

# **Kuka Movement in Punjab: An Overview**

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## **I INTRODUCTION**

The present study assesses the British resistance in Punjab by the Namdharis. We will also discuss the social-religious evils in the society of Punjab and how Namdharis try to uplift the social status of the Sikhs with the object of preparing the ground for the attainment of a political goal. During the study we see that the Namdhari Movement had influenced almost every section of the Punjabi society and belong to all castes people joined their struggle against the social vices, religious hypocrisy and political slavery. The so-called 'dregs of the people' had strengthened the movement and gave it a character of the mass movement though the officials apprehended real danger from the people of note.

## **II THE BACKDROP**

After the annexation of the Punjab, the Sikh religion was losing its characteristic vigour and its votaries were relapsing into beliefs and dogmas from which their new faith had extricated them. Absorption into ceremonial Hinduism seemed the course inevitably set for them.<sup>1</sup> Religiously and socially, the condition of the land of the five rivers,<sup>2</sup> as well as the rest of India was no better. Ever since the days of Banda Bairagi, the Sikh community stood divided. The passage of invaders like Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Abdali through the Punjab,<sup>3</sup> the nature of political activity under the Misdars, and the persecution of Sikhs by the Mughal Kings or their Governors, all these tended to produce social and religious indiscipline and moral laxity among the followers of Guru Gobind Singh. The times of Ranjit Singh and his successors witnessed further landslides on the road of religion and morality. The Brahmanic influences, costly ceremonialism, emotional depravities, individual treacheries and violence, the practice of Sati, sale of daughters, infanticide, etc., became wide spread.<sup>4</sup>

After the annexation of the Punjab, a flood of Christian Missionaries had moved into the province. The Sikhs and the Afghans were the two communities from which some trouble could be apprehended and therefore, the best means to them was to bring them under the folds of Christianity. Amritsar being the centre of Sikhs and Peshawar that of Pathans, thus wrote Sir Edwardes to Sir John Lawrence, "There are two obligatory points, the Peshawar Valley and Manjha. The rest are mere

dependencies. Holding these two points you will hold the whole Punjab."<sup>5</sup> The British intentions are clear. The first great missionary movement in the Punjab proper was the establishment of the American Presbyterian Mission at Ludhiana in 1834. The Ludhiana mission as it thus came to be called later on, occupied a number of stations in the Central Punjab south of the Ravi.<sup>6</sup> Social laws of property were being altered for the progress of an alien church. The sanctity of Harmandir (now called the Golden Temple) was endangered. Beef was being hawked about in the holy city of Amritsar under the laws of the Christian Government.<sup>7</sup> The Church Missionary Society began operations in the Punjab in 1851 and developed stations comprising a group round Amritsar and Lahore, and a long line of frontier stations strictly from Simla to Karachi in Sind. Other Missionaries were the Methodist Episcopal the Church of Scotland, the Moravian the American United Presbyterian, the Zanana Bible and Medical Missions, and the Salvation Army, besides the missionary work conducted by the various Roman Catholic orders."<sup>8</sup> The British Government themselves took an undue and unreasonable interest in these missionary activities. Sir John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab used to contribute Rs 500 a year towards these activities, and even the young Prince, Maharaja Dalip Singh, was made to embrace the new faith<sup>9</sup> and converted into Christianity. The official interest of the Government is manifesto from Queen Victoria's own letter to Lord Dalhousie, Dated November 24, 1854 expressing the hope that the development of the railway communication in the country would facilitate considerably the spread of Christianity in these lands.<sup>10</sup>

## **III PERIOD OF RENAISSANCE & REFORMATION**

The latter half of the 19th century in the history of our country as a period of renaissance or reformation or both. This is mainly for the reason that there emerged during this period a large number of movements which exercised far-reaching influence on the modernization of our complex social fabric. They were not confined to any single community, but had within the orbit of their influence nearly all important sections of the Indian population. Among the Hindus there were the Brahmo Smaj (which had originated earlier, but reached its climax only after 1860), Prarthana

Smaj, Arya Smaj, Ramakrishna Mission and the Theosophical Movement. The Muslims had the Wahabi and Aligarh Movements.<sup>11</sup> So far as the Sikhs are concerned, there were two well-known movements among Sikhs-the Nirankari and the Namdharis.<sup>12</sup> It was in the above political and religious circumstances that Kukaism was initiated in order to dispel darkness, to denounce social weaknesses, to meet the challenge of an overpowering Western imperialism, and to forge the bonds of religious purity and brotherhood.<sup>13</sup> Impelled by similar circumstances, and inspired by the action of the Tenth Guru, the Namdhari Guru Ram Singh, a disciple of Guru Balak Singh of Huzroo,<sup>14</sup> entered upon a similar resolve of religious purity and political freedom through the pathways of perpetual sacrifice and self-denial.

