

Grade: 8

Course: Virsa (ਵਿਰਸਾ)

Lesson Number: 17

Unit Name: Sikh (ਸਿੱਖ) Tensions in the 19th Century

Title: Introduction to the Babbar Akālī (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ) Movement

Standards

Standard 2: Sikh Tensions in the 19th Century

- Students identify the uneasy relationship between the Rāj (ਰਾਜ) and the Khālāsā (ਖਾਲਸਾ).
 - Students will understand the uneasy relationship between these forces: Dalīp Singh (ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ), Mutiny of 1857, Sikh enlistment in the army, Singh Sabhā (ਸਿੰਘ ਸਭਾ) Movement, Gadar (ਗਦਰ) Movement, Babbar Akālīs (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ), Gurduārā (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) Reform Movement, Bhagat Singh and Udham Singh (ਭਗਤ ਸਿੰਘ ਅਤੇ ਉਧਮ ਸਿੰਘ), etc.
 - Students will understand the two forces within Sikh sociological history—resistance (Khālāsā) versus accommodation and connivance (Dillī Sarkār - ਦਿੱਲੀ ਸਰਕਾਰ/Outside Forces).

Objectives

- Students will analyze the Babbar Akālī Movement and write their own newspaper article or a pamphlet asking others to join their (as Babbar Akālīs) movement.

Prerequisite

- Lessons 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16

Materials

- Newspaper article (in Teacher Resources)
- Paper to write their newspaper article or pamphlet

Advanced Preparation

- Teachers should read the newspaper article and additional resources to help students complete their newspaper article and pamphlet.

Engagement (15 to 20 minutes)

- Start out with the following critical thinking question:
 - Do you believe it is justified to kill others (especially political leaders) when they are unfairly massacring your people? Why or why not?
- Lead a discussion around the above question and then connect it to the Babbar Akālī movement. (Connection: They were a more militant group of the Akālī movement and believed that those responsible for massacre of the Akālīs at Nankānā Sāhib (ਨਨਕਾਣਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ) should be assassinated.)
- Teachers should now give an overview of the Babbar Akālī movement based on the write-up in the teacher resources by Harbans Singh (ਹਰਬੰਸ ਸਿੰਘ).

Exploration (35 minutes)

- Each student should receive the reading/ newspaper article.
- Each student must silently read the entire reading to themselves.
- They should then find a partner to work with.

- Then with the partner they can begin working on their newspaper article or pamphlet.
- Remind them that their goal is to convince others (especially Hindūs and Muslims of that time) to join their movement through their newspaper article or pamphlet.
- Ask students/pairs to share their articles or pamphlets with the class when they are completed.

Explanation/ Extension (5 to 10 minutes)

- Ask students if they know of similar movements that have taken place in other religions or regions. Students might also think of political movements they might have learned about in their history classes in school and compare or contrast them to the Singh Sabhā Movement. One example might be the Black Panthers during the Civil Rights Movement.

Evaluation (On-Going)

- Teachers may collect the newspapers or pamphlets to look over and evaluate.

Teacher Resources

The Babbar Akālīs (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ)
Sunday, 23rd of July 2006; The Sikh Times, 1982



Babbar Akālī Martyrs: (Left) Babbar Kishan Singh Gargajj (ਕਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਗੜਗੱਜ), Babbar Santā Singh (ਸੰਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ), Babbar Nand Singh (ਨੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ), Babbar Dalip Singh (ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ), Babbar Dharam Singh (ਧਰਮ ਸਿੰਘ)

The Babbar Akālī Movement came into existence when the peaceful Akālī struggle for Gurduārā (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) Reform was passing through a crucial stage. Popular Sikh *Gurduārās* like Nankāṇā Sāhib (ਨਨਕਾਣਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ), Taran Tāran Sāhib (ਤਰਨ ਤਾਰਨ) and Gurū-kā-Bāg (ਗੁਰੂ ਕਾ ਬਾਗ) were occupied by the *Mahants* (ਮਹੰਤ), who had made the *Gurduārās* into their personal property, vanquishing the sanctity of the holy places. The *Mahants* had become the puppets of the government of the Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ). With the open backing of the Pañjāb Government, the *Mahants* stood against the Akālīs and attempted to finish them off and put an end to their peaceful struggle for *Gurduārā* reformation.

The Babbar Akālī Movement took place during the years 1921 to 1925. The majority of the Babbar Akālīs were returned immigrants from Canada. Some of them had actively participated in the Gadar Movement and were also known as Gadarī Bābe (ਗਦਰੀ ਬਾਬੇ).

The Babbar Akālīs were Gursikhs (ਗੁਰਸਿਖ), who were against the imperialist policies of the British Government. Babbar Akālīs did not approve of the Congress leadership and were against the Gāndhī (ਗਾਂਧੀ) formula of non-violence and non-cooperation. They were upset because of the tragedy of Nankāṇā Sāhib in which hundreds of innocent Sikhs were massacred. They rejected the peaceful struggle for reformation in the Sikh *Gurduārās* and decided to lead their movement separately, without the company and cooperation of the dominant Akālī leadership.

