

# **BHAI KAHAN SINGH NABHA: An Illustrious Scholar Remembered**

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Bhai Kahan Singh 'Nabha' was born in the same year as Rabindranath Tagore. In the same mould of a reformer, a poet, a writer and a great music lover, Bhai Kahan Singh Ji Nabha lived upto 77 years of age shining like northstar in the Sikh firmament of early 20th century.

When I first thought of looking into the life of Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, I had doubts in my mind about my capability to handle this task. Bhai Sahib was a towering personality, not only in his lifetime but also after his death. He is remembered for his literary excellence and the work he did for the Punjabi literature and Sikh religion.

Bhai Kahan Singh Ji Nabha was born on 30th August 1861 into a respectable Sikh family of village Sabaj Banaera, in the State of Patiala. His father Bhai Narayan Singh, was a Mahant in one of the prestigious "Gurdwara Ajaipal Singh" in the neighboring State of Nabha and his deeply religious mother's name was Mata Hira Kaur. Bhai Sahib was one of the families of three brothers and one sister.

His education commenced under the guidance of his learned father at a very early age, when he put him under the tutorship of Bhai Bhoop Singh. He learnt Gurmukhi script and, being very intelligent and keen, mastered the language. He was able to read Guru Granth Sahib fluently at the age of only seven years.

His father was impressed with his son's intelligence and interest in learning. He decided to send Bhai Kahan Singh to Delhi for further studies in Sanskrit, where he spent his teenage years, learning Hindi and Sanskrit literature, from various distinguished teachers of that time, notably Bawa Kalyan Das, Pandit Sri Dhar, Bansi Dhar, Bhai Vir Singh Jalalke, Bhai Ram Singh and Bawa Parmanand. His keen interest led him to go deep into the literary works of all the famous writers. He also picked up poetry and history from Bhai Bhagwan Singh Dug and even learnt Hindi classical music from Mahant of Gurusar Maharaj Gaja Singh.

As he progressed, his father Bhai Narayan Singh Ji, encouraged him to pursue his learning to other literary works and not confine himself to Punjabi. Bhai Sahib started learning Urdu, Farsi and English literature. For this he was fortunate to have his tutor in Bhagwan Singh Dug. Soon under his able guidance Bhai Kahan Singh attained a good degree of knowledge in this field. The news of his learning of Farsi spread to his father's social circle and Sikh community. These so-called well-wishers approached Bhai Narayan Singh with strong objection to Bhai Kahan Singh's learning of Farsi. Bhai Narayan Singh was under such pressure by these agencies and he had to advise his

son to discontinue his studies in Farsi and return home to Nabha. Bhai Kahan Singh was shocked by the views of the community, but had to obey his father.

Bhai Sahib was at the impressionable age of twenty years. He could not accept this setback to his learning and regarded the idea of the community as primitive. He kept quiet for some time, but pushed by his desire to pursue his studies, he left Nabha for Delhi without informing his family. He spent the next couple of years in Delhi studying Farsi literature. Thus at the age of twenty two years he was well versed in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Farsi and English.

Lahore in 1883 was becoming a center of activities of the Sikh nation. He left for Lahore and approached Bhai Sant Singh of Dera Sahib. Under his able guidance Bhai Sahib completed his studies of "*Zafarnama*" and other Sikh literature written in Farsi. In those days certain Hindu elements like Arya Samajists had started a campaign to slight the Sikh scriptures, *Gurbani*, and Sikh Gurus. Anti-Sikh literature was written and published by the Hindu media. Bhai Sahib noted that Prof. Gurmukh Singh and Giani Dit Singh were busy in their efforts to counter the Hindu propaganda. The Singh Sabha movement brought about the regeneration among the Sikhs and they faced the challenges of the time. Siri Guru Singh Sabha was established in 1880 with the sole purpose to educate the general public about Sikhism. The Sabha published a newspaper, wrote articles, papers, held conferences and published Sikh literature. Bhai Sahib was impressed and joined the Siri Singh Sabha Movement. He took full interest in its activities. He co-authored a book called "*Siri Guru Granth Puryay*".

