

The Mystique of Akal Takht

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Akal Takht was 'revealed' by Guru Hargobind Sahib on June 15, 1606. The foundation stone of the shrine of Akal Takht Sahib was laid down by Guru Hargobind Sahib. Akal Takht truly belonged to *Waheguru* and it was the Almighty. The rest of the structure was completed by Baba Buddha and Bhai Gurdas. Guru Hargobind Sahib remained the Custodian of the Takht of *Waheguru*.

When Guru Hargobind Sahib went to Gwalior, he asked Baba Buddha to perform the services at Darbar Sahib and Bhai Gurdas to take care of the Akal Takht. It was not the appointment of Bhai Gurdas as the *Jathedar* of Akal Takht Sahib. It is erroneous to say that Bhai Gurdas was the *Jathedar* of Akal Takht Sahib. He was simply the caretaker. Guru Hargobind Sahib left Amritsar in 1635. Between 1635 and 1696 (till the death of Har Gobind Ji), Amritsar was under the control of the descendants of Prithi Chand (elder brother of Guru Arjun Sahib). In April 1698, Guru Gobind Singh Sahib appointed Bhai Mani Singh as *Granthi* of Darbar Sahib and Akal Takht Sahib. On December 30, 1711, Bahadur Shah, the Moghul emperor "assigned" the *Jagir* of *Guru Da Chakk* (Amritsar) to Ajit Singh Palit. Bahadur Shah wanted to use Ajit Singh Palit against Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, the Sikh General. Ajit Singh returned to Delhi after the death of Bahadur Shah (February 27, 1712).

After this Baba Kahan Singh of the so-called *Tat Khalsa* performed services at Akal Takht Sahib. In 1721, Bhai Mani Singh helped solving dispute between Baba Kahan Singh of the so-called *Tat Khalsa*, who looked after Akal Takht and Mahant Amar Singh of the so called *Bandai Khalsa*, who had the control of Jhanda Bunga. Bhai Mani Singh is not referred as so-called *Jathedar* in any source of Sikh history. Bhai Rattan Singh Bhangu (in *Prachin Panth Prakash*) calls him "*pujaraan siyon vado pujari*" (chief priest among the priests).

After the martyrdom of Bhai Mani Singh (June 24, 1734), there was no one to take care of the shrines at Amritsar during the dark period of the Sikh history. There were *Sarbat Khalsa* gatherings at Akal Takht, at least since 1726, but no reference is available as to who convened these gatherings. It is presumed that the *Jathedars* of the army used to call these gatherings. Later, *Buddha Dal* (the Sikh 'veterans') took the duty of management of the shrines at Amritsar. In 1800, Akali Phula Singh came to Amritsar and took over charge of the shrines. As the caretaker of Akal Takht, he introduced authentic Sikh practices at Takht Sahib and Darbar Sahib. Baba Prem Singh Hoti wrote a book about Akali Phula Singh in 1912. Baba Prem Singh does not use the term *Jathedar* even once.

On October 12, 1920, when some initiated Sikhs belonging to so-called low castes went to Akal Takht to offer an *Ardas* (offerings), the caretaker of Akal Takht Sahib slipped away. The gathering found the Takht Sahib unattended. A *Jatha* (band) of 25 Sikhs was selected to take care of Takht Sahib. Bhai Teja Singh Bhucher was appointed the *Jathedar* of the *Jatha*. Bhai Teja Singh was to be the chief of the *Jatha*.

On October 13, 1920, the Deputy Commissioner called a meeting of the (former) priests and the Sikh leaders. The priests abstained from the meeting. This meeting selected an *ad hoc* Committee to look after the affairs of Darbar Sahib and Akal Takht. The Committee comprised Sunder Singh Ramgarhia (the manager of Akal Takht Sahib and Darbar Sahib), Professor Teja Singh, Bawa Harkishan Singh, Bhai Deva Singh, Bhai Bahadur Singh Hakim, Bhai Chanda Singh, *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar, *Jathedar* Teja Singh Bhucher and Doctor Gurbax Singh. This Committee, later, called a *Sarbat Khalsa* gathering for

November 15-16, 1920. A *Hukamnama*, signed by Dr. Gurbax Singh, a member of the *ad-hoc* Committee, was issued. (This *Hukamnama* was not issued by *Jathedar* Teja Singh Bhucher, the *Jathedar* of the *Jatha* appointed to take care of Akal Takht Sahib on October 12, 1920). Bhai Kahan Singh of Nabha published his encyclopedic work, *Mahan Kosh*, in 1930. He did not mention anyone as the *Jathedar* of Akal Takht Sahib.

