

# Holy Shrines: The Nanakana Sahib Saga

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For some years, the corrupt Mahant Narain Dass of Nanakana Sahib was known to be indulging in unscrupulous and immoral acts in Gurudwara Sahib, a shrine most revered place for Sikhs. Immediate cause of provocation was an incident of molestation of a 13 year old daughter of a Sindhi Engineer of Karachi who was a devotee of Guru Nanak and who had to stay overnight. This shook the conscience of Sikhs. Earlier, a group of six women devotees of Jaranwala, Dist. Layalpur were treated similarly by Mahant and his cohorts. Mahant was affluent as he had under his control 760 squares (each square equal to 25 acres of land) rich and fertile land and huge offerings by devotees. Such immoral practices ignited the immediate spark in the minds of Sikhs.

Bhai Lachhman Singh of Dharowal, Tehsil Nankana Sahib, Dist. Shekhpura was a land holder, and Amritdhari Gursikh and deeply devoted. He used to go to villages around his native place for preaching Sikh way of life as and when he was free from his agricultural responsibilities. On 20 Feb. 1921, he with about 200 Gursikhs reached Nankana Sahib to get rid of the curse of mahant. They had pledged to remain non-violent in all situations, even when they knew that Mahant had enlisted the services of large number of hooligans and convicts. According to historians, when Bhai Lachhman Singh went to Taran Taaran to attend the Bhog Ceremony of martyrs on 26.1.1921 who laid down their lives to liberate Gurdwara from unscrupulous elements, he narrated misdeeds of Mahant Narain Das at Janamsthan and pledged that he will offer his head to free the shrine of Nankana Sahib and prayed before Sat Guru.

“Today I, an insignificant sewak offer my head to liberate Janamsthan from clutches of immoral Mahant. ‘O Satguru, bestow me the courage and strength to achieve this object.”

Mahant’s misdeeds had compelled the whole Panth to take remedial steps when the British Government was at his back. On 23.1.1921, he went to Amritsar to consult Sikh leaders. One Sher Singh, a servant of Mahant was sitting near Bhai Lachhman Singh in the same compartment of a train was listening to the resolve of Bhai Sahib and conveyed to Mahant that Sikhs have decided to achieve martyrdom to oust lecherous Mahant and his hirelings. Mahant went to Lahore and met Mr. King, Commissioner of Lahore Division and appraised him of the situation and requested that a Police Chowki may be set up at the site of the Shrine. Mr. King told him that he had vast resources and was capable of dealing with the situation himself. He had enlisted about 300 Gundas besides large number of servants and equipped them with weapons to meet the situation.

Central leadership at Amritsar had decided to meet at Nankana Sahib on 3, 4, 5 March 1921 and hold a Panthik gathering. Bha Lachhman Singh, however, received intelligence that Mahant had decided to wipe out the entire Sikh leadership at this gathering. He, therefore, decided that Gurdwara should be liberated before these dates. He and Kartar Singh Jhabar, a brave leader of the area met at Gurdwara Sacha Sauda and decided to lead a Jatha on the morning of 19th Feb. 1921. He was advised by Master Tara Singh and Teja Singh Samundari to heed the leadership’s programme but he had his own schedule.

Before departure, he told his wife, Bibi Inderkaur that he was going to Janamsthan to achieve martyrdom and she should reconcile to the situation. Bibi insisted that she will also accompany the Jatha and her two other friends, Bibi Ranjit Kaur and a teacher of Kanya Pathshala, Bibi Mahender Kaur went with Shahidi Jatha. All of them met at his house and after offering Ardas, and after taking hukumnama from Shri Guru Granth Sahib started with

the spirit:

“Maron te har key dwar”

After travelling the whole night, they reached Chander Kot in the morning, about 5 miles from Nankana Sahib. Bhai Lachhman Singh reminded the Jatha of great Shahid of Khalsa Panth, Baba Deep Singh and drew a line for those who wished to save their lives but everybody jumped the line saying that they had started to liberate Janamsthan and now they cannot betray and be false to their prayer. They were again asked to remain non-violent even against extreme provocation to achieve their noble object. At this place, blessings of Guru Nanak were solicited, by offering Ardas. Bhai Tehl Singh of Taran Taran asked the three ladies to go back to their village. Bhai Lachhman Singh addressed his wife:

“Inder Kaure, we were destined to live together thus far. Now you go after paying obeisance at Gurdwara Tambu Sahib and pray that we should stand firm in our resolve. Bibi touched his feet and with bowed head and tearful eyes glanced towards her husband for the last time. Bhai Tehl Singh took out Rs. 18/- from his pocket and handed over to her saying that Akhand Path may be arranged with this amount.”

Bhai Lachhman Singh asked three of his Jatha to go and see if doors of Darshini Deodi was open and if so, they should loudly announce:

“Ticket window is open, come and get into the train.”

As soon as they heard this, they ran towards Darshini Deodi. Here they handed over kripans and spears to one of them to take them back. It was 5.45 a.m. Bhai Lachhman Singh sent 5 Sikhs to each of 5 gates and other squatted at Barandari. Thakur Dass, was reciting Sukhmani Sahib. He was asked to move and Bhai Lachhman Singh took his seat behind Guru Granth sahib. At the appearance of first sun rays, Mahant Narain Dass who was fully drunk and was on his horseback and Rehana, a local convict started firing indiscriminately. Many Sikhs fell down, injured/killed. One Sant Ram, Sadh was also hit and killed. Sikhs were particularly indignant at Rehana's ruthless firing. Mahant in an inebriated state and a pistol in hand was prowling among peaceful gathering and addressing thus:

“Today no Sikhra should remain alive and clear this place from the curse of Akali's root and branch.”

Some hirelings and cohorts started throwing bricks at Sikhs. Bhai Tehl Singh of Taran Taran was hit on his head and killed. Some Sikhs went inside choukhandi and doors were closed. One boy, Darbara Singh (12 years) son of Tehl Singh was concealed in almirah. Sikhs were being hit with gun shots, bricks and acid bulbs. Whole parikarma was splattered with blood of the saint soldiers who were being butchered only because they offered peaceful protest for upholding with the purity of the shrine, built in the memory of apostle of peace and non-violence. Mahant's men started collecting legs, arms and other parts of bodies and threw them on five heaps. As per planned, tins of kerosene oil were poured on these heaps and set on fire. It was literally a scene of barbarism in its cruel form, but who was there to listen to their cries?

Mahant issued new order:

“Oye 5-6 Sikhs corpses may be retained. Bodies of Sadhs who were killed by their own men may be kept. We will say that Akalis have killed them.”

This group of murderers then proceeded to Darbar Sahib and tried to break the door. They drilled a hole through which bullets were fired which roasted some Sikhs. This dastardly deed was done by hoodlooms and hirelinings of Mahant. At last, they broke open the door. Kaka Darbara Singh (12 years) was alarmed and started crying. Goondas took him to Mahant and asked what to do with the boy. Mahant said, “He is a Sikh and when he grows up he will become Akali. Send him to where his father has gone.” Brave son of a brave

father, himself said that he wanted to be martyred like his father. thus the noble son of Guru Gobind Singh was thrown in burning heaps of corpses. After committing the crime, they proceeded towards Bhai Lachhman Singh who had received several shots and was bleeding profusely. He was caught from his sacred hair and dragged out. He was uttering "Wahe Guru, Wahe Guru". But, they hung him upside down on a jand tree, behind Choukhandi, poured kerosene oil and set him on fire. This tree reminds even today the horrible torture perpetrated by Mahant who posed himself as a custodian of Nankana Sahib. He had much to lose, i.e. a vast jageer of 760 square of fertile land besides huge offerings of the devotees. His corruption and low mentality had become widely known.

Bhai Dalip Singh, a friend of Mahant when learnt of the massacre, ran to Gurdwara with his colleague Bhai Waryam Singh and saw Mahant on his horse firing ruthlessly. He asked what he was doing? At this, Mahant fired at him saying: "Your end was destined from my hands. You also go with your Akalis. Waryam Singh ran to protect Bhai Dalip Singh, but next bullet was aimed at him. While still alive, they were offering last respect to Baba Nanak.

