



Giani Ditt Singh: A Visionary Scholar and Sikh Reformer

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Abstract

The late 19th century witnessed significant challenges to Sikhism, as corruption and external religious influences threatened the community's spiritual and cultural identity. Christian missionaries, along with reform movements such as Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Ahmadiyya movement, sought to shape religious discourse in Punjab. In response, Sikh scholars recognized the urgent need for a revitalization of Sikh principles, leading to the formation of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha in Amritsar in 1873. This movement aimed to restore Sikh traditions, counter external religious influences, and eliminate internal corruption. Among the key figures of the Singh Sabha Movement, Giani Ditt Singh emerged as a prominent scholar, poet, editor, and social reformer dedicated to the cause of Sikh enlightenment. He played a crucial role in spreading Sikh teachings and countering distortions of the faith through his writings, debates, and leadership. His contributions were instrumental in reinforcing Sikh identity and resisting the encroachments of other religious movements. This study delves into Giani Ditt Singh's life and contributions, highlighting his role in shaping Sikh intellectual thought. It examines his literary works, his advocacy for Sikh values, and his efforts in reinforcing Sikh traditions against socio-religious threats. By analyzing his impact on the Singh Sabha Movement, this research underscores his legacy as a torchbearer of Sikh enlightenment. His works remain a cornerstone in the history of Sikh reform, ensuring the preservation and propagation of Sikhism in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Singh Sabha, Giani Ditt Singh, Editor, Khalsa Akhbar, Scholar, Reformer.

Introduction: In the latter half of the 19th century, corruption was on the rise within Sikhism, leading to a gradual deviation of the Sikh community from the fundamental principles of their faith. The Sikh society was drifting away from the path laid down by the Gurus, while external influences from Hindu and Christian missionaries were further impacting the religious and cultural identity of the Sikhs. Recognizing the imminent threats posed by Christian missionaries and other reform movements such as Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Ahmadiyya movement, several Sikh scholars felt an urgent need for an organized body to safeguard and rejuvenate Sikh traditions. This necessity led to the establishment of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha in Amritsar on July 28, 1873. The organization was officially registered with S. Thakur Singh Sandhawalia as its President, along with Prof. Gurmukh Singh, Bhai Ditt Singh Giani, Bhai Mayia Singh, and Bhai Jawahar Singh as key office bearers.^[1] The primary objective of the Singh Sabha Movement was to promote and propagate Sikhism while countering external religious influences and internal corruption. Among its leading figures, Giani Ditt Singh played a pivotal role in advancing the movement's mission. As a distinguished Sikh scholar and a leading figure in the Singh Sabha reform movement, he devoted his life to revitalizing and spreading Sikh values and teachings. His life and contributions as a scholar and reformer are elaborated upon below.

Birth and Life: There are differing opinions among scholars regarding his exact date of birth. Various sources cite the year as 1850, 1852, or 1853. According to Pritam Singh M.A., Giani Ditt Singh was born on April 21, 1850.^[2] Dr. Inderjeet Singh Gogoani also supports the birthdate of April 21, 1850, stating that he was born to Bhai Diwan Singh and Mata Ram Kaur in Kalaur, located in present-day Fatehgarh Sahib. Before Fatehgarh Sahib was designated as a district, Kalaur was part of the Patiala Princely State. Giani Ditt Singh was born into a weaver's (Ramdasia) family, and his birth name was Ram Dita.^[3] He was married to Bishan Devi, daughter of Sant Bhag Singh Badala of Kharar. The couple had two children: a son, Baldev Singh, and a daughter, Vidyawant Kaur.^[4] Giani Ditt Singh's early life was deeply influenced by his father, a devout man who believed in serving saints. His father was associated with the Gulabdas sect. After receiving his early education from his father, Ditt Singh was sent at the age of 8 or 9 to the Dera of Gulabdas in Tiur village, near Kharar in Ambala district. There, under the guidance of

Sant Kauldas, he studied multiple languages and religious scriptures. As a member of the Gulabdas sect, which advocated an epicurean way of life, he later moved to Chathian Wala, a prominent Gulabdasi center near Lahore. Under the mentorship of Sant Desa Singh, he was formally initiated into the sect and became a Gulabdasi preacher.[5] However, his intellectual journey led him to Bhai Jawahar Singh, a former Gulabdasi who had joined the Arya Samaj. Influenced by his teachings, Giani Ditt Singh gradually distanced himself from the Gulabdas sect and embraced social reform, urging people to abandon superstitions. Giani Ditt Singh's relentless pursuit of knowledge led him to various centers of learning until he eventually reached Lahore, where he successfully passed the Giani examination and attained other academic qualifications. He was subsequently appointed as a Professor of Punjabi at Oriental College, Lahore. Initially influenced by the Arya Samaj, his views evolved after encountering Swami Dayanand Saraswati's critical remarks about Guru Nanak. In response, he engaged Swami Dayanand in a series of debates on spiritualism and philosophy, three of which took place in Lahore in 1877. By 1888, he had completely severed ties with the Arya Samaj. Thereafter,[6] Giani Ditt Singh emerged as a staunch advocate of the Singh Sabha Movement, playing a pivotal role in establishing its Lahore unit. As a distinguished scholar, poet, editor, and dedicated reformer, he made significant contributions to Sikh thought and remains an influential figure in the Sikh Panth.

