

THE GREAT SIKH FREEDOM FIGHTER

BHAI SAHIB BHAI RANDHIR SINGH JI



1878 – 1961

Bhai Sahib Bhai Randhir Singh Ji, the well-known Sikh reformer, theologian and saint, was born on the 7th July 1878, at Narangwal (Ludhiana District). After completing his studies in 1900, he joined government service, but soon his spiritual tendencies developed and he took Amrit in 1904.

He had the firm belief that initiation into the Khalsa fold was not merely a ritual but meant a new birth into the Spirit of the Guru, provided that the ceremony is conducted strictly in accordance with the rules and procedures laid down by Guru Sahib. At the time of his own baptismal ceremony, a disturbing intrusion by an outsider caused confusion in his mind regarding the true Gurmantra. He felt that there was a Mystic Word prescribed as Gurmantra for the Sikhs, which also formed the central theme of the Gurbani - a particular NAAM - and it was possible to repeat it with every breath. He firmly believed that only through constant repetition of, and meditation on, this Mystic Word could complete self realization and oneness with God, be attained.

He, therefore, yearned ardently for getting the Gurmantra directly from Siri Guru Granth Sahib and was also confident that he would be blessed with it. **He believed Siri Guru Granth Sahib to be the real embodiment of the Ten Gurus and, therefore, prayed only to Guru Sahib for the Bliss of the Holy Naam.** With this objective in view, he made a prayerful vow to accept that holy word as the True Gurmantra that was indicated in the first hymn he read or heard in the Gurdwara on one particular morning. If there was any indication of the popularly known Divine Name of Waheguru through such words as Wah or Guru, he would accept Waheguru as the True Naam prescribed for the Sikhs as Gurmantra. How his prayer was accepted, in what a glorious way Guru Sahib blessed him with the Gurmantra, and the technique of its constant repetition, is very beautifully narrated in his autobiographical letters. '

"As soon as I entered the Gurdwara and bowed before Siri Guru Granth Sahib, these words were being recited:

Ve-muhtaja Ve-parvah Nanak Daas Kaho Gurvah (Asa M. 5:376)
Carefree and unconcerned is the Lord, Sayeth Nanak Speak GUR VAH.

The words Kaho Gurvah had such a magnetic effect on my mind that immediately my every nerve and pore in the body became imbued with the thrilled music of the Mystic Word Waheguru ... To my great surprise I saw some unseen hand wave the chowri over Guru Granth Sahib and in between the canopy The words Kaho Gurvah had such a magnetic effect on my mind that immediately my every nerve and pore in the body became imbued with the thrilled music of the Mystic Word Waheguru ...

To my great surprise I saw some unseen hand wave the chowri over Guru Granth Sahib and in between the canopy and Guru Granth Sahib, there flashed forth a wave of light forming in itself into the divine word Waheguru and moving in space throughout the inside of the Gurdwara without any visible support."

After attaining the true Gurmat Naam from Siri Guru Granth Sahib, he became determined and anxious to attain the Named One, the Lord God Himself. His desire turned into a poignant thirst, and he took to repeating the Naam continuously without any feeling of fatigue or wavering of mind. After attaining the stage of self-realization during which he saw his own soul to be quite distinct from his body, his thirst for seeing the Light of God Himself increased manifold On the auspicious day of Sahib Siri Guru Nanak Dev ji's Prakash Utsav, in the year 1905, God revealed himself in all His Perfect Resplendence to him in the silence of the midnight meditation 'which he describes in one of his autobiographical letters as follows:

"God was now resplendently revealed within me... Ah! Blessed was my search today. I could see a sea of Divine Light flooding within me and outside me in shimmering resplendence... The more I was

absorbed in it, the more wonderful and sublimely dazzling spiritual phenomena were seen by my inner eyes which cannot be expressed in the language of our physical and earthly world... I could see right through the roof and walls of the room in which I was sitting. Right through the sky I could see space beyond space, all crystal clear and bathed in purity. The whole of the universe was filled with incomprehensible light which was penetrating me and enfolding me. The music of His Divine Presence filled my heart with Blissful joy. I could see all this clearly and visibly in a wide awake condition..!"