He stayed in Lahore for the next two years, working hard in the mission, with full dedication to the Sikh cause and Sikh religious activities. His association with Prof. Gurmukh Singh changed his entire outlook in life. He committed himself totally to work for the Sikh community and Sikh religion.

He was now 24 years of age and being away from home for a long time, felt bit homesick and decided to return to his parents in Nabha. His first marriage was in the state of Patiala. His wife died soon after, and he married again in the city of Muktsar, but she also passed away. This was a shock to Bhai Sahib. He was getting under depression and seemed to be losing interest in life. His parents could not bear this and persuaded him to get married again. Bhai Sahib was married the third time to Bibi Basant Kaur of village Ramgarh in Patiala.

He had a son, Bhagwant Singh by his third marriage. Having settled down, Bhai Narayan Singh Ji introduced him to Maharaja Hira Singh Ji of Nabha. The Maharaja was impressed by his qualifications and knowledge and asked him to be his companion and advisor. Bhai Sahib accepted the job and worked hard in all spheres of the Maharaja's activities. Maharaja Hira Singh Ji was happy and appointed him tutor to his son Tilak Ridduman Singh. In 1885, as a companion he accompanied Maharaja Hira Singh Ji to Rawalpindi for a political meeting and conference with the Government and other states.

During that time Mr. M.A. Macauliffe, a divisional Judge of the area and a keen scholar, who was doing research on Sikhism met Bhai Sahib during this conference. He had already heard about Bhai Sahib and his contribution to Sikhism, and was pleased to meet him. Mr. Macauliffe was looking for some assistance in his work on Sikh history and was very happy when Maharaja Hira Singh agreed to release Bhai Sahib for some time to help him in his research on Sikhism. Thus Bhai Sahib stayed with Mr. M.A. Macauliffe for nearly three months helping him with his research. Before returning to Nabha he offered his full cooperation in future whenever needed, and, during next few years, he did assist Mr. Macauliffe with his research and writing of the book *The Sikh Religion* and also his English translation of Siri Guru Granth Sahib.

All those years Bhai Sahib was busy in his official duties to Maharaja Hira Singh Ji and being tutor to the prince. Still he did not neglect his own literary interest and work on Sikh religious activities spending major part of his income. His books "*Raj Dharam*" and "*Natak Bhâwarath Tika*" were published during that time.

Prof. Gurmukh Singh and his associates in Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Lahore, were trying to get the political backing and financial assistance from various bodies to establish a Sikh Institution. They contacted Bhai Kahan Singh and encouraged him to join them in the noble cause. Bhai Sahib with his close association to Maharaja Hira Singh, knew Rais Attar Singh Bador and other affluent Sikh families, who could help them financially. Even other Sikh states and the Government were approached. It was a proud day in 1892 for the Sikh nation when the foundation stone was laid of Khalsa College, Amritsar.

Maharaja Hira Singh acknowledged with pleasure the good work and outstanding service by Bhai Sahib and appointed him as his Private Secretary and, thereafter, in 1895, was promoted to the position of City Magistrate. In 1896 he was appointed the Deputy Commissioner in-charge of Canal Department of Nabha State. In 1902 when Maharaja Hira Singh was faced with some legal problems with the Government of India, and needed someone with experience and knowledge to deal with the agent of Phoolkian States, he selected Bhai Kahan Singh to represent him and handle the case. Bhai Sahib took the matter in earnest and worked most diligently, honestly and sincerely to win the case. The agent of Phoolkian States was very impressed by the way he handled the case. He wrote to Maharaja Hira Singh and paid high tribute for Bhai Sahib's devotion to his service, his chief and the State.

Bhai Sahib traveled three times to England during this time. On his first trip in 1907, Mr. Macauliffe accompanied him. Second time in 1908 and third time in 1910, the prince Tika Ripduman Singh accompanied him.

