

Sketching the Formative Years of Sohan Singh Bhakna's Life in Punjab

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Formed in the United States of America, the Ghadar Party was the harbinger of novel perspectives in Indian politics. The British Government crushed this movement ruthlessly during the early days of the World War I. There exist only limited literature which focuses on the lives of those Ghadarites who made daring efforts to establish a revolutionary movement. This paper assesses the early life of Sohan Singh Bhakna who was to later become the founder of the Ghadar Party. His long life span of ninety eight years presents a picture of a man who remained consistent in his actions whatever may be the consequences. In this article, an attempt is made to bring out the early, formative years, of the life of this revolutionary before he decided to migrate to America. The paper suggests that, it was not only the American liberal but racialized atmosphere which influenced his actions, leading him to think deeply about the meaning of slavery and freedom, but also his life experiences in Punjab itself, especially his interactions with Baba Kesar, which had a transforming impact on his state of mind.

Introduction

Sohan Singh Bhakna - the founder and first President of the Ghadar Party was a low profile altruistic revolutionary. From a Punjabi peasant to an American labourer and from a spirited revolutionary to a radical thinker, Bhakna's life depicts an apt portrayal of the Ghadar Movement and its heroic legacy. As an important organic leader of the Ghadar Party in America, he worked passionately among the Punjabi immigrants and fruitfully succeeded in sparking off a revolutionary spirit in their hearts. Sohan Singh Bhakna was a product *par excellence* of the grassroots peasant dimension of emerging South Asian radicalism in the American environment.¹ Various aspects of his life throw light on the genesis, expansion and downfall of one of the most life-pulsating revolutionary movements in the history of Indian freedom struggle. Besides, the missionary zeal with which he worked for Indian freedom, the sufferings and torments which he underwent in the course of his mission, makes Sohan Singh Bhakna a reverential and an inspirational figure.

Sohan Singh Bhakna was born during the first half of month January in 1870 at his maternal home in village *Khutrae Khurd*, near *Guru Ka Bagh*, in Amritsar district. This was in consonance with the prevalent Punjabi custom of those days that the first child was to be delivered in the maternal home.² Although there is no convincing evidence to ascertain the correct date of his birth, it has now become a tradition that his birth anniversary should be celebrated in his native village *Bhakna Kalan* annually on January 4. He qualified as a 'high caste' Sikh

having been born in a Jat Sikh family with the *gotra* Shergill. The suffix of his name Bhakna does not denote his surname but his village identity as has been is also the custom among others hailing from this village. It means that his village name stands glued to his name incessantly. In fact, it became a noticeable practice among the Ghadarites to refer to their fellow community members by their village name instead of any caste or other surnames. The Ghadar Party, in fact, forbade caste-classified identities. The name of their villages, in a general sense, became a common identity of the Ghadar Party members because of their easy recognition and for avoiding confusion with other similar names. None of the members of the organization used caste related hierarchical classifications in their names. As an ardent soldier of the Ghadar Party and a flag bearer of its ideology, Sohan Singh Bhakna never used Shergill along with his first name. However, in the later years of his life, an honorific, *Baba* (used particularly in the Punjab for a respectable aged person) was attached to his name. Now, he is respectfully remembered as Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna by people all over the world. Like him, most of the Ghadarites instantly got the epithet of *Ghadri Babey* because after they were released from jails by the colonial authorities, they were all aged persons with grey hair and were revered by the people.

Early Childhood

Sohan Singh's father Karam Singh was a well-heeled peasant of Bhakna village which is situated sixteen kilometers southwest of Amritsar, near the Indo-Pak Wagha border. His mother, Ram Kaur belonged to village Khutrae Khurd.³ She was the second wife of Bhakna's father, whose first wife Har Kaur failed to bear him any child even after many years of their marriage. Belonging to an agriculturist landlord family, Har Kaur was keen to have a male heir who could look after the ancestral agricultural property. Arguing for the importance of continuance of family lineage, Har Kaur herself took the lead in marrying her cousin sister Ram Kaur to her husband Karam Singh. The birth of a son - Sohan Singh Bhakna - from the second marriage brought happiness to the entire family. Since childhood, Bhakna was deeply attached to his stepmother Har Kaur, who was said to be sober in her personality and conduct. He regarded her as his *Dharam - Mata* (God mother). In his autobiography, published in the form of a series of articles in a Punjabi newspaper, *Akali te Pardesi*, Bhakna writes, "If someone loved me selflessly throughout my life, it was my *Dharam-Mata* Har Kaur; I owe a debt of gratitude to her which I can never repay".⁴ When a child, Bhakna was brought up and groomed in a traditional Punjabi household family where he was treated with utmost love and care by its members. While acknowledging the gesture of kind love and affection of his stepmother towards him, Bhakna, during the course of an interview with Prem Singh Bajaj,⁵ remarks: "My *Dharam-Mata* was a humble lady; she was a God-fearing woman who led a life of ritual piety and austere living. My mother had deep regard for her; in the household affairs, she always followed her advice".⁶ He mentions that highly cordial relations existed throughout between his mother and

stepmother, something rarely found among other families. Both lived like real sisters and vied with each other in showing their fond love and affection towards the little child. In his brief account of life, *Jeewan Sangram* (Life Struggle), Bhakna acknowledges the fact that he was fortunate enough to receive the affection, care and love of two mothers.⁷ The relationship between Bhakna and *Dharam-Mata* Har Kaur was closer by all means and it remained so throughout her lifetime.

