

Hon. Rai Bilal Akram Bhatti honoured with Proclamation and Saropa in South California Events

By Dr. Opendar Singh.

The Sikh Community of Southern California, in two separate events held on Wednesday, August 25th, at Buena Park Gurudwara and Dr. Amrit Singh's Private place, honoured Rai Bilal Akram Bhatti with Citation of Honor and Saropas during his visit to Southern California. This was part of the larger visit of Rai Bilal Akram Bhatti to New York and California in what he described as a private personal visit to meet with Sikh leaders in the US.

Rai Bilal Akram Bhatti is the 19th Generation Direct Descendant of Rai Bular of Rai Bohey di Talwandi which is now known to Sikhs all over the world as Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak the Founder of Sikhism.

In his address to the Sikhs gathered at the events in southern California Rai Bilal Akram Bhatti invited the Sikhs to visit Nankana Sahib and other historical Gurudwaras like Kartarpur and imbibe the spirit of the Sikhism and Guru Nanak that pervades these Gurudwaras.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Asif Iqbal said that the honorable Rai Bular Akram Bhatti, he along with others, would always be ready to extend all possible help with regards to visa matters for the Sikhs to be able to visit Nankana Sahib and other historical Gurudwaras in Pakistan.

Rai Bular was a contemporary of Guru Nanak who grew up with Guruji from childhood and knew Guruji and his saintly ways. Rai Bular had always supported Guru Nanak Ji in his efforts to spread the message of God through his travels.

He had witnessed many of the events that happened around Guru Nanak from childhood, which were seen as miracles. Guru Nanak would always return to Nankana Sahib after the end of his long journeys, a total of four spread over twenty years.

Guru Nanak left Nankana Sahib at the Age of twenty according to the Rai Bular Family descendants but came back to his place of birth for rest and recoup. At the end of his travels, Guru Nanak came back to settle at Kartarpur and it is there that he departed for Sachkand at the end of his earthly life. In his four long journeys covering a span of 20 years Guru Nanak was said to have traveled over 17000 miles.

Rai Bular family then owned a total of 36000 acres of land. Of this Rai Bular donated 18000 acres to Guru Nanak where Nankana Sahib is now located. The land still stands as entered in the name of Guru Nanak in the local government records as per the

descendants of Rai Bular who have been traveling to USA, Canada and other parts of the world to invite Sikhs to come and visit in general or to make group tours and get to know all the historical Sikh Gurudwaras in Pakistan.

As per the Website <http://www.nankanayatratoours.com/bhatti-family/>, the members of the Bhatti family always takes part with great enthusiasm every year for the Guru Nanak birth anniversary celebrations. They are bestowed the honour to lead the procession every year.

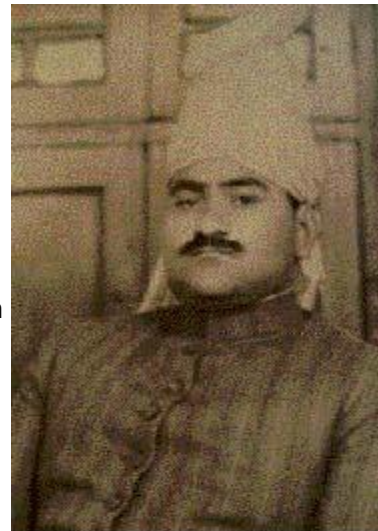
The Rais were Bhatti Rajputs and Rai Bular, a contemporary of Guru Nanak was the Ruler of Rai Bho Di Talwandi where Nankana Sahib is now located. Mehta Kalyan Das of the Bedi Clan, a well read person served as the Munshi of Rai Bular. Guru Nanak was born in 1469 to Mehta Kalu as he was known and wife Mata Tripta at a place now known as Janam Asthan in Nankana Sahib Township which is also a District.

As per ancient revenue records that the family still owns, Rai Bular gave 247 *murabas* of land to Gurdwara Janam Asthan along with an annual jagir of Rs 9996. He also gave another 220 murabas to Gurdwara Bal Lila and extended an annual jagir of Rs 31 and another 290 muraba and annual grant of Rs 50 to Gurdwara Mal Sahib. This entire land of Nankana Sahib given to Guru Nanak by Rai Bular amounts to 757 murabas (approx. 18,750 acres) and is now controlled by the Evacuee Trust Property Board of Pakistan and leased out to the people of Nankana Sahib.

