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Role of Amar Singh Jhabal in the Gurdwara Reform Movement

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Amar Singh Jhabhal, born in 1888 in the village of Jhabal, Amritsar district, Punjab, emerged as a prominent figure during the Gurdwara Reform Movement.¹ He was the eldest son of Gopal Singh and Jass Kaur, and his upbringing was deeply influenced by their strong belief in Gurbani. Amar Singh Jhabhal's family had an illustrious lineage: his great-grandfather, Gulab Singh, served in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army, while his grandfather, Harbhagat Singh, held the position of an aide-de-camp to Kanvar Nau Nihal Singh. The younger brothers of Amar Singh Jhabhal, Sarmukh Singh² and Jaswant Singh³, also played pivotal roles in the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Amar Singh Jhabhal received his education at the village school and later attended Khalsa Collegiate School in Amritsar. After completing his matriculation, he joined the police department and gradually rose to the rank of Sub-inspector. However, his commitment to upholding religious freedom became evident when he witnessed police officers confiscating kirpans from Sikh individuals. He voiced his objection to the superintendent of police, emphasising that depriving a Sikh of their kirpan was a violation of their religious rights. In response, the government implemented a ban on the wearing of kirpans by Sikhs. Additionally, tragic incidents such as the killings in Budge Budge, Calcutta, further fueled Amar Singh's discontent. These events ultimately led him to make the decision to resign from his position in the police department.

In December 1919, Amar Singh Jhabhal attended for the first time the political function of the Sikh League and the function of the Congress in Amritsar. In the meantime, a movement against the British demolition of a section of the outer wall of Gurdwara Rikabganj in Delhi was gaining momentum. The initial coordinated effort began during a Diwan organized by the Central Sikh League in Tarn Taran in July 1920.

¹ Akali, Lahore, September 23, 1921, p.2.

² Sarmukh Singh Jhabhal, the middle brother among the Jhabal trio, completed his education at Khalsa College, Amritsar. He actively participated in social and religious reforms. In 1918, he became a member of the Central Majha Khalsa Diwan. The Shiromani Akali Dal was established on December 14, 1920, with Sarmukh Singh being elected as its first president. He faced arrests during various movements, including the Akali Movement in 1921, the Guru Ka Bagh agitation in 1922, and volunteering to help calm Hindu-Muslim riots in Amritsar in 1923. Following the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925, while many Akali leaders were conditionally released, Sarmukh Singh and his colleagues were denied such a release. He later joined the Indian National Congress after his release in 1926. pp. 73, 74, 76.

³ Jaswant Singh Jhabhal, born on June 17, 1896, in Jhabal, was the youngest Amar Singh Jhabhal. He attended Khalsa High School and Khalsa College in Amritsar but had to leave his studies after his father's death in 1918. Then, he dedicated himself to religious and social work, serving as the president of the village Sri Guru Singh Sabha. He actively participated alongside his brothers in movements for Gurdwara reform, including the reconstruction of the Gurdwara Rikabganj wall and the reformation of Gurdwara Babe di Ber in Sialkot in October 1920. He held significant positions, such as joint secretary of the Central Sikh League's district branch and member of the first Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. He was also involved in the management of Darbar Sahib in Amritsar and was a member of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee. Partap Singh Giani, *Akali Lehar de Mahan Neta*, Amritsar, 1976, pp. 91, 92.

During this gathering, Amar Singh Jhabal made an appeal to the attendees, urging them to enlist as Shahids with the aim of restoring the wall of Gurdwara Rakabganj in Delhi. Consequently, the Akalis enthusiastically volunteered to become Shahids during this Diwan. Over time, the number of Shahids in the region grew significantly, exceeding 700 individuals, including some Hindu and Muslim volunteers. Since the original objective of recruiting Shahids had already been accomplished when the Government of India reconstructed the demolished wall of Gurdwara Rakabganj, the dedication and energy of these volunteers shifted towards the reform movement in important Sikh Gurdwaras. After achieving some initial successes, Amar Singh Jhabbal established a systematic approach for recruiting Akali volunteers, with the assistance of his brother Jaswant Singh Jhabbal, Teja Singh Bhuchar, and other leaders.⁴ Their primary duty was to continue advocating for reform, particularly in places such as Nankana and other significant locations.