In the Punjab many Sikh patriots tried to regain sovereignty for the Sikh and the rest of the country. Several attempts and movements started to gain the old glory of the Khalsa. One being Namdhari Movement known as the Namdhari or Kuka, which was started by Baba Ram Singh<sup>15</sup> Namdhari after Anglo-Sikh wars. The Namdhari Sikhs played a prominent role in the freedom movement of India.<sup>16</sup> They were in the forefront of freedom struggle at a time when the British were consolidating their hold over the country. During the early days of British rule in Punjab the Namdhari Sikhs organized themselves into a well-knit group of Saints soldiers in the true tradition of Sikh Gurus and offered a taught resistance to British rule in Punjab. Nearly one month before the outbreak of the rebellion of 1857.<sup>17</sup> Guru Ram Singh raised a new flag to be upheld, uttered a new pledge to be fulfilled and saw a new vision to be realized. Guru Ram Singh founded, on April 12, 1857, a socio-political sect called 'Namdhari' in the Punjab. These Namdharis, while reciting Sikh Mantras or repeating the Name, often developed emotions, screamed and shouted, turbans in their hands and hair streaming in the air, hence called Kukas or the shouters.<sup>18</sup> The Kuka Movement preceded not only the other Sikh movement but, as a matter of fact, almost all other movements mentioned above, with the possible exceptions of the Brahmo Smaj and the Wahabis. But it was not merely among the first to appear; it had what is more important a character of its own, which marked it off from the other movements of the period. Whereas the other movements devoted themselves entirely to social and reform activities, with the main emphasis on re-examination of the prevailing thought and practice in the light of both western impact and rediscovery of the Ancient Indian glory and wisdom with a view to regeneration of the country's social and religious life, the Kuka Movement concentrated on these reforms primarily with the object of preparing the ground for the attainment of a political goal.

The Kukas, unlike the rest, took an integrated view of the problem facing the country and visualized the various questions, social as religious and political, in their true and proper perspective. To them the programme of social and religious uplift was of basic importance but not less so was the question of freedom. Namdharis were instance, the concepts of unity of God, equality of all human beings, fraternity as the basis of all human relations and emancipation of women, besides that of fight against all forms of tyranny, social, religious, economic and political, reinforced by a long and deep-rooted tradition of such a fight running through the larger part of the Sikh history. The Namdharis were essentially Sikhs, and they drew inspiration from the Sikh Gurus<sup>19</sup>, especially from Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh.

In 1847 Baba Ram Singh started preaching against bad habits among the Sikhs.<sup>20</sup> In 1857, on the Baisakhi day, Ram Singh founded his movement, the Namdhari, in his own village, Bheni, where four Sikhs received baptism at his hands to start with. He fixed preaching centres in different parts of the province,<sup>21</sup> and in each one of them he appointed a Deputy called Suba, to carry on the preaching business. Besides, the Subas were also appointed in Gwalior, Hyderabad Deccan, Banarees, Lucknow, Nepal and Kabul. The institution of Subas was completed by 1864, and they went about preaching Ram Singh's message from place to place.<sup>22</sup> In the beginning, the districts of Sialkot, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana formed chief centers of Namdhari activities, but later they spread to Ferozepur, Lahore and Gujranwala as well. Not only Sikhs joined this movement in great numbers, Hindus were also attracted towards it and by 1871 as it was revealed by Giani Rattan Singh in the court of Mr. Cowan, the Kukas numbered ten lakhs of whom only one third were Kesadharis, the rest being all Sehjdharis. Ram Singh never told his followers to beg about and move about unemployed as mendicants. The Kukas were to be found in all sorts of profession. They were business-men, traders and merchants, and employed in Government and private services. They were found especially in Police and Army, where it was difficult to ascertain their numbers, because they joined these services with a purpose and never revealed their Kuka affiliations.<sup>23</sup>