Sohan Singh Bhakna's family held a high position in the village. His father, Karam Singh was the biggest landlord of the village, owning one hundred and thirty *bighas* of agricultural land (sixty-five acres). In the previous three generations, there had only been one male heir to the property in the family and as such ancestral land remained as a single unit registered under a single person. The whole land was irrigated by wells enabling the family to enjoy a healthy income from it. Apart from agricultural land, the family also had a big flock of cattle as an asset. There was no dearth of milk, curd or vegetables in the home. The small family led a comfortable and prosperous life. Since the agricultural operations in those days were performed with little use of modern machinery, Karam Singh farmed out the land for one year to small farmers for its cultivation. Bhakna's father had a religious-oriented mind and the people revered the saintly personality, because of his generosity and eruditeness. As a pious person, he was seen to have many good qualities in his personality. Sadly, Sohan Singh Bhakna was barely one year old when his father died. His untimely death was a grievous blow to the family. Now, there were four members at home - his grandmother Hukam Kaur, mother Ram Kaur and stepmother Har Kaur - besides, a little child Sohan Singh, in whom the women could find solace for the future. On his death bed, Karam Singh had expressed his wish that half of the family property should be offered to Bhakna's *Dharam-Mata*. She, however, refused to accept the offer stating that all she had in her possession belonged to the "only child of ours".⁸ Although she was reluctant to accept her share, Hukam Kaur mutated it on her name in the family property to fulfill the last wish of her son. Bhakna, in his autobiography remarks that throughout her life she had never raised the issue of the division of the family property or her share.⁹

In fact, with sagacious wisdom, the three women cultivated a deep bond of mutual understanding for the wellbeing of the little child and family lineage. His grandmother, Hukam Kaur was a brave hearted woman, who managed the household tasks and agricultural affairs with a mature sense of responsibility. Bhakna writes that the suave lady of the family efficiently managed all these matters. At the age of seven, Bhakna went to the village *gurdwara* for learning the Gurmukhi script. The *Granthi* (preacher of the *gurdwara*) imparted him religious education. There, he studied the religious scriptures of Sikhism, such as *Panj Bani*, *Das Granthi* and *Bhagat Bani*. He had a sharp brain and quickly grasped the lessons taught to him. After three years, Bhakna got enrolled in the newly opened primary school in the village. At that time, no formal system of education was in vogue in the remote villages. In that school, Urdu was the chief medium of instruction; Punjabi and Persian were also part of the curriculum, but

no scientific or vocational educational facility existed except for general Mathematics which was available for students. Bestowed with sharp intellect, Bhakna became proficient in reading and writing Urdu; he passed the examination of Mathematics with distinction. His handwriting was not so good, as he admits, "My writing lacked the beauty of words. I used to write on the wooden tablet (*phatti*) but more often I practised on land".¹⁰

During his childhood, Bhakna used to practise wrestling in the village *akhara* (wrestling pit) for physical fitness. When his mother discouraged him from doing wrestling, he firmly answered: "I am the only child of the family; to protect the family's property and cope with any adverse confrontation, I must have a strong physique". In fact, he started to learn wrestling when two of his schoolmates (who were siblings) thrashed him brutally and damaged his writing tablet by spattering ink on it. He remarks: "In a fit of anger, I prepared myself for retribution and eventually after six months, I was strong enough to counter them. On one occasion, I pitted on both the brothers and gave them a severe bashing".¹¹