The Babbar Akālīs made their first appearance during the Sikh Educational Conference held at Hushiārpur (ਹੁਸ਼ਿਆਰਪੁਰ) from 19-21 March 1921. Later, they organized their own meetings which were attended by renowned personalities like Master Motā Singh (ਮਾਸਟਰ ਮੋਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ), Kishan Singh (ਕਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ), Amar Singh (ਅਮਰ ਸਿੰਘ), Totā Singh Peshāvarī (ਤੋਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਪੇਸ਼ਾਵਰੀ), Gurbacan Singh (ਗੁਰਬਚਨ ਸਿੰਘ) and Buṭṭan Singh (ਬੁੱਟਨ ਸਿੰਘ) and some of the returned emigrants from Canada. The

working committee of the Babbar Akālīs was elected in 1922, with Sardār (ਸਰਦਾਰ) Kishan Singh as *Jathedār* (ਜਥੇਦਾਰ), Dalīp Singh Gosal (ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ ਗੋਸਲ), as Secretary and Bābā Santā Singh (ਸੰਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ) as Treasurer. To reinforce the propaganda machinery and to promote the cause of the movement, the working committee decided to publish a newspaper called Babbar Akālī Doābā Akhbār (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ ਦੋਆਬਾ ਅਖਬਾਰ), with Sardār Karam Singh Daulatpur (ਸਰਦਾਰ ਕਰਮ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੌਲਤਪੁਰ) appointed as editor. Their main objective was to “eliminate” certain officials and non-officials condemned as enemies of the *Khālsā* Panth.

Babbar Akālīs declared it necessary to teach a lesson by eliminating the toadies (stooges) and those who were responsible for the massacre of the Akālīs at Nankāṇā Sāhib. It was generally felt that Mr. C.M. King, the Commissioner of Lāhaur (ਲਾਹੌਰ), J.W. Bowring, the Superintendent of Police, Mahants Devī Dās (ਦੇਵੀ ਦਾਸ) and Basant Dās (ਬਸੰਤ ਦਾਸ), Sundar Singh Majithīā (ਸੁੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਮਜਿਠੀਆ) and Bābā Kartār Singh Bedī (ਕਰਤਾਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਬੇਦੀ) were responsible for the Nankāṇā Sāhib Massacre.

They appealed to the Hindūs and Muslims through articles and leaflets such as Babbar Akālī Doābā Akhbār, and religious congregations and entreated them to join them in their war against the foreigners for freedom. To fulfill their program Billā Singh (ਬਿੱਲਾ ਸਿੰਘ) and Gaṇḍā Singh (ਗੰਡਾ ਸਿੰਘ) were sent to Lāhaur on 23 May 1921, to take care of Mr. J.W. Bowring. They were suspected by the police at Lāhaur Railway Station and arrested. During the interrogation the two let out the secrets which resulted in the arrest of Amar Singh, Narain Singh (ਨਰੈਣ ਸਿੰਘ), Totā Singh, Catar Singh (ਚਤਰ ਸਿੰਘ), Cañcal Singh (ਚੰਚਲ ਸਿੰਘ), Thākūr Singh (ਠਾਕੁਰ ਸਿੰਘ), Shankar Singh (ਸ਼ੰਕਰ ਸਿੰਘ) and many more members of the group. Warrants for the arrest of Master Motā Singh, Bijlā Singh (ਬਿਜਲਾ ਸਿੰਘ) and Kishan Singh, who had managed to dodge the police, were also issued.

Babbar Akālīs also aimed to paralyze the supporters of the British Government such as *Zaildārs* (ਜ਼ੈਲਦਾਰ), *Lambaḍdārs* (ਲੰਬਡਦਾਰ), *Paṭvārīs* (ਪਟਵਾਰੀ), police informers and other toadies by terrorizing them through various forms of punishments. According to the plans of the Babbars, an attempt was made to take care of Arjan Singh Paṭvārī (ਅਰਜਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਪਟਵਾਰੀ) of Harīpur (ਹਰੀਪੁਰ), who had allegedly helped in the arrest of Master Motā Singh. Somehow the attempt failed. Then, Zaildār Bishan Singh (ਜ਼ੈਲਦਾਰ ਬਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ), a retired official of the Canal Department was shot dead on 10 February 1923.

The elimination of Zaildār Bishan Singh greatly alarmed the government authorities. Spies were sent to villages. The government announced rewards for the arrest of the Babbars. *Lambaḍdārs* were ordered to inform the government authorities in case they came across a Babbar or learnt about his whereabouts.

Through betrayal or through information supplied by informers, the important leaders of the Babbar Akālī Movement like Jathedār Kishan Singh, Master Motā Singh and Sundar Singh were arrested. The arrests of these leaders actuated the rest of the Babbars to set up their program of eliminating those responsible for these arrests. Consequently a series of continuous “eliminations” took place.

