

# **JATHEDAR BHAI KARTAR SINGH JHABBAR**

## **- THE LIFE AND TIMES -**

**By Bhai Narayan Singh**

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This is the story of a heroic Akali leader, Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar, gleaned, to begin with, from his personal journals, by Bhai Narayan Singh whose narrative in Punjabi has, at long last, been translated in English by Sardar Karnail Singh, for a much wider audience. It is a story of a simple man of rustic background with no formal education, no organizational base or constituency who, with his matchless daring, piety and astuteness, single-handedly brought about basic gurdwara reforms. Historians appear to have ignored his role notwithstanding his validation by Dr. Ganda Singh, the doyen of Sikhs historians. SGPC deserves praise for throwing light on Jhabbar and for recognizing his invaluable service to the Sikh *panth*.

Sardar Kartar Singh Jhabbar was a lay preacher who lived his life by what he preached. He was destined to devote all his time and energy in the *panthic* service. He was a natural born leader with an uncanny sense to read the winds of religio-political changes. He was the first to perceive the threat posed by Gandhi's politically driven non-cooperation movement to Sikh religious reforms. He will be long remembered for singularly spearheading the campaign to gain control of Sikh Shrines from the corrupt *mahants*. During the long-drawn campaign he was jailed thrice for life (one of the life penalty was commutation of a death sentence). He was a truly real renaissance man.

Kartar Singh Jhabbar was born in 1874 in the village of Jhabbar (now part of Sheikhpura district, Pakistan), a stronghold of the fiercely independent-minded *Virks*. His personal diaries say little about his early years, which, in all likelihood, were spent working the family farm. That is not to say that his rural rearing isolated him from the winds of religious and political change that were sweeping the Punjab landscape.

The Panjab that Jhabbar inherited was a shattered homeland. In 1849 the kingdom of the Sikhs came to an unhappy end. For the Sikhs, who cherished their freedom from the times of the sixth Guru, who were imbued with a sense of fighting for justice and equity by the tenth Guru, who ruled Punjab for nearly a hundred and fifty years (1699-1849), first under the *misls* and later under the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, to find themselves endangered was utterly shocking.

Gurudwaras, seminal centres of Sikh gathering, were no longer under Sikh management, control over which had long since passed into the hands of the Udasi Sadhus "with Hindu inclinations". Sikhs sought to regain control over their Gurudwaras, the British preferred the status quo to stop Sikhs from getting organized. Jhabbar was to spend the rest of his days trying to wrest control of the Gurudwaras from the corrupt *mahants*.

Another threat was posed by the steadfast proselytizing zeal of the Christian church and the resurgent Hinduism in the form of the Arya Samaj. Numbers of Sikhs declined sharply leaving the Sikh body politic in disarray. To stop their losses the Sikhs launched a counter campaign of their own, known as *Shudhi* (i.e conversion of Muslims and lower castes to Sikhism). It was, thus, that in 1904, at age 30, Kartar Singh Jhabbar came under the influence of Bhai Mool Singh Gurmula who was to administer the *amrit* to him. Two years later Jhabbar entered the Gharjakh Vidyala seminary where he spent three years to "acquire Gurmat knowledge". Jhabbar moved his residence to Lahore on the urging of Sardar Lall Singh.

In Lahore, Jhabbar discovered to his dismay that the Singh Sabha of Lahore consisted of nineteen members who met irregularly. Within two months he enrolled five hundred members and started weekly congregations. He traveled throughout Punjab preaching *Gurmat*. In 1912 he constituted the "Khalsa Diwan Khara Sauda Bar" which was to render "monumental *Panthic* services".

Jhabbar was destined to prove his true political mettle during the 1919 crisis. In March of that year the British passed the Rowlatt bill, a black law denying right of assembly for political protest. These black laws had sent many of the people into paroxysm of rage. On April 11 demonstrators gathered at Lahore's Shahi Mosque when the police precipitated matters by shooting a student. "At the burning ghat, Jhabbar delivered his maiden political speech against the Government".