Sohan Singh Bhakna's educational qualifications were not very academically-oriented. After completing his basic education in the village school, Bhakna showed interest in pursuing further studies. For undertaking higher education, his village and the neighbouring villages lacked a higher education institution. The family had all the means to send him to a city school and for that purpose but he had to live away from home. His mother could not cope with his potential separation and put a stop on his studies, and as she remarked, "I cannot afford to leave you alone in the city. If in our village's periphery, there is a school, where after studying you can return home in the evening, I should let you go to that school".¹² Her belief was that the family had enough land to lead a comfortable life and it was necessary for Bhakna to resort to taking up an occupation other than agriculture and discouraged him to take up further education. After that time he did not attend any other educational institution. He states, "The fact of my being the only child stood in the way of my pursuit of further studies and I was not allowed by the circumstances to take up further study".¹³ Thus, he received education only up to the fifth standard. At about this time, he married Bishan Kaur, the daughter of Khushal Singh, a high caste Jat Sikh landlord of Jandiala in Lahore district.¹⁴ In those days, early child marriages were common in the Punjabi society and thus, his marriage was not an exception as per the norms of the prevailing social milieu. In fact, the womenfolk in the house wanted an early nuptial knot for him so that he could share some family responsibilities. His grandmother, Hukam Kaur enthusiastically participated in the marriage ceremonies, but unfortunately not long after his marriage, she passed away. In fact, the old lady, after the demise of his son, had astutely managed family finances and had accumulated good savings about which Bhakna remarks, "After the death of my father till my adulthood, the suave lady of the family had saved a considerable sum of money from the agricultural income".¹⁵

Wages of Adulthood

Therefore, up to the age of fifteen or sixteen years, Bhakna did not bother to share any household responsibilities which were being shouldered by his mothers. He was a care-free, fun-loving adolescent who wanted to lead a relaxed and easy-going life. Bhakna was, from all accounts, a handsome and well-built man who had a distinctive personality among village lads. Being the only heir to the family property, he was often found to be surrounded by some ravenous and flattering friends. Baits were often thrown by the self-seeking persons who had their eyes focused on his property. Clever sycophants gathered around him and started praising him to the skies, addressing him '*Sardarji, Sardarji*'.¹⁶

In the formative years of his life, Bhakna fell into a trap of untrustworthy and opportunistic friends who lured him by saying that life would be very enjoyable for them as well as Bhakna if they had good horses for riding and hounds for hunting and if they returned with big bags full after hunting.¹⁷ Belonging to a big landlord family, Bhakna considered himself a distinct and prestigious person in the village. His little smattering of primary school level knowledge developed in him a degree of deference from the populace. In the field, he did not like to do manual work and was hardly available for farming. His *Dharma-Mata* expected him to personally look after agricultural operations but he remained flagrantly indifferent towards his responsibilities. The prime time of his youth witnessed a period of youthful delinquency. Thus, "He spent, rather wasted, the first twenty-five years of his life at his native place in the manner of a care-free young man".¹⁸ No one was strict with him and his frame of mind at that stage of life did not make him attend to his household obligations.

Sohan Singh Bhakna blamed one of his teachers at primary school for inculcating bad habits in him. Both shared time in the evenings and took pleasure in drinking and merry-making. Bhakna's character and mannerisms were profoundly influenced by his teacher at that tender age. The low moral values of the teachers, claims Bhakna, used to leave a bad influence on young children at their most impressionable age. He remarks, "The amateur teachers, appointed by the colonial government on the meager salary of eight or ten rupees per month were not qualified enough to inculcate good values among the students. Many of them had no moral values and ethics. Thus, students were badly influenced by such teachers. Moreover, the teachers who themselves were incapable of understanding the true meaning of education, could not be expected to impart good education to the students. Unfortunately, I came under the influence of one such teacher. I started drinking with him at an early age and became an addict".¹⁹

With a large landed property at his disposal, Bhakna began to lead his life in comfort and luxury. It took no time for him to become accustomed to a lavish lifestyle. Drinking, hunting and other sensuous pursuits of life became a daily routine for him. He spent plentifully on these indulgences. Moreover, he joined the bandwagon of a few idle youngsters of his village, who on account of his impressive property credentials chose him as their leader. Feeling proud of the company of his friends of the adolescent age, Bhakna writes, "They rendered

their support to me through thick and thin; I enjoyed their company. In fact, they completely overpowered my independent thinking and became instrumental in my decision making.²⁰ Even notorious dacoits and hardcore criminals of various hues formed a part of his company. A proclaimed offender named, Jaggu *Brahman*, out of fear of police arrest enjoyed his patronage. The company of drunkard friends completely overshadowed his personality. Along with them, he began to pay frequent visits to the city for dance and singing performances. This ravenous coterie drained his wealth without impunity. Bhakna remained a silent spectator to his material and moral ruin. Hard drinking, moral degeneration and extravagance became the features of his personality.