A message was sent to Dy. commissioner (Mr. Curry) who was camping at Mangtanwala, about 11 miles from Nankana Sahib. He rushed to the place with some district officials and visited the scene. Mahant's hoodlums started complaining: "Sahibji, Akalis have killed Sadhs."

He could have arrested Mahant and his goondas, but he remained insensitive. At about 8.00 p.m., 200 military force reached Nankana Sahib in a special train which Mr. King, Commissioner, I.G. Police, S.B. Mahtab Singh, Govt. Advocate and some Sikh dignitaries including Sardar Amar Singh, Editor, Sher-e-Punjab came. Gurdwara was handed over to the Army. Next day Mahant, some of his sadhs and 26 pathans were arrested and were taken to Lahore Central Jail. All trains to Nankana Sahib were cancelled but inspite of this about forty thousand Sikhs reached Nankana Sahib. Panthic leaders Master Tara Singh, Sardar Harbans Singh Attari, Prof. Jodh Singh and Sardar Teja Singh Samundari reached there. Sardar Kartar Singh Jhabbar demanded that Gurdwara Janamsthan should be handed over to Sikhs immediately, otherwise it will be occupied by force. He also cautioned that Sikhs will now not remain nonviolent. English rulers threatened to use sten guns but situation was getting out of control.

Sardar Mehtab Singh asked DC to act calmly so that it may not deteriorate. At last Gurdwara was handed over to Sikhs.

On 22.2.1921, what they saw was horrible. Amongst them were children, sisters, brothers, wives, parents and friends of martyred Sikhs. The whole compound was splattered with blood, a place sanctified by Guru Nanak's feet who had throughout his life spread the message of love and tolerance. The Governor Punjab (Maclagan) also visited. He simply said "Justice will be done". Mr Curry was transferred and S. Hardit Singh Malik posted as D.C.

Panthic leaders planned for last rites of martyrs. Bhai Takhat Singh (Ferozepur) and Bhai Hira Singh, legendary Ragi were selected for this purpose. Angeetha of about 20 fet long and 8 feet high was prepared to cremate limbs and bodies of Shaheed Sikhs. Prof. Jodh Singh performed Ardas. Thousands of Sikhs from all parts of Punjab assembled and uttered "Maron tan har ke dwar". With tearful eyes they bade farewell to their shaheed brothers.

Mahatma Gandhi reached Nankana Sahib on 3.3.1921 with Lala Lajpat Rai and Ali Brothers. All of them walked from railway station to Gurdwara. After paying obeisance to Guru Granth Sahib they saw half burnt Jand tree, blood splattered parkarma and broken

doors. Gandhiji could not hold his tears and said that this saga was worse than Jalianwala Bagh. Then Firangi rulers had attacked peaceful men and now Indians aided and abetted by Firangis have committed this crime.

Sikhs who achieved martyrdom were bound by the pledge to remain nonviolent otherwise they could easily destroy the entire clan of murderers. In fact this saga was not accidental. It was planned to teach a lesson to Sikhs so that they would desist from future participation for India's independence. Did Sikhs stop to run in the vanguard of struggle for independence after this brutal massacre? Molana Abdul Kalam Azad and Dr. Pattabhai Sitaramya, Congress president wrote that Sikhs' participation was 80% of those executed or imprisoned though they were merely 1% of the total population of India. This struggle became a model for future struggles and they showed to the entire world that they can suffer death and face oppression for the cause dear to them.

Guru Nanak had said that "Dying is the privilege of brave men provided they die on becoming acceptable to God."

Kabirji said "Kabir jis marney te jag dare, mere man anand, marne hi te paiye puram paramanand."

(Oh Kabir! Death for which the whole world fears has a joy for me. It is by dying that the perfect bliss is attained.)

Bhai Lachman Singh and about 200 Gursikhs will inspire men of all times, will be cherished as martyrs and will ever be remembered with love, faith and veneration.