Together with Dan Singh Vachhoa, he organised and spoke at a series of public meetings in his village and surrounding areas. Despite the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar issuing orders, Amar Singh Jhabal defied them and arranged a gathering near the Golden Temple at Manji Sahib. This meeting aimed to protest against the awarding of a Saropa (a religious robe) to General Reginald Dyer by the manager of Darbar Sahib, who had ordered the firing during the rally on April 13, 1919 against the arrest of Dr. Satpal and Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew at the Jallianwali Bagh, Amritsar. The agitation for Gurdwara reform first gained momentum at Babe-di-Ber in Sialkot. After the death of Mahant Harnam Singh, in September 1919, his widow appointed their minor son as his successor, under the guidance of Honorary Magistrate Ganda Singh. This action sparked resentment among Sikhs throughout Punjab, leading various Singh Sabhas to send telegrams to the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, expressing their protest against this perceived "outrage." Despite the popular opposition, the collector granted mutation in favour of the minor Mahant Gurcharan Singh. In response, the Akalis filed a civil suit in the court of the District Judge. However, the court demanded a court fee of Rs. 50,000 by August 30, 1920, which the reformers were unable to collect.⁵ Consequently, their complaint was rejected. Unable to achieve their objective through legal means, the reformers turned to peaceful agitation. During this agitation, Amar Singh Jhabal and his brother, Jaswant Singh Jhabal, visited the Gurdwara Baba di Ber at Sialkot. After this, they travelled throughout the Punjab and addressed the people to motivate them to participate in the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Ganda Singh was also declared *Tankhaiya* and barred from entering the Gurdwara.⁶ Amar Singh Jhabal announced that they would not end the protest until Ganda Singh was removed and the management of the Gurdwara was handed over to the Sikh Committee.⁷ Upon receiving Amar Singh Jhabal's report, the Central Majha Diwan dispatched a group of 50 'martyrs' led by Jathedar Teja Singh Bhuchchar. The next morning, an additional 250 volunteers arrived in Sialkot and prepared their evening meal with items of food taken from the langar of the gurdwara. They began their day with a kirtan early in the morning. Kartar Singh Jhabbar officially assumed control of the Gurdwara on October 5, 1920.⁸ Subsequently, a local committee was established to oversee its management, with Kharak Singh serving as its president.

Gurdwara Guru Kotha is located in Wazirabad, District Gujranwala. In 1920, the Mahant of this Gurdwara was Kirpal, who was accused of selling the Gurdwara's property for around five thousand rupees and retaining some of the property in his own name. Additionally, he was alleged to have had illicit relations with women, which the Sikhs found intolerable because such behaviour by a Mahant was a disgrace to the *Gur Asthana*. The Sikhs of Wazirabad began opposing the Mahant, and as this movement gained momentum, Amar Singh Jhabal was summoned from Sialkot.⁹ In a public meeting held on September 30, 1920, thousands of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were informed about Mahant Kirpal's actions. Subsequently, Kripal Singh was

⁴ Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 93, 94. Also see *Akali*, Lahore, October 27, 1920, pp. 3, 4.

⁵ Giani Partap Singh, *Gurdwara Sudhar Arthat Akali Lehar*, Amritsar, 1951, pp.84, 85.

⁶ *Akali*, Lahore, October 20, 1920, p. 3.

⁷ *Akali*, Lahore, October 3, 1920, p. 2.

⁸ J.S. Grewal, *The Akalis A Short History*, Chandigarh, 1996, p. 32.

⁹ *Akali*, Lahore, October 7, 1920, p. 3.

expelled from Gurdwara and declared a *Tankhaya*. Under the leadership of Amar Singh Jhabal, the management of the Gurdwara Panth was assumed by a local Gurdwara Committee.

On October 5, 1920, a significant event took place as the Sikhs elected a managing committee consisting of 13 members to oversee the administration of the Gurdwara. However, the focus of the reform movement shifted to Amritsar, the Sikh headquarters, due to new developments concerning the affairs of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takhat.¹⁰ The emerging Akali leadership convened a general assembly of Sikhs with diverse viewpoints near the Akal Takht in Amritsar. The assembly aimed to elect a representative committee to oversee the administration of the Darbar Sahib and other gurdwaras.¹¹ However, two days prior to the planned conference, the British government established its own committee of 36 Sikhs to manage the Darbar Sahib. Undeterred, the Sikhs proceeded with their meeting and elected a larger committee of 175 members, naming it the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. The establishment of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee served as a catalyst for the Gurdwara reform movement. During the second meeting of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, news arrived that Mahant Miththa Singh of Gurdwara Panja Sahib had passed away. In response, a decision was made for Amar Singh Jhabal and Kartar Singh Jhabbar, accompanied by 25 Sikhs from the Central Majha Diwan, to travel to Panja Sahib.¹² They reached Hasan Abdal on November 19, 1920, and proceeded towards Panja Sahib. Sant Singh, who aspired to succeed Mahant Miththa Singh, found himself unable to resist the Jatha and surrendered, agreeing to the stipulated conditions. Consequently, a local committee was established to oversee the management of the Gurdwara Sahib on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev.¹³

