

ABDICATION OF MAHARAJA RIPUDAMAN SINGH

*Jony Garg **Dr. Varinder Singh

*Research Scholar, Desh Bhagat University

**Professor, Desh Bhagat University

Abstract

Ripudaman Singh was an educated young Prince. He was nominated as a member of the Imperial Legislative Council by the British. This was the policy of Britain Government to appoint loyal Native Chiefs or their sons as members of Legislative Council. Due to this policy Ripudaman Singh was nominated, as he was the son of one of the eminent and most trusted Chiefs of the Punjab. It was expected that he would support the policies and measures of the British in the Council. But Ripudaman Singh came into confrontation with the British from the time of his succession after the death of Raja Hira Singh. Maharaja Ripudaman Singh contended that his succession was a matter of right and there should be no question of British sanction. Moreover, he wanted that the installation ceremony should be on traditional lines and should not differ from that performed at the time of his father's investiture. He was exiled for opposing the British.

Key Words: Abdication, British, Maharaja

The deposition of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh in 1923 in the form of forced abdication¹ was the most noteworthy event in the history of the Nabha State, especially in that of its relations with the British. It may be said to have marked the culmination of the process of British Paramountcy in operation in this State of the Punjab region. The so-called abdication of the Maharaja was not a sudden development. Rather it was the outcome of a long process, and its genesis may be found in the ever-increasing intervention of the British authorities in the affairs of the Nabha State, which was not liked by the Maharaja of independent outlook.

Before the accession of Ripudaman Singh the British authorities had been interfering with the internal affairs of the State. But the previous Chiefs of Nabha State had been submitting passively to all these encroachments on their sovereign rights by the Paramount Power, and as such the relation of British Government and Nabha State were generally cordial. During the period of Raja Hira Singh (1871-1911) also the State's relations with the British were quite friendly. The British were generally appreciative of the loyal conduct of the Nabha Chief and had conferred upon him many titles and honours. But Ripudaman Singh was made of a different stuff from that of the previous Chiefs. Ripudaman Singh was born on March, 4, 1883 and was brought up on traditional lines. From the very beginning he was spared to be under British environment. He started his education in Gurmukhi under the charge of Bhai Kahn Singh.

Bishan Singh was engaged to teach him English. Thus under the influence of Indian teachers he developed independent and nationalistic outlook². In those days it was the practice that the Princes and Chiefs of the Punjab region used to join Chief's College at Lahore and there they used to learn British ways, habits, manners and traditions and were generally kept in dark about the traditions of their own country. Ripudaman Singh's father was advised many a time to depute him to Chief's College, but he was of the view that the proper place for a Prince's education was his home³.

As Ripudaman Singh grew into an educated young Prince, he was nominated by the British in December 1906 as a member of the Imperial Legislative Council⁴. It was the policy of the Britain to appoint loyal Native Chiefs or their sons as members of Legislative Council. In pursuance of this policy Ripudaman Singh was nominated, as he was the son of one of the eminent and most trusted Chiefs of the Punjab. It was expected that he would support the policies and measures of the British in the Council.

But during this period of two years of Ripudaman Singh's membership in the Council, the expectations of the British were belied. For Ripudaman Singh deliberately and determinedly began to oppose the British, and side with the nationalists on important issues. For instance, he joined the nationalists like Gokhale and Rash Behari Ghose in strongly opposing Prevention of Seditious Meetings Bill when it was placed before the Council in November, 1907.

Earlier, like a truly patriotic Prince, he delivered an eloquent speech in the Council hall on 27 March 1907 in which he touched upon important issues such as the insulting behaviour of the British officers towards Indians, backwardness of the people, the introduction of Legislative Council in Punjab and Indianization of the services etc. In order to give legal sanction to a marriage ceremony common among the Sikhs called 'Anand', he introduced the Anand Marriage Bill in the Council⁷. But the Bill could not be passed into law during his term of office. As a matter of fact, the British were thinking that the Maharaja would gain political influence among the Sikhs if the Bill initiated by him was passed. Ripudaman Singh, however, continued his efforts in league with Sunder Singh Majithia. The Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab reported that since the Maharaja was supported by a great body of Sikh community, it would probably cause serious popular discontent if no action was taken in this matter. So on his recommendation, the Supreme Government took up the matter and got the Bill passed into law in October 1908.

By this time Ripudaman Singh had become so prominent a figure that he was elected as the President of the All India Social Conference held at Lahore on 31 December, 1909. In his Presidential address, he dilated upon the social evils prevailing in the Indian society⁹ and also spoke eloquently on the pitiable condition of Indians in foreign countries. The frankness with which he spoke earned the displeasure of the British officers.