Sohan Singh Bhakna did not follow the righteous path of his father, who was held in high esteem by village folks. People generally sneered at Bhakna, considering him as an unworthy son of a respectable father, who in village relationships, completely undermined the family reputation which had been hard-earned by his late father. People, who knew what his father was, wondered if he was the child of a good person like Karam Singh. The elderly women at home continuously fretted and fumed in their efforts to restrain him from his wayward pursuits, but to no avail. As an eyesore of the family and village folk, he faced an adverse criticism from his mothers and friends of his late father. The mothers repeatedly asked Bhakna to leave the company of his evil friends, but he put a deaf ear to their sensible advice.²¹

Vulnerable to his friends, Bhakna did not change his wicked habits. Deeply let down by the only son of the family, its members found themselves helpless to modify his delinquent nature. His mother, Ram Kaur, showed a strong resentment against his habit of consuming liquor and wasting money in the company of his ill-advised friends. She feared that her son's health and wealth, would both be ruined if he did not leave their decadent company. His lethargic attitude became the cause of perpetual worry and concern for his *Dharma-Mata* who at times admonished him or gave him a piece of sane advice, but to no effect. Bhakna himself admits, "The clout of friends was so great to be repulsed and I brazenly let down her (*Dharam-Mata's*) sane advice".²² She persistently attempted to bring about discipline in Bhakna's life, but he ignored her complacent protests and continued with his extravagant habits. Moreover, Bhakna belied his mothers' expectations by not displaying a fair degree of sensitivity towards his wife. His married life did not bring any change in his attitude and he did not feel a sense of responsibility towards his homely duties. Being a prisoner of whims and desires, Bhakna altogether ignored his wife. She suffered a lot due to his indifference to marital life. His relations with his wife remained strained. Talking about his disturbed marital life, Bhakna remarks, "Added responsibility of marriage did not work well for my lifestyle. The strong undertones of misguided male machismo left no room even for my wife."²³ His hobbies, such as, keeping mules of the best breeds, hunting dogs and spending lavishly on friends took a heavy toll on his finances. He was living in the mistaken belief that his friends were trustworthy, reliable and sincere. He was over-generous to them in his feisty treats. In fact, Bhakna was more extravagant

than usual. Some of his friends were good-for-nothing fellows who exploited his amiable nature; he was almost uncontrollable in his reckless spending on them. His friends often borrowed money in his name, incurring a huge amount of debt which actually was not his but which invited the creditors to knock at his door. Finding no recourse from this awkward situation, his *Dharma-Mata* unwillingly had to pay a few installments of the amount due to him to ease the burden of debt. The parasitic lifestyle of Bhakna profoundly pierced the heart of his *Dharam-Mata* who kept on advising him to mend his ways. In an effort to change his habits and curb his extravagant nature, his family members refused to bear the expenses of his unprolific way of lifestyle. But contrary to their expectations, this decision proved worse than anything for the family. Short of money, as a pitfall of it, he started mortgaging his land. Later, while writing his biography, Bhakna lamented on his bad habits which he had imbibed during his youth. He summarised them in the following way:

My friends became indispensable for me. Inspired by youthful fancies, drinking became my weakness and they exploited it for their petty interests. The aim of all these friends was the same - greed for easy money and exploitation of my extravagant nature. Nothing was meaningful in their company. They served me and I paid to them. In this group of sycophants, I did not comprehend their mischievous efforts for ruining my life. My friends decided all the matters for me and I knew no life without them. Hunting and drinking were only two things which I passionately enjoyed without any kind of remorse. One day, when the liquor shop owner asked me to pay the amount of overdue credit, my friends rebuked him as they considered me as an important person of the village, whom nobody could question. As I had no ready money in hand, they envisaged a plan to pay all my outstanding dues. They reached an understanding with a moneylender who agreed to lend money on interest on the condition that I would mortgage my land to him. Without any second thought, I immediately responded in affirmation. It was the beginning of financing my merry-making habits through mortgaging land. My callous attitude was a clear indicator of my moral and material ruins. The handing over of household affairs to me did not auger well for the family in the long run. I did not distinguish between right and wrong. I ran away from all that was good for me and my family.²⁴

The ruin had set in; who could be blamed for the ruin more than Bhakna himself? His thrifty lifestyle landed him in the flap of heavy debt and swept all family savings. The only child of the family had ruined the finances beyond redemption. All sane pieces of advice of his well-wishers fell flat on his sense and he became completely apathetic to the pathetic condition of the home. His

idle fists longed for bouts of wine and he, in a short span of seven to eight years, squandered away most of the land possessed by the family. Soon more than thirty-two acres of his fertile land was mortgaged.²⁵ The ramifications of mortgaging land were infinite and this phase of his life was dominated by a strong sense of wayward habits. Indebtedness was not due to the impoverished condition of Bhakna, but due to his uncontrolled borrowing to support feudal standards of grandeur. Money was plentiful in his kitty as land offered the security for loans. He spent the greater part of this easy wealth on unproductive and often unworthy ends. Despite accruing heavy debt, he had no regret in his heart. For about ten years, from 1887 to 1897, till he was twenty-seven years of age, he was too busy with the life of profligacy and luxurious pursuits.²⁶

