

# Jaito Morcha

**Introduction:** "Morcha" means a peaceful agitation/demonstration, and "Jaito" refers to the place where this demonstration took place. *Jaito Morcha* was preceded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Sikh history by Saka Nankana Sahib and a series of other morchas as part of the Gurdwara Reform Movement/Akali Movement (1920 – 1925) which led to decadent mahants, who were historically left in control of prominent Sikh gurdwaras, being forced to hand over control of these shrines to the Sikh sangat. The Gurdwara Reform Movement/ Akali Movement culminated in the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee (SGPC) which was formed in 1920, later being ceded the control of Sikh Gurdwaras in Punjab by the British.

**The spark:** The impetus of the Jaito Morcha was to restore Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, the pro-Akali Sikh ruler of the princely state of Nabha. The Maharaja's support and involvement in popular causes, including the Gurdwara Reform Movement and attendant morchas, angered the British government which forced him to abdicate on 9 July 1923. The abdication was denounced as high-handed by Sikh leaders like Master Tara Singh, and the SGPG passed a resolution to have the Maharaja of Nabha restored to the gaddi (throne). It picked 29 July 1923 as a day of prayer for the Maharaja to be observed in all the principal towns of the Punjab.

Master Tara Singh, set out for Jaito (in Faridkot) to peacefully demonstrate their demand to have the Maharaja reinstated via the recitation of Akhand Path (continuous recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib) at Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib. The British authorities interrupted the Akhand path, arrested the Granthi Singh and replaced him with their own reader on 14 Sept 1923. This sparked the beginning of the morcha with jathas (Sikh groups) making their way to Jaito in nonviolent protest.

Seeing this as a display of defiance to their rule, the British authorities met the jathas with brutal force, resorting to lathi charges, tear gasing, and firing on unarmed protestors. Despite the violence, the Sikhs remained steadfast in their resolve, offering non-violent resistance. On 21 Feb 1924, a jatha which refused to disperse despite orders was fired upon by the British administrator at Nabha, Wilson Johnston. The official count was 19 dead and 29 injured, though Akali figures were recorded as higher. The incident sparked widespread resentment in Punjab and elsewhere.

**A Wave of Solidarity:** Thirteen more jathas of 500 people each reached Jaito over the next few months and courted arrest. Sikh jathas also came from Canada, Hong Kong, and Shanghai to join the morcha campaign. This unwavering commitment and sacrifices of the Sikh community finally forced the British government to seek resolution. In February 1924, the ban on Akhand Path at Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib was lifted. Despite this, it did not appease the Sikh community nor slow the morcha agitation. While open to negotiations, the government remained inflexible on restoring the deposed Maharaja's state and he was sent Dehradun and was granted a monthly allowance. Thereafter, the British authorities cleverly decided to diffuse the growing Sikh morcha agitation by gazetting the Sikh Gurdwaras Bill which was unanimously passed in the Punjab Legislature in July 1925.

While the Jaito Morcha failed to reinstate the Nabha Maharaja to his gaddi (throne), its significance was that it was a vital cog that led to the passage of the Sikh Gurdwara Act. The Act met the long standing demand of the Gurdwara Reform Movement for the Indian government to legally define Sikh identity and brought Sikh gurdwaras in Punjab under the control of the Sikh sangat. This ended the 5-year reform movement initiated by the Sikhs to free Sikh gurdwaras from the mahants. This was significant because the Sikh desire to free Gurdwaras from the mahants from 1920 was not shared by the British who wanted to maintain the cultural/communal status quo and therefore not cede control of the Gurdwaras to the SGPC. The British saw the maintenance of the status quo in line with their practice of keeping Indian communities divided in order to facilitate British control. Thus, the passing of the Sikh Gurdwaras Bill was a significant victory for the Sikhs, and ended a controversy within the Sikh community that had embroiled it with the British government and threatened the tranquillity of the Punjab.

**Conclusion:** The legacy of Jaito da Morcha endures as a powerful testament to the transformative power of non-violent resistance and unwavering faith. It continues to inspire generations to strive for a better tomorrow, guided by the principles of non-violence and dedication to the pursuit of truth and justice.