After the expiry of his term as a member in the Council, the British authorities decided to send him to England in 1909, for it was thought that a visit to England would broaden his outlook and make him favourable towards the British. In England he attended several meetings of the House of Commons and gained good knowledge of the working of parliamentary system. On his return, he tried to follow that pattern of Government in his own State. There is no doubt that he gained a great knowledge and developed liberal outlook in the course of his stay in England. But he did not change his attitude towards the British authorities and continued to have patriotic leanings.

Ripudaman Singh came into confrontation with the British from the time of his succession after

the death of Raja Hira Singh on 25 December 1911. Maharaja Ripudaman Singh contended that his succession was a matter of right and there should be no question of British sanction. Moreover, he wanted that the installation ceremony should be on traditional lines and should not differ from that performed at the time of his father's investiture¹⁰. He delivered an eloquent speech at his installation, which was strongly objected by the British Government. The British authorities probably never forgave him for this show of independence. Thus from the time of his very succession the British authorities were unhappy with the conduct of Ripudaman Singh.

The Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Louis Dane, before retiring wanted to visit the Nabha State. The Maharaja declined to receive a visit from His Honour, as the proposed date came in conflict with the dates of his own tour in the State which he did not want to cancel. The conduct of the Maharaja was characterised by the Government of India as "without excuse and calling for severe reproof."¹¹

On the arrival of the new Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Michael O' Dwyer, in May 1913, Maharaja Ripudaman Singh was invited by him through the State Motamid to a friendly meeting at Simla. But the Maharaja gave no reply. At last on the invitation of the Government of India, the Maharaja reached Simla on 13 October, 1913 and made promise to higher authorities to remove some of the difficulties in the way of co-operation, but practically little was done towards the fulfillment of the Maharaja's promises. Again on April 28, 1914 the Lieutenant-Governor warned the Maharaja to correct his behaviour of unfriendliness¹².

On the outbreak of the European war in 1914, the Maharaja made his offer of Imperial Service Infantry direct to the Viceroy¹³. During the war the Government used harsh measures for recruiting the people of the States¹⁴. But Ripudaman Singh gave freedom to his subjects and announced that every person would be recruited by his own will and no one would be forced for this. Such an attitude of the Maharaja also incurred the wrath of the British authorities.

Maharaja Ripudaman Singh vigorously supported the reform movements in the country. When Nankana Tragedy¹⁵ took place

on 21 February 1921 and the Akalis gave a call for observing 5 April 1921 as 'Nankana Sahib Day', he showed full sympathy for them. As a mark of respect for the martyrs he did not take food for the day, wore a black turban and slept on the ground¹⁶. In March-April 1922 when Akali workers were arrested all over the Punjab and the other Sikh Chiefs of this region supported the British authorities, Ripudama Singh was the only notable Chief who did not help the British Government in suppressing the Akalis¹⁷. All these facts show that he was of independent outlook who was not willing to act as a sychophant of the British Government.

The association of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh with nationalist and anti-Government movements was not liked by the British authorities who apprehended that he might assume the role of a nationalist leader of the Sikhs. It was observed by the Government authorities that the Maharaja had been trying since long to win for himself the position of the leader and acknowledged head of the Sikhs¹⁸.

Apart from all this, Maharaja Ripudaman Singh was opposed to undue intervention of the British authorities in the affairs of the State. A capable and enlightened ruler, he did not like to be dictated by the British Political Agent in the internal matters of the State. There had been complaints from some of the Indian ruling Princes that rights secured to them by treaties, Sanads and engagements had not been fully observed by the Government of India in practice. It was, therefore, suggested by the Viceroy that concrete instances of disregard of treaty rights needed to be brought to the notice of the Government before the next meeting. It was in response to this suggestion that Maharaja Ripudama Singh collected as many as twenty-one instances of violation of treaty-rights of Nabha¹⁹. Some of these instances pertained to undue interference in cases of certain individuals. Of the remaining, some notable instances complained of referred to interference in Imperial Service Troops, assumption of jurisdiction over railway lands and enforcement of Arms Act over these lands, statistics relating to the State, interference with excise administration, uncalled for recognition of succession by the Paramount Power, entertaining complaints from the subjects, muafidars etc. of the State, encouraging

deserters from the State, establishment of the office of Political Agent, unauthorised possession of State's lands by Canal Department of the British etc.

Another charge which is often levelled against the Maharaja to justify his deposition is that the administration of the State under him was far from satisfactory and that the State subjects suffered due to his mal-administration. But this charge was unfounded. Ripudaman Singh took keen interest in the administration of his State and his administration appears to have been better than that of many other Native States. Being an enlightened Chief, Ripudaman Singh was perhaps the first Chief in the region who introduced the Legislative Council in his State in 1918. Thus the personal qualities of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh as ruler and all available evidences contradict the charge of mal-administration of Nabha. Even if it be accepted for the sake of argument that there was bad administration in the State and the people were not happy, wherein lay the justification of deposing him on the basis of this charge? The subjects of Patiala State in the neighbourhood under Ripudaman Singh's contemporary Maharaja Bhupinder Singh were highly discontented with his misrule and had represented to the British authorities on this account²⁰, but no action was taken against that Chief.