Encounter with Baba Kesar and Transformation

A turning point came into the life of Sohan Singh Bhakna after he met Baba Kesar. He was a prominent Namdhari preacher who lived in village Muhawa, about four kilometers from Bhakna.²⁷ He was a disciple of Baba Ram Singh, the leader of the Kuka Movement, who during the 1870s raised a banner of revolt against British rule. Being an active member of the Namdhari sect, he had resorted to the task of socio-religious reforms in his village. He was held in high esteem by the people of his own and nearby villages who admired him for his uprightness, ethical and religious values. Baba Kesar's personality left a profound impact on Sohan Singh Bhakna during their very first meeting. In his company, Bhakna was highly inspired to lead an upright life. The spirit of religious verve compassionately goaded his conscience to change his strong-willed delinquent mindset. Baba Kesar planted the seeds of rationality, humanity and nationality in his heart. Gradually, the company of Baba Kesar brought a radical change in the life of Bhakna. He gave a new momentum to his varied life. One peculiar trait of Bhakna's personality was his straightforwardness and throughout his life he had not been found a hypocrite. He was a man of one-track mind and whatever he pursued he did with extreme one-sidedness.²⁸ If he led a life of wickedness, he led it thoroughly; if he became a follower of Baba Kesar, he completely subsumed his life with his religious philosophy. Bhakna was immensely benefitted by the teachings of Baba Kesar. He remarks, "I was in the company of *Babaji* from 1896 to 1908. The fact of the matter is that the life I am living today is the gift of his noble company. Life of national service was bestowed upon me by Baba Kesar".²⁹

Baba Kesar strongly denounced child marriage, idolatry, polygamy, gender bias and casteism. He was known for his simple lifestyle, sincerity of purpose, straightforward rationality and earnestness in public dealings. He often organized assemblage for the purpose of religious discourses in which he invited listeners from all communities - Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and others. He named such assemblage as *Prem Sangat*. In fact, Baba's all-embracing influence was beyond parochial concerns of religion and often it came to the notice of Bhakna that even Muslims at the Shahi Mosque of Lahore bowed before him in

reverence.³⁰ His meeting with Baba Kesar, indeed, was a fortuitous incident of his life. In his autobiography, describing about his first meeting with Baba Kesar, Bhakna recalls that the very first sight of Baba Kesar pierced his soul. He thus records:

One fine morning, in the month of *Jaith* of *Vikrami Samvat* 1953,³¹ I was going to my field. While walking past the village *gurdwara*, I heard the recitation of hymns inside the building. Although, I had listened to the congregational hymn-chanting many times before, but on that day I was captivated by the mesmerising voice of a saintly personality. I could not prevent myself from seeing a saint whose melodious voice had been so effective. I found that a white bearded person wearing a white gown was gracing the congregation. The glow of his face stood distinct among all people assembled there. Instead of going to field, I sat among the devotees. When the prayers of the day were over, the saint gave a sermon to the gathering in a composed voice which seemed to reflect enlightenment of a soul that had realised the eternal truth of human life. His eloquent words inoculated with divine attributes could turn a non-believer to a believer. I was simply swayed away by the magic of his words. His address captured my nerves and I was in a mode of withdrawal.³²

Baba Kesar's sermons, as Bhakna admits in his autobiography touched the sinews of his heart. After the congregational gathering was over, Bhakna invited Baba to his home for dinner. His invitation was graciously accepted by Baba Kesar. His mothers as well as other villagers were astonished to see this unusual development. Nobody expected that Bhakna would call a religious person to his home as he had never been seen in the company of such persons before. At night, a congregation or *Satsang* was held in the vast compound of his home and he invited villagers for the assemblage. In fact, long after his father's death, a spiritual gathering was organised by Bhakna at his home. Baba Kesar talked about the virtuous influence of the noble deeds on human life. He recited the *Sloka* of Baba Farid, "If you have a trace of wisdom, do not indulge in a black deed; look deep into your inner self with humility".³³ Bhakna's mother and many other villagers made Baba Kesar know about the nature of his host. They requested him to bless Bhakna with good deeds. In a lighter vein, a village elder said, "If Sohan Singh leaves his bad habits and follow righteousness conduct in his life, you can believe that the village would be transformed".³⁴ Baba silently smiled and looked towards Bhakna. He then instructed him to make arrangements for his bedding. Baba Kesar stayed for a night at his home and had a formal talk with him before going to bed.