Būṭā Singh Lambaḍdār (ਬੂਟਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਲੰਬਡਦਾਰ) and his grandson were eliminated in the village of Naṅgal Shaman (ਨੰਗਲ ਸ਼ਮਨ) of district Jalandhar (ਜਲੰਧਰ) on 11 March 1923. On 19 March, Lābh Singh (ਲਾਭ ਸਿੰਘ), an employee of the Police Training School, Filaur (ਫਿਲੌਰ), was shot dead in the Hushiārpur district. He had helped in the arrest of Jathedār Kishan Singh.

The Babbars issued an open letter addressed to the Governor on 22 March 1923. They claimed the credit for the eliminations and threatened that other toadies would also face the same fate. Hazārā Singh of Hushiārpur district was killed on 27 March 1923. On 17 April ex-Subedār Gaiṇdā Singh (ਸੁਬੇਦਾਰ ਗੈਂਦਾ ਸਿੰਘ) was shot dead in the village of Ghurīāl (ਘੁੜਿਆਲ). Gaiṇdā Singh had helped the police to arrest certain Babbars. In the Hushiārpur district Caudharī Ralā Rām (ਚੌਧਰੀ ਰਲਾ ਰਾਮ) and his brother Dittā (ਦਿੱਤਾ) were killed in the village of Kaulgaṛ (ਕੌਲਗੜ) on 27 May 1923.

The continuous “elimination” created panic among the toadies and the Government authorities. A large number of village officials and other loyalists to the Government started expressing fear for their lives and the desire to resign from their posts. The government took stiff measures to meet the Babbar challenge and tried to restore peace and confidence among the loyalists. Special C.I.D. was deputed to assist the police. The police force at Jalandhar was increased by adding another fifty men. Above all, a special enrollment of 150 was sanctioned, and an Indian infantry of 250 and a squadron of armored cars were deputed to assist the police in making the arrests of the Babbars. Leaflets were scattered by airplane over the affected area in order to restore peace, and the Babbars were proclaimed as an unlawful association under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1908. The government offered handsome rewards of *Jagīrs* (ਜਗੀਰ) and cash prizes if someone provided useful information leading to the arrest of any Babbars.

Undeterred by the arrests and deaths of the important leaders, the Babbars continued their program of eliminating the toadies and the supporters of the Government. Simultaneously, they continued preaching against the British rule. The threats by the Babbars and the continuous elimination of toadies and the government officials caused considerable anxiety in the official circle in London. Members of the British Parliament raised questions about the deteriorating condition of law and order in the Pañjāb. The government of the Pañjāb was criticized, and fears were expressed about the safety of the British officials in India.

On 4 June 1923, Sir C. Yates drew the attention of the House of Commons to the Babbar program of murdering officers and foreigners, and wanted the Government to make a statement on the situation in the Pañjāb. The motion was again tabled on 14 June 1923, in the British Parliament regarding the seriousness of the Babbar Akālī Movement. Upon pressure of the British Parliament, London, the government of the Pañjāb introduced more stringent measures against the Babbars. Hideout places of the Babbars were raided, with similar raids carried out in the villages of Paṇḍorī Nijran (ਪੰਡੋਰੀ ਨਿਜਰਨ), Kishanpur (ਕਿਸ਼ਨਪੁਰ), Jassovāl (ਜੱਸੋਵਾਲ), Paragpur (ਪਰਗਪੁਰ), Koṭ Fatūhī (ਕੋਟ ਫਤੂਹੀ) and Daulatpur (ਦੌਲਤਪੁਰ). As a result, 186 arrests were made.

By the middle of 1924 all the important Babbars were either killed or arrested. However, the Akālī leaders and the Congress leaders like Gāndhī did not approve of the Babbars’ programme of violence. The Shromaṇī Gurduārā Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) issued communiqués appealing to the Sikhs to disassociate with the activities of the Babbars. Writes Mohindar Singh (ਮੋਹਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ), author of *The Akālī Movement*: “Though the Akālī leadership disowned both the Babbars as also their methods and went even to the extent of passing formal resolutions against them, the Babbars contribution to the Akālī Movement cannot be ignored. They increased the bargaining power of the Akālī leadership by terrorizing the bureaucratic machinery and its supporters in the Pañjāb and thus compelling the Government to come to terms with them. The Babbars equally contributed towards the weakening of the opposition by vested interests in the villages to the Akālī Movement by announcing their plan of eliminating all those responsible for the Nankāṇā tragedy and by actually assassinating some of the loyalists who had helped the authorities in the province.”

(Courtesy: *THE SIKH TIMES*, June 1982)

Books: *The Akālī Movement* by Mohindar Singh, 1997 edition

Babbar Akālī Movement

The Babbar Akālī movement was a radical outgrowth of the Akālī movement for the reform of Sikh Gurduārās during the early 1920s. The latter, aiming to have the *Gurduārās* released from the control of priests who had become lax and ineffective over the generations, was peaceful in its character and strategy. In the course of the prolonged campaign, Akālīs, true to their vows, patiently suffered physical injury and violence at the hands of the priests as well as of government authority. The incidents at Taran Tāran (January 1921) and Nankāṇā Sāhib (February 1921) in which many Sikhs lost their lives led to the emergence of a group which rejected non-violence and adopted violence as a creed. The members of this secret group called themselves Babbar Akālīs — babbar meaning lion. Their targets were the British officers and their Indian informers. They were strongly attached to their Sikh faith and shared an intense patriotic fervor.