Three days later, on Baisakhi day, the crisis reached critical mass when British soldiers mowed down hundreds of innocent people at Jallianwala Bagh. News reached Jhabbar while he was addressing a congregation at the Gurudwara Sacha Sauda at Chuhar Kana. Young men formed squads and blew up government assets, such as canal bridges, electric wires and railway stations. Jhabbar was among the rounded-up ringleaders. He was tried, convicted and sentenced to death. A month later his sentence was commuted to life in Andaman Islands, but soon thereafter he was freed. At Andaman he got a good grounding in political theories.

On his return to mainland (circa 1920) Jhabbar found himself closely monitored by law enforcement. Although he was a much sought after political speaker he remained a preacher at heart. It was the sexual shenanigans at the historic holy shrines that were to provoke Jhabbar to launch a campaign to bring these temples under *panthic* control. The *modus operandi* was to dispatch special *Jathas* to the targeted Gurudwara, perform *kirtan* and prepare and serve *langar*; in other words, a *de facto* occupation.

1920 was a watershed date. In October some of the important Sikh shrines passed into the hands of the *panth* without much ado. First to fall was the Gurudwara of Babe Di Bar and was followed, successively, by Harmandir Sahib and Sri Akal Takht Sahib. The *pujaris* of Sri Akal

Takht Sahib bribed a Nihang Jatha to neutralize the *Panthic* control but that was of no avail. At the request of Jhabbar, Bhai Teja Singh Bhuchar was appointed Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib. On October 11, 1920 Deputy Commissioner, Amritsar, summoned Jathedars Jhabbar and Bhuchar, and appointed a nine member committee to which he handed over the possession of Golden temple complex, which was the forerunner to the SGPC.

The takeover of the next shrine, Gurudwara Punja Sahib, involved protracted negotiations requiring dispatch of *Jatha* after *Jatha* to show *Panthic* firmness. Jhabbar was to report the daily happenings for the newspaper "*Akali*". In December Jhabbar "called a convention of Sikhs in Gurudwara Mai Nikayan (Sheikhupura)" and formed "Akali Jatha Khara Sauda Bar". Thus was founded *Akali Dal*.

Next, Jhabbar set his sights on the recovery of the Gurudwara Janam Asthan at Nankana Sahib. Obvious opposition came from the *mahants* who had the most to lose. The *mahants* were to gird themselves to frustrate all *Panthic* efforts to gain control of their shrines. At the same time the *mahants* appealed to the police, the law courts and the British government to stop what they called illegal seizures. The magistrates tried to wrestle with material implications of possession and ownership of property. With the increasing number of Sikhs taking the *amrit* to enlist into *Jathas* the British were to assess the threat that posed to their interests. They were determined to squelch any revival of Khalsa spirit even if it meant deploying the army.

*Mahant* Narain Das of Gurudwara Janam Asthan at Nankana Sahib was to use ruse after ruse to catch Jhabbar and other *Jatha* leaders off guard and when one scheme failed he would employ a different stratagem to thwart them. But the unkindest cut of all was the opposition from within. Often Jhabbar found himself at odds with the *Panthic* leaders. For example, Sardar Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh and others issued a verbal "*hukam*" to Jhabbar to cease all efforts at seizing Gurudwara Janam Asthan.

Jhabbar gave in reluctantly, but Bhai Lachman Singh and his *Jatha* who had performed *ardas* to take possession of the Gurudwara and who felt that it was "not in keeping with the Sikh tradition to go back on it" nonetheless went ahead, entered the shrine and "bolted it from inside". *Mahant* Narain Das was to let loose his own goon militia on the peaceful 'squatters' with dire consequences: Bhai Lachman Singh was burnt alive, Bhai Dalip Singh was shot dead and Bhai Waryam Singh was butchered.

On hearing of the massacre Jhabbar "chalked out" an action plan. Devout Sikhs were to be mobilized. On February 20, 1921 hundreds gathered at Chandar Kot Bridge discovering that the Government had taken control of the shrine and placed it under guard of British army. Notwithstanding an order from Mr. King, Deputy Commissioner of Lahore Division, not to proceed, and despite a warning that the army was armed to the teeth, Jhabbar led eleven *Jathas*, consisting of two hundred volunteers each, to march forward. Sensing the determination of the *Jatha*, Deputy Commissioner Currie approached Jhabbar to know what was it that they wanted. Jhabbar replied, "keys to the Gurudwara". After some discussion Commissioner King handed the keys to Jhabbar with the proviso that they form a committee to whom will be given the possession of the shrine.