Giani Ditt Singh: A Visionary Thinker and Sikh Reformer: Giani Ditt Singh was a distinguished scholar. He received his schooling from a variety of sources. He stands as a towering figure in the literary and journalistic history of Punjab. Recognized as the first modern prose writer and journalist in Punjabi, he was a scholar of exceptional caliber, possessing the qualities of a profound writer and literary visionary. Eminent scholars such as Narinder Singh Kapoor, Inderjit Singh Gogoani, Karnail Singh Somal, Pritam Singh M.A., Giani Gurdit Singh, and Shamsher Singh Ashok etc. have documented his literary legacy. His contributions to Sikh literature and journalism remain unparalleled, with an extensive body of work that includes over seventy books on Sikhism. Among these, "Khalsa Akhbar" (Weekly Newspaper) holds a place of special prominence which was launched on June 13, 1986. The publication consisted of eight pages, and its initial editor was Giani Jhanda Singh.[7] Later it was handed over to Giani Ditt Singh. Under his leadership, the newspaper became a powerful voice for reformist elements within Sikh society. The Khalsa Akhbar continued publication until 1889, when it was temporarily suspended due to a legal suit filed by the Amritsari party concerning the publication of a play titled Swapan. However, the newspaper resumed publication on May 1, 1893, with Giani Ditt Singh reinstated as its editor. A distinguished scholar and skilled debater, Giani Ditt Singh actively engaged in intellectual discussions with representatives of the Arya Samaj. He frequently utilized poetry as a medium for editorial expression. Through this newspaper, he played a pivotal role in advancing the objectives of the Singh Sabha Lahore movement. Following his passing in 1901, Sardar Maiya Singh Ahluwalia assumed the role of editor of this newspaper.[8] Apart from this, his seminal works, Dayanand Naal Mera Samvaad and Durga Prabodh, are regarded as foundational contributions to Sikh philosophical discourse. His literary works cover a wide range of themes, including social justice, Sikh philosophy, the lives and sacrifices of Sikh Gurus, the martyrdom of Sikh warriors, and the rich cultural heritage of Punjab. Through his eloquent prose, he meticulously documented history, employing the written word as a profound tool for enlightenment and reform. Giani Ditt Singh's works establish him as a profound thinker and reformist within Sikhism. His literary endeavors aimed at dismantling caste barriers and uniting all individuals under the teachings of Sikhism. His writings exude a deep love and devotion to Sikh principles, reflecting his unwavering commitment to social reform and spiritual awakening.

Giani Ditt Singh was a key figure in the Singh Sabha Movement, using his literary talent to fight caste discrimination and social injustices. Despite facing discrimination due to his lower-caste background, he fearlessly addressed the issue through his writings. In his work *Fake Sikh Prabodh*, he questioned caste divisions among Sikhs in a thought-provoking and dramatic manner: "Kaun Sikh hunde ho bhai? Ji main Arora, ih hai Nai. Teri Singha ki hai jaat? Nami Vanshi main han Bhrat. Tera janam kinah de gharda? Main ji Mehra pani bharda." [9] (Translation: "Which type of Sikh are you, O brother?" "I am Arora; he is a barber." "O Singh! What is your caste?" "I am from Nami Vansh, Bhrat by caste." "In whose house were you born?" "I belong to a water carrier's family.")