At the time of the Sikh Educational Conference at Hushiārpur (ਹੁਸ਼ਿਆਰਪੁਰ) from 19-21 March 1921, some radicals led by Master Motā Singh and Kishan Singh Gargajj, a retired *havalḍār* (ਹਵਾਲਦਾਰ) major of the Indian army, held a secret meeting and made up a plan to avenge themselves upon those responsible for the killings at Nankāṇā Sāhib. Among those on their list were J.W. Bowring, the superintendent of police in the Intelligence department and C.M. King, the commissioner. However, those assigned to the task fell into the police net on 23 May 1921. Arrest warrants were issued against Master Motā Singh and Kishan Singh, but both of them went underground. In November 1921, Kishan Singh formed a secret organization called Cakarvartī Jathā (ਚਕਰਵਰਤੀ ਜਥਾ) and started working among the peasantry and soldiers, inciting them against the foreign rulers. While Kishan Singh and his band carried on their campaign in Jalandhar district with frequent incursions into the villages of Ambālā (ਅੰਬਾਲਾ) and Kapūrthālā (ਕਪੂਰਥਲਾ) state, Karam (ਕਰਮ) Singh of Daulatpur (ਦੌਲਤਪੁਰ) organized a band of extremist Sikhs in Hushiārpur (ਹੁਸ਼ਿਆਰਪੁਰ) on similar lines. In some of the villages in the district, *divāns* (ਦਿਵਾਨ) were convened daily by the sympathizers and helpers of the *jathā* of Karam Singh, who was under warrants of arrest for delivering seditious speeches. Towards the end of August 1922, the two Cakarvartī Jathās resolved to merge together and rename their organization Babbar Akālī Jathā. A committee was formed to work out a plan of action and collect arms and ammunition. Kishan Singh was chosen *jathedār* (ਜਥੇਦਾਰ) or president, while Dalīp Singh Daulatpur, Karam Singh Jhīngan (ਝੀਂਗਣ) and Ude Singh Rāmgaṛ were nominated members. A circular news-sheet called the Babbar Akālī Doaba had already been launched. Contacts were sought to be established especially with soldiers serving in the army and students. The party's program of violence centered on the word *sudhār* (ਸੁਧਾਰ)-reformation—a euphemism for liquidation of *jholichukks* (ਝੋਲੀ ਚੁੱਕ) (lit. robe-bearers, i.e., stooges and lackeys of the British).

The Babbar Akālī Jathā had its own code. Persons with family encumbrances were advised not to join as full members, but to help only as sympathizers. The members were to recite Gurbāṇī regularly. They were not to indulge in personal vendettas against anyone. Likewise, they must not molest any woman nor lift any cash or goods other than those expressly permitted by the group. The total strength of the *Jathā* scarcely exceeded two hundred: the exact number was not known even to its members. The outer circle of the *Jathā* consisted of sympathizers who helped the active members with food and shelter. Some ran errands for the leaders carrying messages from one place to another; others arranged *divāns* (ਦਿਵਾਨ) in advance for traveling speakers and distributed Babbar Akālī leaflets. In order to evade the police and keep their activities secret, the Babbar Akālī Jathā also evolved a secret code. The movement was very active from mid-1922 to the end of 1923. Several government

officials and supporters were singled out and killed. Encounters with the police took place during which some rare feats of daring and self-sacrifice were performed by Babbar Akālīs.

The government acted with firmness and eagerness. In April 1923, the Babbar Akālī Jathā was declared an unlawful association under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908. Units of cavalry and infantry were stationed at strategic points in the sensitive areas, with magistrates on duty with them. A joint force of military and special police was created to seize Babbars sheltering themselves in the Shivālik (ਸ਼ਿਵਾਲਿਕ) hills. Every two weeks, propaganda leaflets were dropped from airplanes with a view to strengthening the morale of the loyalist population. Punitive police-post tax was levied and disciplinary action was taken against civil and military pensioners harboring or sympathizing with the Babbar Akālīs. These measures helped in curbing the movement. The arrests and deaths, in police encounters, of its members depleted the *Jathā*'s ranks. The movement virtually came to an end when Varyām Singh (ਵਰਯਾਮ ਸਿੰਘ) was run down by the police in Lāyalpur district in June 1924.