Writing in an article published in 1935, thus commented Dr. Rajendra Prasad,<sup>24</sup> the Ex-President of India: "Guru Ram Singh considered political freedom a part of religion. The organization of the Namdharis became very strong. The principles of boycott and non co-operation, which Mahatma Gandhi introduced so vigorously in our freedom movement were expounded by Guru Ram Singh for the Namdharis." The Guru's non co-operation movement was based on the

following five principles: (1) Boycott of Government services. (2) Boycott of educational institutions run by British Government. (3) Boycott of law established by them. (4) Boycott of foreign clothings. (5) Disobedience of Government orders, which one's conscience abhorred. The Namdharis were so steadfast in these principles that even after the independence.<sup>25</sup> The Punjab in nineteenth century had two dominant religions Hinduism and Islam. The Sikhs had been a thin minority. They were generally regarded as a part of the Hindu religion.<sup>26</sup> However, the Kukas were strict in wearing the five Sikh "Ks" (The Kesh, Kachha, Kara, Kirpan and Kangha) like Guru Gobind Singh<sup>27</sup> and in other Sikh essentials. In their social beliefs, the Kukas were against child-marriage. They condemned infanticide and dowry system. The Namdharis in fact were religiously denied the right to spend more than Rs. 13 on a marriage. This practice obtains among them even in the present times, and in a recent Kuka conference at Delhi, many couples were married at Rs. 1.40 each. The Kukas gave strictly equal status to women and believed in inter-caste marriage between caste Hindus and Untouchables. The first such inter-caste marriage was performed among the Kukas on January 4, 1863.<sup>28</sup> Giving an account of the Kuka Articles of Belief, in 1863 Mr. Kinchant wrote, The leading feature of the doctrines Ram Singh preaches are: "He abolishes all distinctions of caste among Sikhs; advocates indiscriminate marriage of all classes; enjoins the marriage of widows; enjoins abstinence from liquor and drugs; but advocates much too free intercourse between the sexes; men and women rave together at his meetings, and thousands of women and young girls have joined the sect; he exhorts his disciples to be cleanly and truth telling. One of his maxims says: it is well that every man carries his staff and they all do. The Granth is their only accepted volume. The brotherhood may be known by the tie of their Pagris, Sidha Pag by a watchword and by a necklace of knots made in a white woolen cord to represent beads and which are worn by all the community." They had no respect for tombs and temples and were also iconoclasts.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV EMERGENCE OF KUKA

The unfurling of a flag and the establishment of a society called 'Sant Khalsa' in 1857 were not merely steps to tone up social and religious life, but also the inauguration of a political movement. The movement was to be run on the lines of Guru Gobind Singh, who had first created and militarized the Khalsa, and then employed it in his prolonged struggle against the Mughal imperialism of Aurangzeb. The greatest stress was placed upon 'Khande da Amrit' introduced by Gobind Singh and observance of the associated strict discipline

substituting heavy 'lathis' (sticks) for the disallowed 'kirpans' Obviously, the flag and the lathi cannot be the insignia of a peaceful movement concentrating merely on religious and social problems. Fixation of a common secret watch word and uniform dress for all, which made the Sant Khalsa a closely-knit and compact organization, is another pointer to a similar conclusion.<sup>30</sup>

The Kukas or as they are sometimes called the "Sunt Khalsa" (Khalsa saints) have a private post of their own, which appears to be admirably organized. Confidential orders are circulated much in the same way as the fiery cross was carried through a Highland clan in Scottish bygone days. A Kukahs, on the arrival at his village of another of the same sect with a dispatch, at once leaves off, whatever work he may be engaged upon; if in the midst of a repast, not another morsel is eaten; he asks no questions, but taking the missive, starts off at a run and conveys it to the next relief, or to its destination. Important communications are sent verbally and are not committed to writing. In carrying messages they are said by Major Perkins to make great detours to avoid the Grand Trunk Road.<sup>31</sup> The political and military successes were, however, accompanied by developments which a later revived Sikhism was to regard as serious deviations from the teachings of the Gurus.<sup>32</sup> The Kukas also enlisted themselves in great numbers in the state police and in the army, and got there by a military training to be used when required. When in such services, the Kukas did not reveal their identity. A special Kuka regiment was raised by the Maharaja of Kashmir, which later at the British intercession, was disbanded. To make his political programme a success, Bhai Ram Singh spread his sphere of activity in Nepal, Bhutan, Kashmir and several other States.<sup>33</sup> Much more important incident was the revelation in the month of November 1869, of Baba Ram Singh's secret efforts to have his followers trained militarily in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. A reference to this is found in the official report for the year 1869-70. It mentions<sup>34</sup>: "In November reports were received the Maharaja of Kashmir was raising a Kuka regiment and that each recruit received a certificate from Ram Singh before setting out for Kashmir." The events of the years immediately following clearly proved that what was called calm or "thanda" in 1869 was really the proverbial calm before the storm. The period (1868-1870) of calm, ended in 1871 with the Kuka attacks on the butchers of Amritsar and Raikot, followed, not long afterwards, by much bigger raids on Malodh and Maler Kotla. They were now openly on the war-path. Infact, their aim was cow-protection, long established cultural value of Indian civilization.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that the introduction of kine killing was the work of the British was driven home by the way they backed the butchers engaged on the business. In 1864 and even twice or thrice before that, there were some slight disturbances caused by the Amritsar butchers' audacity to sell beef openly in the city. Against the offending butchers several complaints were lodged with the authorities, but no stern action was taken. Only nominal punishments were inflicted, which, too, not unoften were remitted on appeal. The Hindu and Sikh inhabitants of the city started an agitation having for its object the complete suppression of cow-slaughter in or about the holy city. Several affrays took place between the two communities during the months of April and May 1871.