Giani Ditt Singh Ji was known for his qualities of self-sacrifice and social service. As one of the founding members of the Singh Sabha of Lahore, he played a crucial role in transforming the Singh Sabha into a powerful movement through his speeches and writings. His significant contributions greatly enhanced the effectiveness and impact of the Singh Sabha Movement, leaving a lasting legacy in Sikh history. Giani Ditt Singh played a pivotal role in establishing Khalsa College, Amritsar, and contributed to the academic development of its students by authoring textbooks. He actively encouraged his students to promote education among the Sikh community. His efforts in teaching and scholarship were instrumental in propagating Sikh history and fostering awareness. He was deeply concerned about the neglect of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. In 1699 AD, the tenth Guru created 'Khalsa' by abolishing caste, discrimination etc. 'Khalsa' means pure. With the passage of time and due to some internal and external events, the Khalsa seemed to be losing sight of its original purpose. Giani Ditt Singh was a pure Sikh scholar and wanted Guru Sahib's teachings to reach every home in the same form as he had preached. This quality was the foundation of his life. His argumentative power was strong. There was no big personality standing in front of him.[10] He wrote a number of books on brave Sikhs like Bhai Taru Singh, Bota Singh, Shabegh Singh, Mehtab Singh Mirankotia, etc. which deeply touched the sentiments of the Sikhs and caused an instant awakening. Through Khalsa newspaper, he shook the Sikhs with his strong writings and started answering the opponents with a mouthful.[11] Giani Ditt Singh and Prof. Gurmukh Singh (Sikh Scholar of Singh Sabha Movement) had a very close relationship, the reason being that both were scholars of the same path. Narinder Singh Kapoor writes, "Baba Khem Singh Bedi used to sit on the throne in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib by telling himself that he was from the lineage of the Guru and bowed to the people then two famous preachers and founders of the Singh Sabha, Prof. Gurmukh Singh and Giani Ditt Singh opposed this custom. The result of this was that the Singh Sabha split into two factions in Lahore and Amritsar.[12] Giani Ditt Singh Ji's nature was to write openly. He presented an absolute picture of Sikhism through his pen. At that time, Giani ji contributed a lot in the field of literature. Credible responses were given to Christian missionaries, Arya Samaj and various organizations opposed to Sikhism. Khalsa newspaper edited by Giani Ditt Singh has made a special contribution in propagating the principles of Guru Sahib. According to Punjab Kosh, "The weekly 'Khalsa Newspaper' run by Giani Ditt Singh became a major means of spreading the ideology/theories of the Singh Sabha among the people at that time. Khalsa newspaper used to include news related to world events, agriculture, disease etc. Apart from this, the message of Sri Guru Granth Sahib was also printed in the Khalsa newspaper from time to time. There were many such issues among the Sikhs which had become a matter of concern. 'Khalsa Akhbar' used to shed light on them from time to time. About the format of 'Khalsa Akhbar' Narinder Singh Kapur says, "The name of the letter 'Khalsa Akhbar Lahore' was printed on the main page of Khalsa Akhbar both in Punjabi and English. Nanakshahi Sammat was also printed on the first page and also Saka. Due to the interest of propagating the Sikhism, the name of this newspaper used to be printed as 'ਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਕੀ ਫਤੇਹ ਹੈ' .[13] Through this newspaper, Giani Ditt Singh served the Sikh religion and drew the attention of the society towards Sikhism. His work laid the foundation for modern Sikh literature, inspiring countless writers who adopted his style and approach. Giani Ditt Singh remained dedicated to religious revivalism and social reform among Sikhs and the broader society until his passing. His contributions continue to serve as a guiding light for Sikh scholars and writers today.

Conclusion: Giani Ditt Singh was a distinguished Sikh reformer, scholar, poet, and journalist of the 19th century, who played a pivotal role in the Singh Sabha movement. His unwavering dedication to social and religious reforms continues to inspire generations. As a key figure in the Singh Sabha movement, he made significant contributions to the revival and preservation of Sikhism, embodying the ideals of a true Sikh. His legacy is firmly enshrined in the history of the Khalsa Panth, which will forever honor his invaluable contributions. Following his passing, Bhai Vir Singh composed a poignant poem in his memory, expressing the profound sense of loss experienced by the Sikh community.

Jago jago ji Ditt Singh pyare, kaum baithee sirane jagawe Kion kitne piaree, kion jaag tuhanun na aave. Kadi kaum jagaayee si taine, lame kaddh kaddh vain te haave, Han! Jagaike kaum bhulakad, app saun gaye hoi bedawe. Apni vaari te hun jago, eh neend na saanun bhave. Kiti kaum jagai na Takdi, nirbal chhadd na hovin wawe. Deyie dukh na sute nun aipar tere jeha nazar na aawe. Jahda panth di rakhsha sambhale, bhari pand nun sir te chaw.)[14]

(Translation: Wake up, wake up, O Ditt Singh ji dear, The nation (Sikh Kaum) is sitting near your pillow. Why have you fallen in love with slumber,

Why don't you wake up? Once you awakened the entire nation By praying, crying, howling & growing, Now after awakening the forgetful nation, Yourself have gone to sleep unattached. Please wake up on your turn, We don't like this sleep.

After your awakening the nation has yet to become the strongest, Don't leave it weak and become recluse.

We don't want to trouble you in sleep

But there appears to be no one equal to you.

Who else could protect the Panth And take its problems on his head.

Don't we need him or such person now under the prevailing circumstances? Please think over.

"Jago jago ji Ditt Singh pyare, Qaum baithe sirane jagave."

(Wake up, wake up, O Ditt Singh ji dear, The Sikh nation sits by your side, longing for your presence.)

Giani Ditt Singh's impact on Sikh thought, literature, and social reform remains a guiding light for future generations. His life and works continue to be remembered as a testament to his relentless pursuit of truth and justice.

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