The trial of the arrested Babbar Akālīs had already begun inside Lāhaur Central Jail on 15 August 1923. Sixty-two persons were challenged originally and the names of thirty-six more were added in January 1924. Of them two died during investigations and five were acquitted by the investigating magistrates; the remaining 91 were committed to the sessions in April 1924. Mr J.K.M. Tapp, appointed additional session Judge to try conspiracy cases, opened the proceedings on 2 June 1924. He was assisted by four assessors. Divān Bahādur Piṇḍī Dās (ਬਹਾਦੁਰ ਪਿੰਡੀ ਦਾਸ) was special public prosecutor. The prosecution produced 447 witnesses, 734 documents and 228 other exhibits to prove its case. The judgment was delivered on 28 February 1925. Of the ninety-one accused, two had died in jail during trial, thirty-four were acquitted, six including Jathedār Kishan Singh Gargajj were awarded death penalty and the remaining forty-nine were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. The government, not satisfied with the punishments awarded, filed a revision petition in the High Court. The High Court overruled the Sessions Court judgment on a few points, but let the death sentences remain unaltered. Babbars, so condemned, were hanged on 27 February 1926. They were Kishan Singh Gargajj, Santā (ਸੰਤਾ) Singh, Dalīp (ਦਲੀਪ) Singh, Karam (ਕਰਮ) Singh, Nand (ਨੰਦ) Singh and Dharam Hayātpur (ਧਰਮ ਹਯਾਤਪੁਰ). The Babbar Akālī Jathā ceased to exist, but it had left a permanent mark on the history of the Sikhs and of the nationalist movement of India. The Naujvān (ਨੌਜਵਾਨ) and Kirtī Kisān (ਕਿਰਤੀ ਕਿਸਾਨ) movements in the Pañjāb owed their militant policy and tactics to the Babbar insurrection.

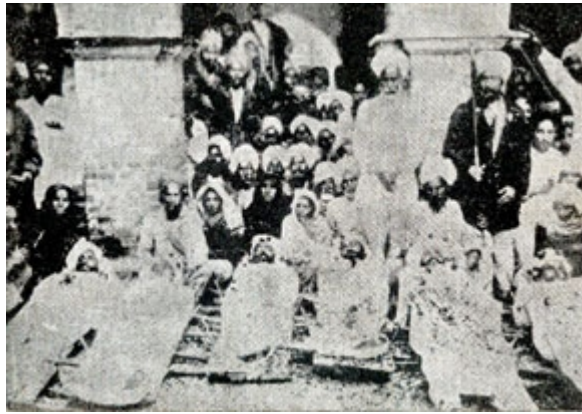
Adapted from: The Encyclopedia of Sikhism by Harbans Singh.

Another Akālī Morcā was precipitated by police interrupting an Akhaṇḍ Pāṭh (ਅਖੰਡ ਪਾਠ) at Gurduārā Gaṅgsar (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਗੰਗਸਰ) at Jaito (ਜੈਤੋ), in the Princely state of Nābhā (ਨਾਭਾ), to demonstrate the Sikhs' solidarity with the cause of Mahārājā Ripudaman Singh (ਮਹਾਰਾਜਾ ਰਿਪੁਦਮਨ ਸਿੰਘ), the ruler of the state, who had been deposed, by the British. Batches of passive resisters began arriving every day at Jaito to assert their right to freedom of worship. The Shromaṇī Committee and the Akālī Dal were declared illegal bodies by government and the more prominent of the leaders were arrested. They were charged with conspiracy to wage war against the King and taken to Lāhaur Fort for trial. The agitation continued and the size of the *Jathās* going to Jaito was in fact increased from 25 each to a hundred, and then from one hundred to five hundred. One such *Jathā* was fired upon on 21 February 1924, by the state police, resulting in a number of casualties.

With the arrival, in May 1924, of Sir Malcolm Hailey as Governor of the Pañjāb, the government began to relent. Negotiations were opened with the Akālī leaders imprisoned in Lāhaur Fort. A bill accommodating their demands was moved in the Pañjāb Legislative Council and passed into law in 1925, under the title the Sikh Gurduārās Act, 1925. As this legislation was put on the statute book, almost all historical shrines, numbering 241 as listed in Schedule I of the Act, were declared as Sikh Gurduārās and they were to be under the administrative control of the Central Board, later renamed the Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee. Procedure was also laid down in section 7 of the Act for the transfer of any other *Gurduārā* not listed in Schedules I and II to the administrative control of the Central Board. With the passage of this Act, the Akālī agitation ceased. In the Akālī agitation for *Gurduārā* reform, nearly forty thousand went to jail. Four hundred lost their lives while two thousand suffered injuries: Sums to the tune of sixteen lakhs of rupees were paid by way of fines and forfeitures and about seven hundred Sikh government functionaries in the villages were deprived of their positions. In addition to this, a ban was placed on civil and military recruitment of Sikhs which, however, was subsequently withdrawn.