Amritsar being the religious capital of the Sikhs, the quickly mounting activities of the cow-slaughterers there created a widespread dissatisfaction among the Sikhs as well as among the Hindus living in the Punjab and even outside.<sup>36</sup> The Kuka movement planned as an attack on the butchers in Punjab was in reality an attack on the British Government.<sup>37</sup> and if this contention is correct then the killing of some butchers on 15th June, 1871 by a band of Kukas inside the slaughter-house at Raikot and outside the city of Amritsar was symptomatic of the anti-British attitude. A vivid description of how Kukas resorted to butchers- killing is given in the following account: A band of ten Kukas - Fateh Singh of Amritsar, Beela Singh Sandhu of Narli, Hakim Singh Patwari of Maura, Lehna Singh Tarkhan, of Amritsar, Jhanda Singh of Thathi, Lenha Singh and Mehar Singh of Lopoke, Lachhman Singh and Bhagwan Singh of Mehran and Gulab Singh-was shortly afterwards formed to destroy the butchers of Amritsar.<sup>38</sup> Weapons were supplied by Lal Singh, a police constable serving at Amritsar. When the case was still under trial at Amritsar, the butcher murder at Raikot took place. The murderers were apprehended, tried and condemned to death. They were all Kukas. One of the four convicts, named Gulab Singh, offered, if pardoned, to give up the names of all who had been concerned in the Amritsar murders. His offer was accepted and on the promise of pardon he gave up the names of his nine companions. With him Lieut. Colonels McAndrew and Baillie arrived at Amritsar on the 2nd August and enquiry into the truth of his statements commenced immediately. The next day, Fateh Singh, Hakim Singh and Lehna Singh were arrested. On the 5th August Beela Singh was brought in by the police and a day or two after Lehna Singh of Amritsar was apprehended. Four people, namely Jhanda Singh, Mehar Singh, Bhagwan Singh and Lachhman Singh could not be arrested. According to the version prevalent among the Kukas, there were no arrests by the police, for the Kukas voluntarily surrendered themselves to

the authorities. The old case was now withdrawn and all the thirteen accused committed to the Sessions were released.

Exactly one month after the Amritsar incident another band of Kukas fell upon the slaughter-house of Raikot in the district of Ludhiana. This slaughter-house situated about 150 yards outside the city wall, not far from the gurdwara named after Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikhs of Raikot and elsewhere had a special grouse, because birds carried the bones and bits from the slaughter-house and perching on the temple walls would often throw them down into the Gurdwara enclosure. In the attack of the 15th July 1871 three people were killed and nine wounded, four of them seriously. However, the chief butchers, Ranjha and Buta, both escaped.<sup>39</sup> After the investigation into the Raikot murders it became clear that Baba Ram Singh was the main force behind the butcher-killing movement.<sup>40</sup> The Government officials were deeply concerned about it. On 8th August Lt. Col. Baillie wrote a memorandum holding Ram Singh responsible for all the murders and strongly recommended that he should be expelled from the country. The Government of the Punjab, after careful consideration, was of the view that the witnesses being all Kukas, it was not possible to depend upon them for the trial of Ram Singh and that the stage of his expulsion from the country had not yet arrived. The political case against Ram Singh stands thus: "He is the actual as well as the nominal leader of a sect which in its nature as a revival of the Khalsa is antagonistic to the British power". Mr. Macnabb wanted the immediate action against Ram Singh to be taken under Regulation III of 1818. He ruled out the method of punishment by trial, because it was a political and not legal matter and regarded the alternative course of giving a stern warning to Ram Singh as unlikely to answer.<sup>41</sup>