For some period during 1905, he worked as a Superintendent of the Khalsa College Hostel, Amritsar. It is reported that when about 200 hostel-students fell sick on the account of food poisoning, he cured them with his supplication and prayers. He inspired the students with the Sikh way of life.

After these highly spiritual, mystical, and blissful experiences he resigned his government job, but did not become a hermit. He continued to tread the path of true Gurmat which enjoins upon the Sikhs to continue to live in this world without being engrossed in it. He continued to perform his duties to his family and society. He took the initiative in clearing the malpractices in the various historical Gurdwaras. As a reformer, he was not deterred by the strength of the vested interests involved in their management. Once, at **Gurdwara Fateh Garh Sahib** on a holy occasion, he did not allow the recitation of Gurban by an unholy and apostate Ragi Jatha, without caring for danger to his life. Again at **Anandpur Sahib Gurdwara**, on the occasion of Hola Mohala Celebration, he did not tolerate the malpractices and immoral activities of the powerful management. Risking his own life, he successfully fought against the administration; it was for such deeds of Gurdwara reform that he has been referred to as **the pioneer of the Gurdwara Reform Movement**. A reference to his services in this respect was also made in the **Hukam Namah** bestowed upon him from **Takht Siri Kesh Garh Sahib** in 1905.

In 1914, when the British rulers razed the wall of the historical **Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib** in New Delhi to beautify the surroundings of the then newly built Parliament House, it was Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh who not only was the first to protest publicly against this desecration of the Holy Shrine, but also to announce his specific plans to spearhead the agitation until the razed wall was restored. He was also instrumental in organizing two large Panthic Conferences in this connection, at Patti in District Amritsar, and at Lahore, to pass the Resolutions condemning the British action, and demanding the restoration of the razed wall. These conferences were the first of their kind after the British occupation of Punjab.

Although his mind was never in politics, as a true Gursikh who cannot accept slavery and repression, he, along with the Ghadarite emigrants from USA and Canada, became an active participant in the armed revolt against the British Government for the country's freedom. In fact, he was the only outstanding leader from Punjab who, along with his companions, was a participant in this revolt. It is worth noting here that the top Hindu leader of the Indian National Congress, M. K Gandhi, opposed this revolt and declared his support to the British Government in their First World War efforts, saying, "Was it not the duty of the slave, seeking to be free, to make the master's need his opportunity? It was our duty to win their help by standing by them in their need." Earlier the so-called Punjab Kesri, Lala Lajpat Rai called these Ghadarite emigrants, fanatics and dangerous to the national cause.

The revolt failed due to leakage of plans by traitors from within, and he and his companions were arrested on May 9, 1915 and tried in what is commonly known as the Second Lahore Conspiracy case. However, his love for the country's freedom arose solely from the ideals of the Sikh Dharma, and whatever he did for the country he did primarily as a true Gursikh and not merely as a political freedom fighter. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1916 and his property confiscated. He was only 38 years old with a wife and three young children.

During his prison term of over 16 years, he faced unprecedented sufferings. This was not for any political or personal reasons, but only for his determination to live strictly in accordance with the **Khalsa Code of Conduct** made known to him at the time of initiation into the Khalsa fold. In Multan jail, one of the hottest places in India (now in W Pakistan) with temperatures going up to 122° F in May and June, he remained without food and water continuously for 40 days. This was because he was not allowed to prepare his food himself according to the Gurmat principles and he would not take food prepared by non-Amritdharis. He was chained to iron gates in the open for many days to face the scorching heat of the sun and bear the brunt of hot winds. At night he was put into a 6' x 4' cell without ventilation. This is only one instance of the many tortures inflicted upon him. He had to bear such terrible sufferings in prison that twice he was given up for dead even by members of his own family. Even after suffering such inhuman tortures, he remained steadfast in his beliefs and never once wavered from following strictly the Khalsa Code of Conduct. When the **Khalsa Panth** came to know of his tortuous sufferings, the whole Panth observed February 1, 1923 as a special day of prayer for him in particular and for other suffering Sikh prisoners in general.