Source: Harbans Singh, Encyclopedia of Sikhism

The Babbar Akālīs (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ)
Sunday, 23rd of July 2006; The Sikh Times, 1982



Babbar Akālī Martyrs: (Left) Babbar Kishan Singh Gargajj (ਕਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਗੜਗੱਜ), Babbar Santā Singh (ਸੰਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ), Babbar Nand Singh (ਨੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ), Babbar Dalīp Singh (ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ), Babbar Dharam Singh (ਧਰਮ ਸਿੰਘ)

The Babbar Akālī Movement came into existence when the peaceful Akālī struggle for Gurduārā (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) Reform was passing through a crucial stage. Popular Sikh *Gurduārās* like Nankāṇā Sāhib (ਨਨਕਾਣਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ), Taran Tāran Sāhib (ਤਰਨ ਤਾਰਨ) and Gurū-kā-Bāg (ਗੁਰੂ ਕਾ ਬਾਗ) were occupied by the *Mahants* (ਮਹੰਤ), who had made the *Gurduārās* into their personal property, vanquishing the sanctity of the holy places. The *Mahants* had become the puppets of the government of the Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ). With the open backing of the Pañjāb Government, the *Mahants* stood against the Akālīs and attempted to finish them off and put an end to their peaceful struggle for *Gurduārā* reformation.

The Babbar Akālī Movement took place during the years 1921 to 1925. The majority of the Babbar Akālīs were returned immigrants from Canada. Some of them had actively participated in the Gadar Movement and were also known as Gadarī Bābe (ਗਦਰੀ ਬਾਬੇ).

The Babbar Akālīs were Gursikhs (ਗੁਰਸਿਖ), who were against the imperialist policies of the British Government. Babbar Akālīs did not approve of the Congress leadership and were against the Gāndhī (ਗਾਂਧੀ) formula of non-violence and non-cooperation. They were upset because of the tragedy of Nankāṇā Sāhib in which hundreds of innocent Sikhs were massacred. They rejected the peaceful struggle for reformation in the Sikh *Gurduārās* and decided to lead their movement separately, without the company and cooperation of the dominant Akālī leadership.

The Babbar Akālīs made their first appearance during the Sikh Educational Conference held at Hushiārpur (ਹੁਸ਼ਿਆਰਪੁਰ) from 19-21 March 1921. Later, they organized their own meetings which were attended by renowned personalities like Master Motā Singh (ਮਾਸਟਰ ਮੋਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ), Kishan Singh (ਕਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ), Amar Singh (ਅਮਰ ਸਿੰਘ), Totā Singh Peshāvarī (ਤੋਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਪੇਸ਼ਾਵਰੀ), Gurbacan Singh (ਗੁਰਬਚਨ ਸਿੰਘ) and Buṭṭan Singh (ਬੁੱਟਨ ਸਿੰਘ) and some of the returned emigrants from Canada. The working committee of the Babbar Akālīs was elected in 1922, with Sardār (ਸਰਦਾਰ) Kishan Singh as

Jathedār (ਜਥੇਦਾਰ), Dalip Singh Gosal (ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ ਗੋਸਲ), as Secretary and Bābā Santā Singh (ਸੰਤਾ ਸਿੰਘ) as Treasurer. To reinforce the propaganda machinery and to promote the cause of the movement, the working committee decided to publish a newspaper called Babbar Akālī Doābā Akhbār (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ ਦੋਆਬਾ ਅਖਬਾਰ), with Sardār Karam Singh Daulatpur (ਸਰਦਾਰ ਕਰਮ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੌਲਤਪੁਰ) appointed as editor. Their main objective was to “eliminate” certain officials and non-officials condemned as enemies of the *Khālās* Panth.

Babbar Akālīs declared it necessary to teach a lesson by eliminating the toadies (stooges) and those who were responsible for the massacre of the Akālīs at Nankāṇā Sāhib. It was generally felt that Mr. C.M. King, the Commissioner of Lāhaur (ਲਾਹੌਰ), J.W. Bowring, the Superintendent of Police, Mahants Devī Dās (ਦੇਵੀ ਦਾਸ) and Basant Dās (ਬਸੰਤ ਦਾਸ), Sundar Singh Majithīā (ਸੁੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਮਜਿਠੀਆ) and Bābā Kartār Singh Bedī (ਕਰਤਾਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਬੇਦੀ) were responsible for the Nankāṇā Sāhib Massacre.

They appealed to the Hindūs and Muslims through articles and leaflets such as Babbar Akālī Doābā Akhbār, and religious congregations and entreated them to join them in their war against the foreigners for freedom. To fulfill their program Billā Singh (ਬਿੱਲਾ ਸਿੰਘ) and Gaṇḍā Singh (ਗੰਡਾ ਸਿੰਘ) were sent to Lāhaur on 23 May 1921, to take care of Mr. J.W. Bowring. They were suspected by the police at Lāhaur Railway Station and arrested. During the interrogation the two let out the secrets which resulted in the arrest of Amar Singh, Narain Singh (ਨਰੈਣ ਸਿੰਘ), Totā Singh, Catar Singh (ਚਤਰ ਸਿੰਘ), Cañcal Singh (ਚੰਚਲ ਸਿੰਘ), Ṭhākūr Singh (ਠਾਕੁਰ ਸਿੰਘ), Shankar Singh (ਸ਼ੰਕਰ ਸਿੰਘ) and many more members of the group. Warrants for the arrest of Master Motā Singh, Bijlā Singh (ਬਿਜਲਾ ਸਿੰਘ) and Kishan Singh, who had managed to dodge the police, were also issued.