Today the Nankana Sahib Estate consists of about 16,962 acres, mainly leased to farmers and residents of Nankana Sahib. Almost all houses in Nankana Sahib are built on the property donated by the Bhatti family. “Babaji” (as Guru Nanak is affectionately called by the Bhatti family), says Rai Mohammad Saleem Akram Bhatti, the 19th generation descendant of Rai Bular, “is revered by all of us as our father.”

The Rai Bular family has maintained the highest traditions of Muslim-Rajput culture. It is said that Rai Hussain, father of Rai Bashir, personally escorted to safety over 1,000 Sikhs during the Partition. Heartbroken by the Partition and the massacre of thousands of lives, he passed away in 1948.

[The two images on the right are courtesy of a 2007 article in Tribube India. The author of the article was Naveen S. Grewal who visited the family in Nankana Sahib. The Photos Copyright belongs to the writer of that article



(Top) Rai Hidayat Bhatti, the 17th descendant of Rai Bular, led a Sikh procession to mark Guru Nanak's 500th birth anniversary. (Right) Rai Hussain Bhatti escorted 1000 Sikhs to safety during Partition



<https://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070526/saturday/main1.htm>]

The family had directly managed and looked after this property on behalf of Guru Nanak many years after him by the successive heads of the Bhatti family. Father-son duo Rai Rehmat Khan and Rai Anayat collected revenue after the Partition and deposited it with the Gurdwara Management, which was in turn used for the welfare and development of local Sikhs and the seven gurdwaras in Nankana Sahib.

As per the details provided on the website, the earliest historical reference to the city of Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib) is found in ballads. There's mention of the first siege of Jaisalmer that occurred during the reign of Alla-ud-din Khilji (1295-1315). Khilji's Army had attacked Jaisalmer, a state in Rajputana, to avenge raids by Rajputs. It is said that after a bloody battle, one of the Bhatti Rajput prince who survived was taken hostage. He was sent to exile somewhere north of Punjab, near Kotli (about 40 miles from the present-day Lahore).

Folklore has it that Alla-ud-din Khilji was so touched by this boy's bravery that he paid a tribute to the young prince by giving him about 1,50,000 acres of Punjab's most fertile land as compensation for his loss and also as an enticement to keep him from rallying troops and building a new Rajput Bhatti Army. This exiled prince is said to have named the place Raipur and later Rai Bho di Talwandi (after his son). Nankana literally means Nanak *da ana* or the coming of Nanak.

As per the family and folklore the Bhatti Clan is also connected to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. And they enjoy the same lineage through the Bhatti Clan. The Bhattis' descend from Raja Rai Bhuni Khan. His one son Rai Sanspal is the ancestor of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the other son Raja Manpal is the ancestor of the Bhatti clan. This is mentioned in the Tarik-e- Bhattian, a book on the family history.

To acknowledge the role of the Bhatti family, Maharaja Ranjit Singh bestowed on Rai Issa Khan, the 15th generation descendant, the title of Rai Bahadur and he was made incharge of a sub-jail Thatta Issa village and also made honorary magistrate and given the duty to collect revenue.

During the 500 hundred years history there have been times when the Nankana Sahib was in control of the Mahants as where other Gurudwaras during that period when the Sikhs were forced to live in jungles in the 1700s. The Mahants were the sadhus of the Udasi Sect that was formed by Baba Siri Chand Ji. They followed the Guru Granth Sahib. But there is need to study how and when the system corrupted to the state of things that led to the Saka Nankana Sahib in 1921.

When Mahraja Ranjit Singh took over reigns of Punjab and build his vast empire he had allowed the Mahants to continue to look after some of the important shrines. Later the British when they took control of Punjab and India in the 1848s and onwards, kept their own people in charge of the Gurudwaras to maintain control of the shrines and the money they generated.

But not all has been smooth sailing for this family honoured and respected by Sikhs all over who helped during the horrible events of the Partition of India. During the militancy in Punjab in 1980s, the numbers of visitors to the historical Nankana Sahib went down and as peace returned the flow of visitors has picked up as per the family members.