During his confinement, he went on hunger-strike many times and won the fight for the Sikh prisoners to wear a turban, underwear (Kachha), and steel wrist band (Kara).

Prior to his release from prison in Lahore, the well-known **Shaheed Bhagat Singh**, who was waiting execution in the same prison, expressed a desire to have Bhai Sahib's darshan before his death. On being approached, Bhai Sahib refused to see him saying "...he has violated the basic tenets of Sikhism by shaving off his hair and hence I do not want to see him. Bhagat Singh was quick to express his repentance and also confessed that he, in fact was an atheist at heart. He further told Bhai Sahib that even then, perhaps, he would have kept the Sikh appearance, but if he had done that **he would have lost the friendship and sympathy of his Hindu comrades and would not have received so much publicity in the press.** After a two hour meeting with Bhai Sahib, he became a true Sikh at heart and later went to the gallows as a true **believer** in Sikhism.

Soon after his release in 1930, Bhai Sahib was honoured by Siri **Akal Takht Sahib** with a **Hukamnama** and a robe of honour, recognizing his steadfastness in faith and selfless sacrifices. He is the second person to have been honoured by Siri **Akal Takht Sahib** during the 20th Century, the first person being Baba Kharak Singh, the renowned Panthic leader of the late twenties. Afterwards, the other three **Takhts** also honoured him in the same way, thus making him **the only single person to have been honoured from all the original four Takhts in the last hundred years of Sikh history.** (Damdama Sahib was declared the fifth Takht later). Robes of honour and a gold medallion were also sent to him by the Sikhs of U.S.A. and Canada. He was selected as one of the Panj Pyaras to inaugurate the Kar Seva of the sarover of Gurdwara Tarn Taran Sahib, and to lay the foundation stones of the new buildings of the Gurdwaras at Panja Sahib and Shahidganj Nankana Sahib, besides those of the Bungas at Patna Sahib and Kavi Darbar Asthan at Paonta Sahib.

After his release from prison, he lived for over thirty years during which time he travelled throughout the country and propagated the true Gursikh way of life through Gurbani Kirtan and Path. A large number of ardent seekers of the true path of Sikhism were drawn to him magnetically, and he directed them to and brought them in direct touch with the infinite wealth of Gurbani. In this way the Akhand Kirtani Jatha came to be formed. According to him, the principles of life pointed out in Gurbani and prescribed in the Khalsa Code of Conduct are not merely ideals but downright practical. He himself conformed to and lived in accordance with these principles in letter and spirit, even in the midst of the most unfavourable and tortuous circumstances of jail life.

Even a cursory look at his life, as revealed from his autobiographical letters and related by his close prison and post-prison comrades, clearly shows that he was one of the very few Gursikhs of the century who had full and unfaltering conviction of his faith in the teachings of the Satguru, so much

so that he staked his personal career, the safety and welfare of his wife and young children, his ancestral property and even his life in following the true path of Gurmat. He was one of the very few outstanding Sikhs of his time who, as one of the Panj Pyares, blessed the so-called lowest caste people with the holy Amrit (Baptism of the Double Edged Sword). It may be recalled that those were the times when the Gurmat way of life had been almost completely overshadowed by Hindu orthodoxy or Brahmanism. The Brahmanic principle of untouchability regarding the low caste Hindus and Muslims had become ingrained in the minds of Sikhs to such an extent that the Sikhs would not even consider taking part in the Amrit ceremony in their company. Bhai Randhir Singh was one of the first few Sikhs of the 20th century who had the courage to be baptized along with a Muslim, a well-known family of Maulvi Karim Bakhsh whose Amrit Ceremony was arranged on a large Panthic scale on June 14, 1903. As a result, he was treated almost as an outcast by the Sikhs of his own village and even by some of his relatives; the priest of Siri Akal Takhat Sahib did not even let him offer Karrah Prasad and do Kirtan there. However, he remained steadfast in practicing whatever was ordained at the Baptismal ceremony, as well as what he understood from the Holy Sikh Scriptures and authentic Sikh traditions. In fact the practice and preaching of the Sikh Code of Conduct strictly in accordance with the true Gurmat became his passion in life. Though he belonged to an aristocratic family, his simple way of life, his devotion to Gurmat, and his determination to live strictly in accordance with the Commandments of the Satguru, have very few parallels in the contemporary Sikh society. Throughout his life, he stuck steadfastly to the Code of Conduct enunciated by the Tenth Guru, even at the risk of losing his health and life.