Babbar Akālīs also aimed to paralyze the supporters of the British Government such as *Zaildārs* (ਜ਼ੈਲਦਾਰ), *Lambaḍdārs* (ਲੰਬਡਦਾਰ), *Paṭvārīs* (ਪਟਵਾਰੀ), police informers and other toadies by terrorizing them through various forms of punishments. According to the plans of the Babbars, an attempt was made to take care of Arjan Singh Paṭvārī (ਅਰਜਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਪਟਵਾਰੀ) of Harīpur (ਹਰੀਪੁਰ), who had allegedly helped in the arrest of Master Motā Singh. Somehow the attempt failed. Then, Zaildār Bishan Singh (ਜ਼ੈਲਦਾਰ ਬਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ), a retired official of the Canal Department was shot dead on 10 February 1923.

The elimination of Zaildār Bishan Singh greatly alarmed the government authorities. Spies were sent to villages. The government announced rewards for the arrest of the Babbars. *Lambaḍdārs* were ordered to inform the government authorities in case they came across a Babbar or learnt about his whereabouts.

Through betrayal or through information supplied by informers, the important leaders of the Babbar Akālī Movement like Jathedār Kishan Singh, Master Motā Singh and Sundar Singh were arrested. The arrests of these leaders actuated the rest of the Babbars to set up their program of eliminating those responsible for these arrests. Consequently a series of continuous “eliminations” took place.

Būṭā Singh Lambaḍdār (ਬੂਟਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਲੰਬਡਦਾਰ) and his grandson were eliminated in the village of Naṅgal Shaman (ਨੰਗਲ ਸ਼ਮਨ) of district Jalandhar (ਜਲੰਧਰ) on 11 March 1923. On 19 March, Lābh Singh (ਲਾਭ ਸਿੰਘ), an employee of the Police Training School, Filaur (ਫਿਲੌਰ), was shot dead in the Hushiārpur district. He had helped in the arrest of Jathedār Kishan Singh.

The Babbars issued an open letter addressed to the Governor on 22 March 1923. They claimed the credit for the eliminations and threatened that other toadies would also face the same fate. Hazārā Singh of Hushiārpur district was killed on 27 March 1923. On 17 April ex-Subedār Gaiṇdā Singh (ਸੁਬੇਦਾਰ ਗੈਂਦਾ ਸਿੰਘ) was shot dead in the village of Ghurīāl (ਘੁੜਿਆਲ). Gaiṇdā Singh had helped the police to arrest certain Babbars. In the Hushiārpur district Caudharī Ralā Rām (ਚੌਧਰੀ ਰਲਾ ਰਾਮ) and his brother Dittā (ਦਿੱਤਾ) were killed in the village of Kaulgaṛ (ਕੌਲਗੜ) on 27 May 1923.

The continuous “elimination” created panic among the toadies and the Government authorities. A large number of village officials and other loyalists to the Government started expressing fear for their lives and the desire to resign from their posts. The government took stiff measures to meet the Babbar challenge and tried to restore peace and confidence among the loyalists. Special C.I.D. was deputed to assist the police. The police force at Jalandhar was increased by adding another fifty men. Above all, a special enrollment of 150 was sanctioned, and an Indian infantry of 250 and a squadron of armored cars were deputed to assist the police in making the arrests of the Babbars. Leaflets were scattered by airplane over the affected area in order to restore peace, and the Babbars were proclaimed as an unlawful association under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1908. The government offered handsome rewards of *Jagīrs* (ਜਗੀਰ) and cash prizes if someone provided useful information leading to the arrest of any Babbars.

Undeterred by the arrests and deaths of the important leaders, the Babbars continued their program of eliminating the toadies and the supporters of the Government. Simultaneously, they continued preaching against the British rule. The threats by the Babbars and the continuous elimination of toadies and the government officials caused considerable anxiety in the official circle in London. Members of the British Parliament raised questions about the deteriorating condition of law and order in the Pañjāb. The government of the Pañjāb was criticized, and fears were expressed about the safety of the British officials in India.

On 4 June 1923, Sir C. Yates drew the attention of the House of Commons to the Babbar program of murdering officers and foreigners, and wanted the Government to make a statement on the situation in the Pañjāb. The motion was again tabled on 14 June 1923, in the British Parliament regarding the seriousness of the Babbar Akālī Movement. Upon pressure of the British Parliament, London, the government of the Pañjāb introduced more stringent measures against the Babbars. Hideout places of the Babbars were raided, with similar raids carried out in the villages of Paṇḍorī Nijran (ਪੰਡੋਰੀ ਨਿਜਰਨ), Kishanpur (ਕਿਸ਼ਨਪੁਰ), Jassovāl (ਜੱਸੋਵਾਲ), Paragpur (ਪਰਗਪੁਰ), Koṭ Fatūhī (ਕੋਟ ਫਤੂਹੀ) and Daulatpur (ਦੌਲਤਪੁਰ). As a result, 186 arrests were made.