Ever since the executions of the Kukas involved in the Amritsar and Raikot cases, in particular that of the renowned Suba Gyani Singh, there had been a lot of agitation in the minds of the whole community. Whatever the consequences, they were not to be deflected from the patriotic path once chosen. The emotions were stirred deeply not only against the British Government, but also against the states of Nabha, Jind and Patiala, which had acted as the puppets of the foreign government in hunting down their heroes of the Raikot butcher case. They decided now to come out in the open and abandon their former strategy of attacks under cover of the night's darkness. A band of prospective martyrs was organized under the leadership of Hira Singh and Lehna Singh of Sakrowdi. Explaining the background of the attacks on Malodh and Maler Kotla.

Mr. Macnaob writes: "Prophecies of the overthrow of the English and the restoration of the Khalsa rule have been circulated among the Kukas and there was a general rumors that this year 1872 was to witness some great display of the Kuka Guru's power. Kukas sold their land and got rid of their property so as to be free to take part in the coming strife which was expected to take place in (Cheyt) April but was precipitated by the action of certain Subahs who, on the plea of taking vengeance for the death of Gyani Singh formed the plan of sending a body of 100 men to seize the capital of Maler Kotla State, where arms and horses would be found and distributed to the rest who should join. Under the plan that was finally adopted, Maler Kotla was to be the first target. It was a "notoriously weak and misgoverned state. The old ruler had died and the succession of the new ruler<sup>42</sup> was disputed. The administration was in the hands of a Regency Council. It was, therefore, thought that there would not be much difficulty in getting money, arms and horses from there, which were so necessary to the success of their whole plan. Additionally, they were urged to the action by the supposed merit of an attack on the traditional enemies of the Sikhs as well as the butchers of the place, who had insulted Gurmukh Singh, a local man, by slaughtering an ox in his very presence. After this an attack was to be made on Nabha, Jind, and Patiala, the railroad between Ludhiana and Ambala was to be broken up.

The long-contemplated attack on Maler Kotla was made on the morning of 15th January at about 7 o'clock. The authorities there had already got information about the designs of the band. Mr. Cowan, the Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana, had warned, through their agents, the rulers of Maler Kotla, Patiala and Jind that the Kukas were out for some mischief in their areas. They were put slightly off guard at 7 a.m. when the Kukas about 25 in number suddenly scaled a damaged wall and entered the palace of the ruler. Their object of going into the palace was to get hold of arms, money and horses. After this occurred some severe fighting between the two parties, in which several casualties were suffered by both the sides. Despairing of being able to get any more arms, money or horses, the Kukas decided to leave Kotla.<sup>43</sup>

## V CONCLUSION

Lastly we can say that the Kuka Movement (Namdhari) was one of the remarkable Indian movements of the second half of the 19th century. Its inception took shape under the very shadow of the Revolt of 1857. This Revolt, the largest since the advent of the British rule in India, was unprecedented also in the terrible revenge taken by

the victorious imperialists. The Punjab did not escape the revenge of the infuriated Britisher. Between Ambala and Delhi hundreds of Indians were condemned to be hanged before a court-martial in a short time and they were most brutally and inhumanly tortured while scaffolds were being erected for them. It was the religious, social or political sphere, in each case the inspiration was derived from the Gurus, particularly Guru Gobind Singh. The western ideas, already in wide circulation in the country, held little charm for the Kukas, for the ideas of unity of God, brotherhood of men, equality of sexes and liberty, commonly considered the gift of the west, were present in Sikhism. Therefore, they believed that the need of the hour was not to hanker after European ideas, but to assimilate and practice what was already with them. There were four focal points in Kukatism, namely the Name (i.e. constant embrace of God), social equality, order of the Khalsa, and Sikh nationality. The first two were the central fibers running through the Sikh religious and social doctrine and related to the teaching of all Gurus. The last two were the special gifts of Guru Gobind Singh, representing the fruit of the tree planted by Guru Nanak. As in the political sphere, in the social and religious spheres too, the Kuka Movement represented a progressive force and may rightly be said to have paved the way for the subsequent Singh Sabha Movement.

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