He had a sizable group of associates attending and performing Kirtan at the Akhand Kirtan Samagams, but he did not organize them into a separate sect nor establish a separate Dera or Ashram as done by many other saints. He even refused to nominate anyone to head the Jatha as his successor and instructed that all the matters of importance and urgency be decided by the Panj Pyaras selected by the Sangat for that purpose.

Bhai Sahib was a theologian and writer of no ordinary standard His devotion to justice and righteousness made him a powerful writer, espousing the cause of the poor and the neglected. He also zealously preached the purity of the Sikh doctrines through lectures. One of his popular books is ***Jail-Chitthian*** (*Jail letters*) translated from Punjabi into English by Trilochan Singh It contains true stories of his courage and sacrifice during his long confinement in many jails. He was calm and patient against the atrocities committed by prison staff He was deliberately harassed through solitary confinement, but he never compromised on Sikh principles. He described his ordeals with graphic detail, and the way they increased his moral strength. He wrote : "*The physical tortures sharpened my moral powers and exalted me spiritually. Each arrow of agony deepened my feelings and helped me in my efforts to achieve the highest spiritual exaltation.*" He stuck to his vows as a Khalsa and carried on his prayers and meditations in spite of the cruelties inflicted on him.

Bhai Randhir Singh s next work ***Undithhi Duniya*** (*Unseen World*) stands in a class by itself. It is the story of the career of a soul from previous life, through the present one, and the next existence. The theme is related to the Sikh religion, namely how to escape the cycle of birth and death. The remedy lies in the remembrance of the Holy Name which is the essence of the Sikh initiation called *Amrit*. He wrote a number of other books, but his long, mystical epic entitled ***Jyot Vigas*** (*Revelation of Light*) is perhaps the best and only work in poetry. It may be compared to Dante's *Divine Comedy* on account of the sublimity of its theme and spontaneity of phrase. It is a masterpiece of devotional poetry which flowed so naturally and continuously that he wrote it for seven days and nights in Nagpur jail, in 1930. As he had no paper, he scribbled more than 3,000 lines on the margins and spaces between lines, of a book which he had in his cell. This composition reminds one of *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas Ji and Bhai Nand Lai's poems.

Another work of Bhai Sahib s which deals with Sikh philosophy is **Gurmat Sach Nirnay**. It is a study of the different aspects of Truth. His next work entitled **Gurmat Karam Philosophy** explains the doctrines of the Gurus and their application in day-to-day life. Another work on Sikh philosophy is **Gurmat Iekh. Rangilay Sajan** gives interesting accounts of some of his contemporaries who led saintly lives. Bhai Sahib deals with the subject of the Khalsa in **Singha-da-Panth Nirala**. He predicts that the Khalsa - both male and female - will be required to show courage and sacrifice in a future war.

In another work entitled **Jhatka Mass Prithai Nirnay**, he has expressed his conviction that meat-eating is prohibited to the Sikhs. Similarly, he affirms that *Ragmala* found at the end of the Adi Granth is not Gurbani.

With regard to purely theological writing, Bhai Sahib's book entitled **Gurbani Lag Matra di Vilakhanta** - covering over 600 pages - deserves a prominent place. It is an applied grammar of the Sikh Scripture and reveals the mystical significance of symbols and linguistic peculiarities of the Guru's compositions. The work reveals his intuitive perception and spiritual attainment. His other work entitled **Gurmat Vichar** is a collection of 13 essays written at different periods. He quotes copiously from Gurbani in order to expound the tenets of Sikhism. He firmly believes in transmuting the power of Amrit which can convert an ordinary man into a Saint-Soldier. He feels convinced that through Amrit, mankind will be united and Guru Gobind Singh's dream of One World – ruled by the good and the pure – will become a reality.