They also faced some issues from the Pakistan government of Benazir Bhutto that did not give the family permission to build the Nankana Sahib foundation on a 10 acre spread donated by the family in 1994. It was to come up at Kot Hussain Khan, about five kms from Nankana Sahib with the idea to generate income to maintain Nankana Sahib. Even today due to that denial there is only a gate standing.



One of the objectives of the now defunct Nankana Sahib Foundation was to spread Guru Nanak's teachings Photo Courtsey Naveen S. Grewal Article in Tribune India. Referred to above.

In another article published in the Tribune India- datelined August 4th, which was published on August 5th, 2019. Rai Saleem Bhatti- who is at the 19th generation direct descendant lineage and his young son Rai Waleed Bhatti were denied the Visa to visit the Golden Temple in India despite repeated efforts.

A practicing lawyer in the Lahore High Court, Rai Saleem Bhatti had informed the Tribune correspondent at Nankana Sahib that they were dejected at not being able to visit the Golden Temple.

The then Sikh Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC) Amritsar President Gobind Singh Longowal, had confirmed the programme could not be held due to the denial of the visa and they had then planned to take up the matter with the Union Home Ministry Department.

The original event was planned for May 2018, but was postponed as the descendants of the Bhatti clan were denied the visa.

The SGPC had planned to set up a Portrait of Rai Bular Bhatti, the 15th Century Landlord ancestor of the Bhatti clan who was a contemporary of Guru Nanak .

Gurudwara Janam Asthan Nankana Sahib also was a center of a demonstration by the family of a Muslim person, who was said to have married 19 year old Sikh girl and converted her to Islam. The news of the protest was covered by Dawn, the Pakistan daily on Jan 3, 2020. as also in Indian media and Canadian media. The protestors had allegedly pelted stones and threatened to make the Shrine into a mosque following the arrest of the Muslim person. The Sikhs visiting the Gurudwara to celebrate the birth Gurburab of Guru Gobind Singh were stranded inside the Gurudwara for hours during the protest.

The protestors had dispersed after negotiations between the Police, the protestors' representatives and Nankana Sahib President Peer Pir Sarwar Shah of the PTI party.

The police has released the suspects following the settlement.

The Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh had requested Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan to intervene and ensure that stranded devotees were rescued and the Historic Gurudwara was saved from the angry protestors. This was reported in the Indian Express article by the Explained Desk.

The Pakistan PM Imran Khan had then stated that the Incident at Nankana Sahib went against his vision and would find zero tolerance from the government.

The Indian government Ministry of External Affairs had also in an official statement asked the Pakistan government to take immediate action and apprehend the perpetrators and give exemplary punishment.

The Indo-Canadian Voiceonline newspaper had in its report on the incident quoted the World Sikh Organization of Canada President Tejinder Singh Sidhu express sadness over the incident. He had then said it was unacceptable that a mob could lay seize to the Historic Gurudwara and make threats against the Sikh Community

In its article by the Explained desk of Indian Express then, it was stated that Gurudwara Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib had during the British rule been the site of violent events in 1921 when over 130 Akalis were killed after they were attacked by the armed men of Mahant Narain Das of the Shrine. The Sikhs referred to this massacre as Saka Nankana Sahib. The massacre of the Sikhs on February 20, 1921 during that incident led to the fight for Gurudwara reform and became its core event and milestone that eventually led to the Gurudwara Reform Movement and passing of the Sikh Gurudwara Act in 1925. That act ended the Mahant control of the Gurudwaras.

In 2014 Pakistan had a memorial built for the massacre and in February 2021, event was held at Nankana Sahib to mark the Centenary of the Nankana Sahib Massacre.

As per reports the SGPC came into existence in November 1920, a month after Sikhs removed partial restrictions on the Dalit Rights inside the Golden Temple. There on it became the Gurudwara Reform movement to take control of historical Sikh Gurudwaras which had become personal property of the priests called Mahants.

The Mahants were accused of running practices in the Gurudwara that was against the Tenets of Sikhism. The SGPC had in that regard asked Mahant Narain Das, who then controlled Nankana Sahib to make changes in the administration. He was also known to have arranged dance girls to perform within the Nankana Sahib precincts, besides other acts contrary to the Teachings of the Gurus and he enjoyed a lavish lifestyle because of the revenue of thousands of rupees that the Shrine and the lands generated. The Mahant took this as an insult and began to arm himself and fortify the Gurudwara.