By the middle of 1924 all the important Babbars were either killed or arrested. However, the Akālī leaders and the Congress leaders like Gāndhī did not approve of the Babbars’ programme of violence. The Shromaṇī Gurduārā Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) issued communiqués appealing to the Sikhs to disassociate with the activities of the Babbars. Writes Mohindar Singh (ਮੋਹਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ), author of *The Akālī Movement*: “Though the Akālī leadership disowned both the Babbars as also their methods and went even to the extent of passing formal resolutions against them, the Babbars contribution to the Akālī Movement cannot be ignored. They increased the bargaining power of the Akālī leadership by terrorizing the bureaucratic machinery and its supporters in the Pañjāb and thus compelling the Government to come to terms with them. The Babbars equally contributed towards the weakening of the opposition by vested interests in the villages to the Akālī Movement by announcing their plan of eliminating all those responsible for the Nankāṇā tragedy and by actually assassinating some of the loyalists who had helped the authorities in the province.”

(Courtesy: *THE SIKH TIMES*, June 1982)

Books: *The Akālī Movement* by Mohindar Singh, 1997 edition

Babbar Akālī Movement

The Babbar Akālī movement was a radical outgrowth of the Akālī movement for the reform of Sikh Gurduārās during the early 1920s. The latter, aiming to have the *Gurduārās* released from the control of priests who had become lax and ineffective over the generations, was peaceful in its character and strategy. In the course of the prolonged campaign, Akālīs, true to their vows, patiently suffered physical injury and violence at the hands of the priests as well as of government authority. The incidents at Taran Tāran (January 1921) and Nankāṇā Sāhib (February 1921) in which many Sikhs lost their lives led to the emergence of a group which rejected non-violence and adopted violence as a creed. The members of this secret group called themselves Babbar Akālīs — babbar meaning lion. Their targets were the British officers and their Indian informers. They were strongly attached to their Sikh faith and shared an intense patriotic fervor.

At the time of the Sikh Educational Conference at Hushiārpur (ਹੁਸ਼ਿਆਰਪੁਰ) from 19-21 March 1921, some radicals led by Master Motā Singh and Kishan Singh Gargajj, a retired *havalḍār* (ਹਵਾਲਦਾਰ) major of the Indian army, held a secret meeting and made up a plan to avenge themselves upon those responsible for the killings at Nankāṇā Sāhib. Among those on their list were J.W. Bowring, the superintendent of police in the Intelligence department and C.M. King, the commissioner. However, those assigned to the task fell into the police net on 23 May 1921. Arrest warrants were issued against Master Motā Singh and Kishan Singh, but both of them went underground. In November 1921, Kishan Singh formed a secret organization called Cakarvartī Jathā (ਚਕਰਵਰਤੀ ਜਥਾ) and started working among the peasantry and soldiers, inciting them against the foreign rulers. While Kishan Singh and his band carried on their campaign in Jalandhar district with frequent incursions into the villages of Ambālā (ਅੰਬਾਲਾ) and Kapūrthālā (ਕਪੂਰਥਲਾ) state, Karam (ਕਰਮ) Singh of Daulatpur (ਦੌਲਤਪੁਰ) organized a band of extremist Sikhs in Hushiārpur (ਹੁਸ਼ਿਆਰਪੁਰ) on similar lines. In some of the villages in the district, *divāns* (ਦਿਵਾਨ) were convened daily by the sympathizers and helpers of the *jathā* of Karam Singh, who was under warrants of arrest for delivering seditious speeches. Towards the end of August 1922, the two Cakarvartī Jathās resolved to merge together and rename their organization Babbar Akālī Jathā. A committee was formed to work out a plan of action and collect arms and ammunition. Kishan Singh was chosen *jathedār* (ਜਥੇਦਾਰ) or president, while Dalīp Singh Daulatpur, Karam Singh Jhīngan (ਝੀਂਗਣ) and Ude Singh Rāmgaṛ were nominated members. A circular news-sheet called the Babbar Akālī Doaba had already been launched. Contacts were sought to be established especially with soldiers serving in the army and students. The party's program of violence centered on the word *sudhār* (ਸੁਧਾਰ)-reformation—a euphemism for liquidation of *jholichukks* (ਝੋਲੀ ਚੁੱਕ) (lit. robe-bearers, i.e., stooges and lackeys of the British).

The Babbar Akālī Jathā had its own code. Persons with family encumbrances were advised not to join as full members, but to help only as sympathizers. The members were to recite Gurbāṇī regularly. They were not to indulge in personal vendettas against anyone. Likewise, they must not molest any woman nor lift any cash or goods other than those expressly permitted by the group. The total strength of the *Jathā* scarcely exceeded two hundred: the exact number was not known even to its members. The outer circle of the *Jathā* consisted of sympathizers who helped the active members with food and shelter. Some ran errands for the leaders carrying messages from one place to another; others arranged *divāns* (ਦਿਵਾਨ) in advance for traveling speakers and distributed Babbar Akālī leaflets. In order to evade the police and keep their activities secret, the Babbar Akālī Jathā also evolved a secret code. The movement was very active from mid-1922 to the end of 1923. Several government