The senseless killing of Bhai Lachman Singh and his comrades was to turn Nankana Sahib into *cause celebre*. The Governor of Punjab, prominent Sikh leaders and even Mahatama Gandhi came to see the aftermath of the bloody struggle for its take-over. Gandhi asked the Khalsa to embrace his non-cooperation movement, forgetful that his was a political movement, whereas the Gurudwara Reform was a religious movement. Jhabbar was opposed to Gandhi's overture but the majority of Congressite Sikhs passed the resolution. As a result Punjab government convened a meeting in March 1921 at which it was decided that Sikhs will not take "forcible possession of Gurudwaras", including that of Nankana Sahib, and that the government will enforce this policy vigorously. Whenever the police or a magistrate or a British official asked Jhabbar under what authority he had taken over the shrine, Jhabbar's pat reply was that the Gurudwara belonged to the Sikh *Panth* and no one else.

In March 1921 Punjab government convened a meeting at which it was decided that Sikhs will not take "forcible possession of Gurudwaras", including that of Nankana Sahib, and that the government will enforce this policy vigorously. Consequently, Jhabbar together with a few members of his *Jatha* were arrested immediately and lodged in Lahore Borstal jail. During their prison visit the Sikh leaders were told by Jhabbar that the campaign for the take-over of the Gurudwaras was a religious and not a political movement. Jhabbar was sentenced to eighteen years of rigorous imprisonment. Once again, Sikh leaders pleaded with the government and secured the release of the prisoners on the understanding that the campaign for forcible take-over will be ended, pending legislation to deed all Gurudwaras to the Sikh *Panth*.

Whilst in prison Jhabbar had learned that Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar had issued an edict against wearing of black turbans. On his release Jhabbar was instrumental in the passing of *Gurmatta* that all Sikhs should wear black turbans. At the same time Gurudwara committee also passed a resolution to take back the keys of *Tosha Khana*. To thwart the Akalis, *Sarbrah* of Harmandir Sahib, an appointee of the government, handed the keys to the magistrate. Word quickly spread that the government had taken possession of this holy shrine. Hundreds of Sikh took the *amrit* and the situation approached crisis point. In the end the government gave up and gave the keys to the *Panth*.

The next crisis erupted over *kar sewa* at Harmandir Sahib and *Jaito morcha* organized for the restoration of Maharaja of Nabha. Sikhs took *amrit* and volunteered for the *morcha*. Many Akalis were arrested and in February 1924 a *shahidi Jatha* was sent to Jaito. Over 50,000 sympathisers marched alongside the *morcha*. The crowd was fired upon killing almost a hundred protestors. Another *Shahidi Jatha* headed for Jaito and in the face of mounting agitation the authorities finally capitulated. But, the new Governor of Punjab, Sir Malcolm Hailey, threw a damper by proclaiming that unlike his predecessor he will "strictly enforce law and order".

In his many addresses to various congregations Jhabbar explained the Gurudwara Reform movement and insisted that Sikhs pay no notice to the Governor but to go ahead with the *Jaito morcha*. Jhabbar was arrested and "sent to Campbellpur jail for 18 years". Assistant Jail Warden translated his hostility towards Jhabbar by planting evidence. Jhabbar's health was on a steady decline. He was later transferred to Multan jail where he, again, suffered at the hands of his jailors. While he was incarcerated the "long-drawn struggle for exercise of religious rights" came to an end with passage of the Gurudwara Act, 1925.

With the passage of the Gurudwara Act, 1925 many Akali prisoners were released. Akalis held at various prison camps were then transferred to Rawalpindi jail. Harsh treatment in jails had taken its toll on Jhabbar and his health deteriorated. He was released after serving of four and half year sentence. He was elected to Nanakana Sahib Gurudwara committee where he "worked for several years". He devoted all his time in obtaining other concessions such as return of income producing lands set aside for upkeep of Gurudwaras, allowing sale of *Jhatka* meat and so on.

But mostly Jhabbar spent his time preaching Gurmat and Sikh Rehat Maryada. Sikh historians have given short shrift to this stellar man by not taking the full measure of the man - one who is the quintessential Sikh votary and whose contributions to the development of Sikh institutions remain unparalleled.