Amar Singh Jhabal, during the Diwan at Akal Takht Sahib on March 20, 1921, urged Sikhs to actively participate in the ongoing movement. Consequently, a case was registered against him for wearing a kirpan, incitement, and sedition. The case was heard on March 30, 1921, in the court of the Additional Magistrate of Amritsar, and he was sentenced to six months imprisonment.¹⁴ Amar Singh Jhabal was sent to Central Jail Multan by train in shackles on his hands and feet.¹⁵ Numerous diwans and meetings were convened in protest against the imprisonment and ill-treatment of political prisoners. Consequently, on July 14, 1921, under the leadership of Jaswant Singh Jhabal, the Central Sikh League convened a meeting during which several *Gurmata*s were passed, one of them calling for the release of Sikh and other political prisoners by the government.¹⁶ After serving his imprisonment, Amar Singh Jhabal was released on September 27, 1921. When he arrived at the Amritsar railway station, thousands of people, including Kharak Singh, Teja Singh Samani, and Jaswant Singh Jhabal, welcomed him. They then proceeded to march towards Akal Takht Sahib in a procession. At that moment, Amar Singh Jhabal urged the people to dedicate themselves to both the nation and religion.¹⁷ On October 7, 1921, a poem was written by Narinder Singh in the newspaper Akali in the honour of Amar Singh Jhabal.¹⁸

¹⁰ Mohinder Singh, *op.cit.*, pp. 20, 21.

¹¹ *Confidential Note on the Akali Movement*, File no. 174, Ganda Singh Collection, Punjabi University, Patiala, pp. 23, 24.

¹² J.S. Grewal, *op.cit.*, p.

¹³ Sohan Singh Josh, *Akali Morchea da Ithihas*, Delhi, 1972, p. 54.

¹⁴ *Akali*, Lahore, April 2, 1921, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Akali*, Lahore, April 18, 1921, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Akali*, Lahore, July 29, 1921, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Akali*, Lahore, October 5, 1921, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Akali*, Lahore, October 7, 1921, p. 1.

“ਚਲ ਵੇਖ ਨਜ਼ਾਰਾ ਪੰਡਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ”

ਕੌਮ ਖ਼ਾਲਸਾ ਆਸਰਾ ਇਕ ਤੈਠੂੰ,	ਦਸਮ ਪਾਤਸ਼ਾਹ ਗੁਰੂ ਅਕਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ
ਕਿਸ ਚੀਜ਼ ਦੀ ਕਮੀ ਹੈ ਵੀਰ ਤੈਠੂੰ,	ਜਦ ਆਸਰਾ ਰਖੋ ਦਿਆਲ ਵਲਾ
ਸਿਖ ਲੀਗ ਹੈ ਸਿਰ ਤੇ ਆ ਪੁਨੀ,	ਵੇਲਾ ਪੁਨਿਆ ਖੁਸ਼ੀ ਕਮਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ।
ਖ਼ਬਰ ਖੁਸ਼ੀ ਅਕਾਲੀ ਸੁਨਾਈ ਆਕੇ,	ਛੁਟਿਆ ਵੀਰਜੇ ਅਮਰ ਝਬਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ
ਅਤੇ ਆਵਨਾਂ ਪੰਥ ਦੁਲਾਰਿਆਂ ਨੇ,	ਚਲ ਵੇਖ ਨਜ਼ਾਰਾ ਪੰਡਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ।

On October 29, 1921, the Executive Committee of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) requested Sunder Singh Ramgarhia to hand over the keys to Kharak Singh, the President of the S.G.P.C. Before this resolution was made public, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, aware of the development, preemptively dispatched Lala Amar Nath, an Extra Assistant Commissioner, along with a police contingent, to collect the keys from Sunder Singh Ramgarhia.¹⁹ The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee, through a resolution, called upon Sikhs to organize religious gatherings (Diwans) everywhere to clarify the situation regarding the 'Keys Affair.' On December 4, 1921, many Akalis were arrested, including Amar Singh Jhabal, the acting President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee, Master Tara Singh, Jaswant Singh Jhabal, Buta Singh, Dr. Gurbakhsh Singh, Bhai Tara Singh, and Bhai Kartar Singh, for their involvement in discussing the prohibited 'Keys' issue during religious gatherings under the Sedition Meeting Act, clause five.²⁰ The movement gained momentum when these arrested leaders, who chose not to present any defence on the grounds of being non-cooperators, were convicted and subjected to severe penalties. Amar Singh Jhabal, Master Tara Singh, and Buta Singh were sent to Mianwali Jail, where they endured numerous atrocities.²¹ The members of these Akali prisoners sent clothes for them but were prevented from delivering them. The official actions of arresting Akali leaders and imposing harsh sentences and fines on them significantly bolstered the popularity of the movement. In addition to suppressing the popular movement, the government attempted to address the complex issue of the 'Keys.'