Next morning, Bhakna went along with Baba Kesar to see him off in the outskirts of the village. During the course of their conversation, he said to his novice devotee, "My dear! Don't think that I want to dissuade you from eating

meat or drinking, or that I am going to tell you to give up your habits. You may indulge in these things. But if in your mind you develop a hatred for these habits, then I am sure you will renounce them".³⁵ In a polite voice, he made Bhakna realise that his self-inflicting approach was not going to work for a long time as one day he would exhaust all his family property and become a bankrupt. Baba Kesar's stern advice of leaving his bad company might not have worked well with Bhakna, because his frame of mind had never accepted forceful suggestions. Earlier, too, he had been in the habit of confronting opinionated suggestions of his mothers and well-wishers of the family when they rebuked him for not sharing household responsibilities. Baba Kesar did not insist him to leave his wayward lifestyle or reprimand him for his unworthy habits, but in a compassionate way, he advised him to visit his *dera* (place of living) to listen to devotional hymns and spend some time there. He readily accepted his friendly advice and sought his blessings. It was a turning point in his life and a metamorphic step towards engaging himself in social activities. Sohan Singh Bhakna held deep regards for Baba Kesar to whom, now, he was seriously devoted. In fact, Bhakna added a new dimension to his life after coming into contact with the Namdhari saint. He felt a new consciousness which altered his outlook and submerged his personal addictions into an arena of spirituality. Hitherto, he had listened to some wandering ascetics, but for the first time in his life, he met a person who upheld high standards of spirituality and morality. Baba Kesar's simple and steady approach to human life cast a deep spell on him and infused a spirit of self-inquiry in his mind. Sharing his experience with Prem Singh Bajaj, Bhakna states, "Saintly persons have magnetic resourcefulness; they silently inculcate good values in human beings, and Baba Kesar is one of such personalities".³⁶

Sohan Singh Bhakna, of course, had made up his mind to distance himself from his friends, but it was not an easy task to break in one stroke his long association of ten years with them. When Bhakna started avoiding his friends for some days, they came to his home on the excuse of asking about his well-being. He saw them and without uttering a single word went inside his room and came out with a bottle of wine which had been left unfinished on some earlier occasion. In a rude, angry and determined action, he broke the bottle by dashing it against the ground and curtly declared 'no' to their barren friendship.³⁷ This behaviour of Bhakna shocked his friends who asked him to have second thoughts about his decision. The cronies worked to ensure that they did not lose the company of Bhakna, but they failed to get him back into their fold. Thus, the company of selfish and unworthy friends was forsaken forever. Bhakna was no longer the same person who had the liking for hunting, drinking, watching dancing in the brothels and mortgaging his land for personal luxurious pursuits.

Sohan Singh Bhakna began to visit Baba Kesar's *dera* frequently. Baba's association thoroughly transformed his personality. He began to feel a deep disquiet for material things of life and was soon absorbed in the quest of God. He wanted to meet Baba Kesar again and again in a hope that he would guide him towards spiritualism. Soon, Bhakna developed an intense emotional

attachment with Baba Kesar. He had many conversations with Baba on different perspectives of life, its agonies, the nature of man and his attitude. Seeds of self-denial, self-inquiry and service to humanity were sown deep into his heart. Continuous interaction with Baba Kesar developed moral and religious instincts in his personality, and this remained a part of his nature till his death. It was nothing short of a revolutionary step for a man who was earlier living a wanton life. However, it was not a sudden and wrenching shift for Bhakna. Baba Kesar understood Bhakna's nature and thereby, his impelling personality took cognisance of the prevailing state of his mind. He provoked him to nourish good values of life.

Sohan Singh Bhakna's understanding of different perspectives of religion completely changed his outlook. His long association with the Namdhari sect made him realise that there did not exist any fundamental contradiction between the basic principles of Sikhism and the Namdhari Movement of Baba Ram Singh. Namdharis - like other Sikhs regarded the Guru Granth Sahib as their Guru and followed the tenets set by Guru Gobind Singh.³⁸ Sikh philosophy was the core of Namdhari teachings. With the passage of time, his instincts became refined and he moved towards the path of spiritualism. Indeed, it was an 'another intoxication'.³⁹ There began a growing tendency in his mind to uphold righteousness in life. He had developed unflinching faith in the ideology of the Namdhari sect. This change was accompanied by appeals to the sentiments and proposals of punitive action for his distraught lifestyle. With each passing day, his belief in religious idealism went deeper. Also, Bhakna started taking interest in political and social issues of the nation. A positive fact of this change was that he started taking a keener and a more serious interest in household affairs. Influenced by the sagacity of Baba Kesar, Bhakna preferred to resort to a simple lifestyle. He developed revulsion for the materialistic concerns of life. The pride of the caste hierarchy, considered as a status symbol and privileged feudalistic image were left by him. Like his father, he adopted a modest way of living and involved himself in social issues. His views got baptised in liberal and unorthodox faith. He started practicing and preaching the ideology that it was the foremost duty of a Sikh to come to the aid of the weak and the poor. This change was a "folk transfiguration",⁴⁰ in his life because he emerged from his social miasma by not choosing the path of formal education, but of ecclesiastical experience. Moreover, Sohan Singh Bhakna tried to imbibe in himself the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, contained in *shabads* of the Guru Granth Sahib. He read the Sikh scriptures and tried to absorb their essence in his life. His outlook became liberal in matters of religion and without any inhibition, he regarded all faiths as true and worthy to follow. In the company of Baba Kesar, Bhakna came to know about the heroic struggle of the Namdharis' against British rule. Though the British succeeded in suppressing the movement, the Namdharis refused to recognise British authority ever in their life.⁴¹ The patriotism and blood soaking sacrifices of Baba Ram Singh and his followers cast a deep influence on Bhakna's mind. In his own words, "The heroic deeds and true devotion of the Namdharis to their faith deeply touched me".⁴²