Bhai Randhir Singh was essentially a preacher and a missionary. His writings are philosophical, based mainly on Sikh doctrines. His style is clear and compelling because it comes from his deep conviction and inner experience. His idiom is apt and effective. In *Jyot Vigas*, he has coined new words which are meaningful and musical. His style reflects his personality and the Sikh way of life. Though some Sikhs may not agree with his insistence on Keski and vegetarianism and the exclusion of *Ragmala*, there is no doubt that he held views with great firmness and sincerity.

Professor Kapur Singh gives Bhai Randhir Singh due credit for rehabilitating the tradition of Nirban and Akhand Kirtan (continuously singing of hymns). Undoubtedly Kirtan brings the common man close to God-consciousness. Bhai Randhir Singh performed Rain-Sabae Kirtan (night-long hymn-singing), and sometimes continued it for 24 hours. Moreover he was so much engrossed in Kirtan that he forgot all his physical needs and felt the presence of God. His singing was full of devotion, which created an extraordinary spell on the Sangat. He is regarded as the pioneer of the Akhand Kirtan movement and as a result, many Kirtan groups even today, perform for long sessions.

Bhai Randhir Singh has mentioned in his own testimony on the illumination produced by his remembrance of the Holy Name through devotional singing In his autobiography, he wrote, *"My soul appeared now to be quite distinct from my body. Then I lost Consciousness of the body completely. The music of the mystic name rang through my whole self."* He has offered glimpses into his mystic experiences which culminated in his union with God. He wrote, *"It now appeared to me that my body was like a spiritual bed in which my soul (atma) was meeting the Beloved Lord which was all divine light. This union gave me such joy and bliss that I could bear it nor leave it. I did not in the least expect that my strange Beloved, my Lord with His unfathomable powers, would miraculously appear within my soul and reveal Himself on the altar of my heart, "*

As a theologian, Randhir Singh occupies a significant position. His books and pamphlets - more than thirty in number - are intuitive expositions of Sikh philosophy, supported by quotations from *Gurbani*. He has also furnished intimate narratives of his moments of vision and trance. His sincerity, his devotion to Sikh faith, his detachment, his selflessness, his fearlessness, and love of his motherland are evident in all that he uttered or wrote. His works offer glimpses into the life of a true

Saint-soldier of Guru Gobind Singh and the peace and enlightenment that he achieved through the practice of *Nam Simran*.

Bhai Sahib Bhai Randhir Singh Ji passed away in 1961. His cremation took place at Ludhiana (Punjab) where hundreds and thousands of Sikhs gathered to pay their last respects, making the funeral parade 7km long.

Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh Ji being the ideal Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh Ji inspired a large number of ardent seekers to the true path of Sikhism. Even today the Akhand Kirtani Jatha is well established internationally, performing Rean-sabhaee Kirtans and Amrit Sanchaars. Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh being a freedom fighter himself also inspired such Sikhs in today's history, such as Saheed Bhai Fauja Singh, Saheed Bhai Kewal Singh, Saheed Bhai Amarjit Singh Dhaeroo, Saheed Bhai Kulwant Singh Nagoke, Saheed Bhai Anokh Singh Babbar, Saheed Bhai Sukhdev Singh Babbar, and many more Saint - Soldiers who like Bhai Sahib stood for the Panth in all times of injustice. Not merely being only Saints and turning a blind eye on the atrocities occurring on the Panth, but remembering Guru Gobind Singh Ji's instruction;

**"When all other means for peace fail,
it is right to yield the sword for justice."**

Article compiled with extracts from:

Aspects of Sikhism by Dr. Gobind Singh Mansukhani ji

Rehat Maryada and The Akhand Kirtani Jatha by Bhai Manmohan Singh ji