SGPC leader Lachman Singh Dharowal was attacked by mahant's men inside gurudwara on birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji in presence of British officials in November 1920. But no action was taken against the mahant. Efforts by sikh leaders to bring the mahant to discuss and negotiate failed and the mahants of various Gurudwaras also began to organize and hold meetings against the SGPC attempts.

In February, 1921 the mahants called a Sikh Sanatan Conference in Lahore. Some Sikh leaders viewed this as opportunity to take control of Nankana Sahib shrine thinking the mahant would be busy in Lahore. But apparently he came to know of the Sikh Jatha planning to take over the Gurudwara. Efforts by Master Tara Singh and other sikh leaders to stop the sikh jatha failed and they continued to the Gurudwara.

As events would transpire the Sikhs entered unarmed hoping for a non violent take over but the Mahant was prepared with armed men and in the ensuing firing by Mahant's armed men, 60 Sikhs were killed in the main hall, 25 bodies were found in a single room as per reports and many received bullet wounds and some were burnt alive in boiling water. The actual casualty figure varies from 130 to 200.

As per event reports in the Indian Express backgrounder, Mahant Narain Das ran away and British Police arrested 26 pathans. But the Sikhs believed the British to be part of the hidden conspiracy as the Mahant, who hired the Pathans and others could not have armed them with weapons without assistance from the British authorities there.

All the prominent Sikh leaders reached Nankana Sahib on February 21, 1921. Kartar Singh Jhabbar reached with 2,200 Sikhs. Initially, police and Army tried to stop the jatha, but later Sikhs were allowed to take control of the gurudwara. The British Administrator Curry apparently tried to threaten them that they would be fired upon and die. The Sikhs just told him to go ahead as they had come to die and would not be scared by such tactics. Realizing that the situation would go bad, Mr. Curry handed over the keys to Nankana Sahib to the Sikhs and thus they gained control again of the Shrine. The Sikhs then proceeded to clean up the Shrine, gathered the martyred Sikhs bodies, limbs and parts and performed the last rites as per the Sikh Religion.

The then Punjab Governor and his council members also reached Nankana Sahib on February 22 and ordered handing over control of gurudwara to Sikhs.

Mahatma Gandhi reached Nankana Sahib on March 3, 1921. Gandhi said that the British government was part of this massacre. He also said that cruelty of this massacre was more than that of Jallianwala Bagh.

“I wish to see the bravery of Lachhman Singh and Dalip Singh in Mulshi Peta. Without raising a little finger, these two warriors stood undaunted against the attack of Mahant Narain Das of Nankana Sahib and let themselves be killed,” said Gandhi.

Narain Das was later arrested along with other main accused, convicted and sentenced to death which was commuted and in 1930 he was released from prison.

In the meantime Mahatma Gandhi asked the Sikhs to support his Non Cooperation Movement when the Sikhs asked him to be a part of their own team to investigate the massacre. The SGPC in a general body meeting in March 1921 decided to join the Non Cooperation movement through a resolution passed by Prof Mota Singh with majority vote. Other Sikh leaders were not happy with the mix of the religious and political movements.

On its part the British government also arrested a few Sikh leaders unhappy to see the Sikhs join the Gandhi movement. The Sikh leaders like Kartar Singh Jhabbar, Teja Singh Bhuchar, Tara Singh Thethar, Bhai Lakha Singh and others were arrested from Nankana Sahib for allegedly taking illegal control of gurudwaras on March 15, 1921.

In May 1921 the SGPC asked the Sikhs to wear black turbans and black clothes to protest the British government action and at Nankana Sikh Utensils were kept to color the turbans black. This continued and after 5 months the Sikh leaders were released.

The Nankana Sahib events became the first major step and effort to take back control of Gurudwaras and this was followed by other such agitations till the Sikhs finally got their demands and the Sikh Gurudwara Act came into being in 1925.



Rai Saleem Bhatti with his father Rai Akram Bhatti at their home in Nankana Sahib. Both have strong faith in Sikhism and regularly participate in Sikh functions. Photo Courtesy Naveen S. Grewal article in Tribune India referred to above.



Rai Bular Bhatti's haveli in Nankana Sahib was frequented by Guru Nanak during his childhood

[Photo Credit Naveen S. Grewal as printed in his Tribune India Article referred to above]