Bhakna developed a long lasting family relationship with Baba Kesar. In the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century, the Punjab continuously reeled under epidemic of plague in short stretches lasting three-four years. Many people died and several children became orphans. Baba Kesar's family suffered a lot. All women members except a little girl of his family succumbed to the disease. There was no one to take care of her. Bhakna's wife carried the child to her home and brought her up like her daughter. At this hour of tragedy, Bhakna received moral strength from Baba Kesar's calmness. He remarks, "At the time when calamity fell at Baba Kesar's home claiming several lives, he did not lose his composure and remained as calm as before".⁴³ He repeatedly pays his tribute to Baba Kesar stating that the life being lived by him was a legacy of Baba's blessings. Baba not only changed the worldly course of Bhakna's life but also altered his eating habits. Bhakna left the use of salt in his diet. He held this view on the logic learnt from Baba Kesar that human body gains the required salt innate in the vegetables while eating an addition would lead to physiological and metabolic problems of the stomach.

Sohan Singh Bhakna, a person who was earlier despised by villagers, now came to be highly respected by them. He spent a lot of money on congregations held in his village and liberally donated for the welfare of the people, even by mortgaging his land. In a new form of social life, "Sohan Singh Bhakna in next ten years devoted himself to a kind of grassroots social reformism that featured the hosting of sojourners and pilgrims passing through his village during religious festivals".⁴⁴ It is important to note here that Bhakna could not rectify all his earlier misdeeds within a short span of time and could not lead a life having no financial constraints. Earlier, he had mortgaged the land carelessly and spent enormously to keep up his lavish lifestyle. He owed a huge amount of debt to be paid off. Later, in the company of Baba Kesar, he generously donated money for the socio-religious cause. He initiated *Hola Mohalla* celebrations in his village, which was popularly called *Bhakna Hola*. He bore all expenses for organising this festival. In fact, thousands of rupees were spent annually on these activities by him until he ran out of money. Much of his estate had already been mortgaged and there existed only a bleak possibility of taking it back given the unfavourable economic conditions existing in Punjab at that time. Bhakna found himself absolutely helpless in taking care of household expenditure. This led to his decision to decide to migrate to America for work and before leaving he went to Baba Kesar to seek his permission:

I went to meet Baba Kesar to seek his permission to go to America. I told him that I incurred a debt of Rs.3000 over my head. The estate had already been mortgaged and it was quite difficult for me to bear the household expenditure as well as arrange money for the cause of devotees too. At this, he smiled and addressed to a devotee sitting by his side saying that although Sohan Singh had decided to tread the path of righteousness but the materialistic concerns started overpowering him. The devotee immediately was prompted

to reply to Baba that if Sohan Singh was ready to abjure his entire services and noble work to his credit, he would pay the amount of debt that he had incurred and he would then be a free man. Baba Kesar asked me to bargain and added that there was no need to go to America. Declining the offer, I replied that I did not want to sell my *Dharma* (service) for few coins. Baba Kesar apprised me of the fact that my pathetic condition was the result of my own misdeeds. I was, therefore, advised to do the work on field, earn honest labour and live a life of dignity.⁴⁵

Thus, Baba Kesar advised Bhakna to marshall his resources for sustaining his livelihood. But it could be assumed that it was hard for a person to carry out agricultural activities when he had not been engaged in farming till then and wasting his entire youth by leading an idle life. On the advice of Baba Kesar, however, Bhakna collected his agricultural implements and began to work in the field. Soon he realised the true state of financial condition and the toil of peasants and tenants working in the fields. Convinced by the fact that there was little scope to earn sufficient money out of agriculture in order to repay his debt, he finally made up his mind to go to America and try his luck there. For him, migration seemed a lucrative option to overcome self-created financial problems and he was determined to give a fair trial to this option. Moreover, a sense of adventure was behind his decision to leave for America.

Notes

- ¹ H. A. Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students and Spies: The Indian Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 176.
- ² S. S. Bhakna (n.d.). Manuscripts, Accession No.11152, DSCN 5813 (in Punjabi). Bhai Santokh Singh Kirti Library, Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall, Jalandhar.
- ³ Jeewan Singh, at present is the surviving heir from his maternal family. He is a religious preacher in the village *gurdwara*.
- ⁴ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 25 February 1930, p. 10.
- ⁵ Prem Singh Bajaj is a renowned Punjabi scholar. He is currently working as Director of the Punjabi Bhawan, Ludhiana.