In 1911 Maharaja Hira Singh, traveled to England to attend the coronation of King George VI. On his return, soon after due to his failing health decided to retire from his day-to-day control of the State affairs. He made lots of changes in the running of the State and in this reshuffle appointed Bhai Sahib his Foreign Minister.

On 25th December 1911 Maharaja Hira Singh passed away and in 1912 his son Tika Ripduman Singh, on his return from England, was crowned the Maharaja of Nabha State. Being young and of modern outlook, his dealings with his ministers, advisors and Government of India created a strained relationship. Bhai Sahib was very unhappy with the state of affairs. He was already feeling out of touch with his literary and religious work. So he decided that this was the good time to leave the service and spend some time on his literary and religious work.

He left the service and headed for Kashmir and, once settled, started writing "*Encyclopaedia of Sikh Literature: MAHAN KOSH*". This book later became a classic and the greatest source of information on Sikhism. The meagre savings that he had were soon exhausted and having no source of income in Kashmir he was forced to return and look for a job. With his good record and experience in running of the State affairs, in 1915 Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala State appointed him as lawyer to the political Agency.

In 1916 Bhai Sahib went through a very tough time both at home and in his career. First his father Bhai Narayan Singh died and this had a lasting effect on him. Then within a year, due to some political misunderstanding, relations between the State of Nabha and State of Patiala started to deteriorate. The strained atmosphere created a war-like situation between the two States. Bhai Sahib was very much disturbed with this situation and with the help of Bhai Arjan Singh Ji Bagrian, talked to the two Maharajas to negotiate and clear the misunderstanding, rather than going to war. Thus with his mediation and untiring effort the matter was settled amicably.

Maharaja of Nabha was vastly impressed by Bhai Sahib's contribution in settling the dispute and rewarded him not only financially but also made him his Prime Minister. He was also elected as the member of the Judicial Council of the States. In this capacity Bhai Sahib worked up to 1923.

He was now nearly 62 years of age. He decided to retire from his State responsibilities and devote his full time to follow his literary and socio political ambition. As a matter of fact his literary life really had started when he went to Lahore to join the activities of Siri Guru Singh Sabha under Prof. Gurmukh Singh. It is remarkable that all through his life, although he had gone through the ups and downs of living, yet he kept his keen interest in the literary field. He kept writing on all aspects of Sikh history, religion and living philosophy. He published many books. Starting from "*Raj Dharam*", "*Natak Bhawarath Deepka* (1888), "*Tika Jameni Ashurmedh* (1896), "*Hum Hindu Nahin*" (1897), "*Gurmat Prabhakar* (1898), "*Gurmat Sudhakar* (1899), "*Thag Leela*" (1899), "*Sad Ka Parmarath*" (1901), "*Bijai Swam Dharam*" (1901), "*Tika Vishan Puran*" (1903), "*Sharab Nished*" (1907), "*Gurchand Diwakar*" (1924), "*Rudeep Pingal*", "*Anekrarth Kosh*", "*Nam Mala Kosh*", all in 1925, "*Gurshabad Ratanakar Mahan Kosh*" (1930), "*Cheepa Shabad Di Utpati*" (1930), "*Steek Chandi Di Var*" (1935), "*Gurmat Martand*" (1962) and "*Guru Mahema Ratnawali*" (1984).

He was given the honorific title of "Sardar Bahadur" in 1933. His keen interest in religious issues touched the life of many and earned the wrath of certain Hindu elements. He was furious and wanted that the Sikh religion and its dictates be taken seriously and depicted correctly. "*Hum Hindu Nahin*" was published to prove the point. He was responsible for removal of all kinds of idols from the *Parkarma* of Harmandir Sahib, condemning it as idol worship. He always protected truth and fought injustice in all spheres of life. His social and political programs were always directed to fulfill his literary and religious agenda.

Today the Sikh nation is proud of his works. Although he is no more, the light is still burning and will remain so for all the time to come.