On December 6, 1921, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee passed a resolution stating that Sikhs should not agree to any arrangement for the return of the keys unless and until all the Sikhs arrested in connection with the Keys Affair were unconditionally released. As a result of the arrests of many Akalis and the willingness of others to surrender, the government found itself in a dilemma. To resolve the situation, the government began expressing a desire to engage in negotiations with the leaders of the movement in order to find a solution. On January 12, 1922, the government made the decision to transfer the keys of Darbar Sahib to the President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee, Karak Singh. Subsequently, on January 17, 1922, all those who had been arrested in connection with the agitation over the Keys Affair were unconditionally released. However, even after securing the unconditional release of the prisoners, the Akali leadership declined to collect the keys from the District Magistrate.²² Amar Singh Jhabal, along with his comrades, also were released. In response, a high-ranking official of the Punjab Government was dispatched to personally deliver the keys to Baba Kharak Singh, the President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, during a specially arranged Diwan for this purpose.

After the release of Amar Singh Jhabal, he was appointed as the President of the Central Sikh League. In 1922, a meeting of the Central Sikh League took place in Lyallpur, with Amar Singh Jhabal serving as the chairman. The purpose of the meeting was to encourage people to boycott British goods, institutions, and government functions. During this gathering, Amar Singh Jhabal delivered a speech in which he criticized the British government's brutal policies.²³ As a result of his outspoken stance, he faced a separate case under Section 124 (A) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in Jalandhar and was subsequently sentenced to one and a half years of imprisonment.²⁴ In addition to the aforementioned case, another legal case was initiated against Amar Singh Jhabal and his four associates under Section 366 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). These cases were a consequence of Amar Singh Jhabal's active involvement in both the Gurdwara Reform Movement and

ਏਹ ਤੋਂ ਵਧ ਖੁਸ਼ੀ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਹੋਰ ਕੀ ਹੈ	ਪਰਤੀਨਿਧ ਪਾਯਾ ਬੇ ਮਿਸਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ
ਕਲਗੀਵਾਲਿਆ ਵੀਰਖੁਸ਼ਹਾਲਰਖੀ,	ਪੰਥ ਖ਼ਾਤਰ ਘਾਲਨਾਂ ਘਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ
ਮਾਤਾ ਸਾਹਬ ਦੇਵਾਂ ਜੁਗੋ ਜੁਗ ਜੀਵੇਂ,	ਅਮਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਰਦਾਰ ਝਬਾਲ ਵਾਲਾ ।
	ਨਰਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ

¹⁹ Giani Partap Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 134.

²¹ *Akali*, Lahore, December 3, 1921, p. 4.

²² Mohinder Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

²³ *Gargajj Akali*, Amritsar, April 19, 1922, p. 4. Also see *Gargajj Akali*, Amritsar, April 21, 1922, p. 1.

²⁴ *Gargajj Akali*, Amritsar, May 3, 1922, p. 3.

the Non-Cooperation Movement.²⁵ On August 10, 1922, Amar Singh Jhabal was sentenced to six months of imprisonment and fined two hundred rupees in a case registered under Section 366 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).²⁶

During the *Guru Ka Bagh Morcha*, Amar Singh Jhabal and his brother Jaswant Singh Jhabal were detained because of their involvement in the ongoing Gurdwara Reform Movement. Meanwhile, their brother Sarmukh Singh Jhabal actively participated in this campaign.²⁷ After serving his prison sentence in Central Jail, Multan, Amar Singh Jhabal was released.²⁸ Simultaneously, the Gurdwara Reform Movement was in full swing. In 1923, the British government had fabricated a false case against Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha due to his sympathies for the Akalis. The government took great offence at Maharaja Ripudaman Singh's ascension to the Nabha throne and actively sought an opportunity to depose him.²⁹ This case against Maharaja Ripudaman Singh was initiated upon the complaint of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, who had an ongoing boundary dispute with the Nabha state.³⁰ Consequently, Maharaja Ripudaman Singh agreed to abdicate and was exiled to Dehradun with an annual pension of three lakh rupees. The abduction of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh greatly distressed the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, which passed a resolution demanding the restoration of the Maharaja. They also appealed to the Sikh community to observe Nabha Day on September 9, 1923, and organized the Akhand Path at Gurdwara Gangsar in the village of Jaito. However, the Punjab police and the Nabha state police intervened, halting the recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib.³¹