Even after 1920 or 1925, or even after 1947, the caretaker of Akal Takht, (though the term *Jathedar* was being used by the management of the S.G.P.C. and the other officials) was not known to be any specific entity. When, on November 29, 1961, the *Punj Piaray* gave their verdict from Akal Takht Sahib against Master Tara Singh, Fateh Singh, etc., the position of *Jathedar* was not known as some thing extraordinary. When, on October 2, 1962, Fateh Singh group wrested the control of the S.G.P.C. from Master Tara Singh, *Jathedar* Achhar Singh, the caretaker of Akal Takht Sahib resigned his position to protest against the mismanagement of the affairs of Darbar Sahib and the other shrines: nobody bothered for the so called *Jathedar* of Akal Takht Sahib. No body bothered when Sadhu Singh Bhaura, who had been defeated in the S.G.P.C. elections was appointed as '*Jathedar*' of Akal Takht Sahib. It was only on September 26, 1979, when *Jathedar* Jagdev Singh Talwandi and *Jathedar* Gurcharan Singh Tohra approached Akal Takht for settlement of the internal affairs of Akali Dal, that the '*Jathedar*' of Akal Takht came to be known as some "extra special" entity. Since then, the caretaker of Akal Takht Sahib has been considered, by some persons, as an official, who is a sort of Head Manager. Some scholars equate the office with the Catholic Pope. This is utterly in contradiction to the Sikh ideology. Akal Takht Sahib is regarded as the Throne of the Almighty. It is the supreme seat of the Sikh nation and all those who owe their allegiance to the Panth. It is not an ordinary shrine, nor an "organisation." A *Jathedar* means the chief or the president or the leader of a *Jatha* (band) or an organisation. Hence the term *Jathedar* is a misnomer. There can be a "caretaker" of Akal Takht Sahib or there can be a *Jathedar* of *Sarbat Khalsa* (the Sikh Commonwealth). He must represent the whole of the Sikh nation. He must have the confidence of the whole of the Sikh nation. It implies that he should be selected through the consensus of the whole Sikh nation. The proper course to select the *Jathedar* of the *Sarbat Khalsa* or the "caretaker" of Akal Takht Sahib, is to convene a *Sarbat Khalsa*. It should be a gathering of the representatives of all the Sikh organisations and the Sikh intellectuals (who consider themselves as the subjects of, and owe their loyalty solely to, Akal Takht Sahib). The S.G.P.C. represent the core of the Sikh nation with regard to the management of the Sikh shrines and on this issue it is supreme. None can challenge S.G.P.C.'s jurisdiction in case of management of the Sikh shrines. Even so, the SGPC is not the *Sarbat Khalsa* for the purpose of the selection of the "*Jathedar* of the *Sarbat Khalsa*" or for the appointment/selection of the "caretaker of Akal Takht Sahib." He can be named as (chief custodian) or *Nigraan* (custodian) or *Safir* (ambassador) or *Bulara* (spokesman). I will suggest the term *Mukh Sewadar* in Punjabi and "custodian" in English.

The chief custodian of Akal Takht Sahib is not a head of state, nor is he the Pontiff (like the Catholic Pope). He is a spokesman, an intervenor. He can issue the *Gurmatas* of the *Sarbat Khalsa* as the *Hukamnamas* of Akal Takht Sahib. In case of the persons excommunicated from the *Sikh Panth*, the cases of punishment must be considered by the *Sarbat Khalsa*. There can be a "standing committee", which should consist of the representatives of the organisations that are loyal to Akal Takht Sahib, plus a panel of Sikh intellectuals (to be co-opted by these representatives). The members of this "standing committee" may

continue to be members of this Committee while they enjoy the confidence of their organisation as well as the Sikh nation. They must be regarded and respected as *Sewadars* of the Sikh nation. For local issues, the petitions may be decided by *Punj Piaray* with the Jathedar as the head of the panel.

The mystical powers of the holy Takht must be used with reverence and caution.