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- ⁶ P. S. Bajaj, "Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna": *Alochna (Punjabi Magazine)*, April-May-June, 1967, p. 10.
 - ⁷ M. S. Waraich, (Ed.) *Jeewan Sangram: Atamkatha (in Punjabi)* (Barnala: Tarak Bharti Parkashan, 1967), p. 14.
 - ⁸ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 25 February 1930, p. 10.
 - ⁹ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 25 February 1930, p. 10.
 - ¹⁰ M. S. Waraich, (Ed.) *Jeewan Sangram: Atamkatha (in Punjabi)*, p. 14.
 - ¹¹ P. S. Bajaj, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: *Alochna (Punjabi Magazine)*, April-May-June, 1967, pp. 11-12.
 - ¹² S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 25 February 1930, p. 10.
 - ¹³ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970), p. 2.
 - ¹⁴ <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/biographies/sikh-political-figures/sohan-singh-bhakna-baba>, (2011, July 18).
 - ¹⁵ M. S. Waraich, (Ed.) *Jeewan Sangram: Atamkatha (in Punjabi)*, p. 15.
 - ¹⁶ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, p. 3.
 - ¹⁷ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, p. 3.
 - ¹⁸ Fauja Singh, *Eminent Freedom Fighters of Punjab*, (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1972), p. 218.
 - ¹⁹ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 25 February 1930, p. 10.
 - ²⁰ S. K. Gupta, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Jeewan te Vichardhara (in Punjabi)*, (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2007), p. 16.

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- ²¹ P. S. Bajaj, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: *Alochna (Punjabi Magazine)*, April-May-June, 1967, p. 12.
- ²² S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 6 March 1930, p. 4.
- ²³ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani. *Akali te Pardesi*, (Newspaper), 9 March 1930 p. 4.
- ²⁴ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani. *Akali te Pardesi*, (Newspaper), 9 March 1930 p. 4.
- ²⁵ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, p. 4.
- ²⁶ S. S. Bhakna, Manuscripts (in Punjabi), Accession No. 11152, DSCN 5814: Bhai Santokh Singh Kirti Library, Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall, Jalandhar, n.d.
- ²⁷ Baba Kesar was born in village Muhawa in 1829. He met Baba Ram Singh in 1845 and became his ardent follower. At present, *Dera Baba Thakur*, a place of worship at Muhawa, commemorates him.
- ²⁸ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, p. 3.
- ²⁹ F. S. Bajwa, *Kuka Movement: An Important Phase in Punjab's Role in India's Struggle for Freedom*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1965), pp. 193-94.
- ³⁰ P. S. Bajaj, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: *Alochna (Punjabi Magazine)*, April-May-June, 1967, p. 17.
- ³¹ *Akali te Pardesi* mentions the year 1900 A.D. (*Vikrami Samvat 1956*), but his own handwritten account refers to year 1897 (*Vikrami Samvat 1953*) which has been accepted here.
- ³² S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 11 March 1930, p. 9.
- ³³ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, pp. 5-6.
- ³⁴ P. S. Bajaj, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: *Alochna (Punjabi Magazine)*, April-May-June, 1967, p. 12.

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- ³⁵ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, p. 6.
- ³⁶ P. S. Bajaj, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Alochna (Punjabi Magazine)*, April-May-June, 1967, p. 13.
- ³⁷ M. S. Waraich, (Ed.) *Jeewan Sangram: Atamkatha (in Punjabi)*, p. 18.
- ³⁸ S. S. Bhakna, Meri Ram Kahani: *Akali te Pardesi (Newspaper)*, 11 March 1930, p. 9.
- ³⁹ S. S. Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, p. 7.
- ⁴⁰ H. A. Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students and Spies: The Indian Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946*, p. 177.
- ⁴¹ When Sohan Singh Bhakna was sentenced in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case, Baba Kesar visited him in the jail. Here, he was asked to write an application to the jailor to seek an interview with Bhakna. Baba Kesar refused to plead before authorities and returned without meeting him. Bhakna writes in his autobiography that he had an emotional attachment with him, but still he could not deviate from his principles.
- ⁴² S. S. Bhakna, Ghadar Party Lehar: *Wariyam, (Punjabi Magazine)*, August-September 1995.
- ⁴³ M. S. Waraich, (ed.) *Jeewan Sangram: Atamkatha (in Punjabi)*, p. 19.
- ⁴⁴ H. A. Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students and Spies: The Indian Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946*, p. 177.
- ⁴⁵ J. S. Jas, *Ghadri Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna (in Punjabi)*, (Amritsar: Jasjit Sahit Parkashan, 1991), p. 15.