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee began dispatching groups of 25 Sikhs, known as jathas, to Jaito for the recitation of the *Akhand Path*. On October 13, 1923, the British government issued Order No. 23772-73, which outlawed the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, leading to the arrest of fifty-nine leaders.³² Among those detained were Amar Singh Jhabal, Master Tara Singh, Jathedar Teja Singh Akarpuri, Sardar Teja Singh Samundari, Sardar Mehtab Singh, Jathedar Sarmukh Singh Jhabal, Gopal Singh Qaumi, Dan Singh Vachhoa, Seva Singh Thikriwala, Giani Sher Singh, Bhag Singh Advocate, Prof. Sahib Singh, Prof. Teja Singh, and Piara Singh Langeri. The British government charged all members of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee with forcibly occupying Gurdwaras, and the formation of the Shiromani Akali Dal was considered an illegal attempt to take control of Gurdwaras.³³ These arrests were carried out with the intent of weakening the movement by removing its leadership. Despite these arrests, a large number of *Jathas* were dispatched from Amritsar to Jaito to conduct the *Akhand Path* recitation.

The Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925, formally known as Punjab Act No. VIII of 1925, was a significant piece of legislation resulting from the Akali movement in India.³⁴ The act was introduced in the Punjab Legislative Council in May 1925 and underwent some amendments before its passage. This act aimed to regulate and manage Sikh Gurdwaras (places of worship) and their associated properties. The Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925, also acknowledged the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee as the representative organization of the Sikh community.³⁵ Its enactment marked a victory for the Akali movement and led to the

²⁵ *Gargajj Akali*, Amritsar, May 11, 1922, p. 1. Also see, *Gargajj Akali*, Amritsar, June 10, 1922, p. 4.

²⁶ *Punjab Drapan*, Amritsar, June 23, 1923, p. 3.

²⁷ *Giani*, Lahore, September 5, 1922, p. 9.

²⁸ *Punjab Drapan*, Amritsar, June 23, 1923, p. 3., Also see *Punjab Drapan*, Amritsar, February 22, 1924, p. 10.

²⁹ *Akali te Pardesi*, Amritsar, October 4, 1923, p.3.

³⁰ *The Jaito Morcha- 1923* by Dr. Bakhshish Singh Nijjar, File no. 192, Ganda Singh Collection, Punjabi University, Patiala, pp. 1-4.

³¹ *Akali te Pardesi*, Amritsar, October 4, 1923, p.4.

³² Fauja Singh, *Nehru in Punjab*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1973, p.15.

³³ Giani Partap Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

³⁴ Government of the Punjab, Legislative Department, *The Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925*, Punjab Act No. VIII of 1925, Lahore, 1925, p. 168.

³⁵ Shamsheer Singh Ashok, *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee da Panjah Saala Ithihas (1926-1976)*, Amritsar, 2003, p. 55.

withdrawal of government orders declaring Akali organizations as unlawful associations. Therefore, following the Sikh Gurdwara Act, the Akalis, including Amar Singh Jhabal, were released from jails that were not related to criminal cases.³⁶

Amar Singh Jhabal played a pivotal role in the Gurdwara Reform Movement, emerging as a prominent figure dedicated to religious freedom. His journey from a police sub-inspector to a prominent leader was marked by a commitment to Sikh rights. His involvement began with his objection to the confiscation of kirpans from Sikhs, which led to a government ban on wearing them. He mobilized the Sikh community alongside leaders like Teja Singh Bhuchar to advocate for reform in significant Gurdwaras. Amar Singh Jhabal's relentless efforts and sacrifices, including imprisonment, contributed to the formation of the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925, marking a significant victory for the Sikh community in their struggle for religious freedom and the equitable management of Gurdwaras. Despite facing challenges and arrests, Amar Singh Jhabal and other Akali leaders persevered in their push for Gurdwara reform and religious freedom, leaving an indelible mark on Sikh history and the broader struggle for civil and religious rights in India.



³⁶ Baldev Raj Nayat, *Minority Politis in Punjab*, Princeton Legacy Library, 1966, p. 65.