According to the official version, the dispute between Maharaja of Nabha and the Maharaja of Patiala was the real cause leading to the abdication of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. The dispute pertained mainly to extradition and jurisdictional matters. The territories of the two States were not only contiguous but also literally dove-tailed into each other²¹ and often provided the cause of friction between the two. Moreover, Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala always sided with the British but this was against the patriotic spirit of the independent Ripudaman Singh²² which created serious differences between the two Chiefs. Another cause of dispute was that the Maharaja of Patiala complained about the irregular arrest, trial and conviction of Patiala police officers by the Nabha Courts and about the abduction of Patiala girls for the zenana or harem of the Maharaja of Nabha²³. But even the Patiala Maharaja cannot be spared from such accusations. According to

Jermani Das, it were the officials of Maharaja of Patiala who had first been guilty on account of abduction of Nabha girls which caused estrangement in their relations²⁴.

Efforts for reconciliation between the two chiefs were made time and again. In August 1917, with the efforts of Arjan Singh of Bagrian all the outstanding disputes and misunderstandings had been removed²⁵. Again in December 1921, Maharaja Ripudaman Singh having thought that he might not lose in his dual fight (one against the Political Department of the Government of India and other against the Patiala Darbar) sent a deputation to Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala asking for reconciliation²⁶. In reply the Maharaja of Patiala said that he was ready to resume his former friendship with Ripudaman Singh on some conditions which were however, unacceptable to Ripudaman Singh. So the Maharaja of Patiala proceeded to break all connections with Nabha.

In May 1922 the Government of India decided to appoint an English Officer, named Mr. Stuart, to enquire into the dispute between the Patiala and Nabha States. Maharaja Ripudaman Singh submitted that instead of a single judicial officer, a court of arbitration should be appointed but the Supreme Government declined to accept the request²⁷. The Stuart enquiry commenced from 3 January 1922 and continued till 3 May 1923 at Ambala²⁸. The Patiala Darbar was represented by Rai Bahadur S.M. Bapna, Additional Foreign Secretary and Member of the Council of Patiala and Mr. Niranjana Prasad, Legal Remembrancer, Patiala. The Nabha State was represented by Sardar Bahadur Bhagwan Singh, Ali Imam, Mr. Hasan Imam and Mr. Durga Prasad²⁹.

In the meanwhile an intrigue was hatched by Diwan Nar Singh Rao of Nabha in collaboration with Minchin, Agent to the Governor-General, to deprive Ripudaman Singh of the administrative powers, for the Diwan wanted to assume the administrative power in his own hands³⁰. But Ripudaman Singh became aware of the intrigue. According to official version Maharaja Ripudaman Singh became worried and went to Kasauli on 5 June to discuss with Minchin regarding settlement of his dispute³¹. Minchin argued that he should abdicate voluntarily which would avoid harsher treatment if he was found guilty after enquiry. But according to other version³², Minchin called the

Maharaja for an interview at Kasauli and gave a threatening discourse. Minchin with the help of Nar Singh Rao and Mr. Sen³³ forced the Maharaja tentatively to agree, and Ripudaman Singh gave in writing that he would abdicate on these conditions:³⁴

- Maharaja would retain his titles and hand over the administration of the State to Government of India.
- He would live outside his State and visit the State with Government's permission.
- He would abdicate in favour of his son when he came of age.
- The education of his son, Partap Singh, would be the entire responsibility of the Government.
- He would pay Rs.50 lakhs to Maharaja of Patiala as an indemnity.
- He would refrain from any kind of interference in the Patiala State.

Ripudaman Singh soon regretted his position before Teja Singh and Didar Singh³⁵, members of the Central Sikh League, telling them that owing to pressure put on him by Col. Minchin he had given in writing that he was prepared to abdicate as he was told that there would be a public trial if he did not agree. The two Sikhs promised their support to Ripudaman Singh in case he refused to abdicate³⁶.

Ripudaman Singh was kept under strict watch and his post was also censored³⁷. Some very high officials of the Nabha State were submitting secret reports to the British authorities³⁸ and they came to know that Ripudaman Singh had begun to remove everything of value to Dehradun³⁹. Minchin then found Ripudaman Singh in excitable and vacillating condition, and he reported to the higher authorities that if there was any delay in carrying out the orders of the Government of India, it might induce the Maharaja to resign from the position he had taken up. The British Government warned Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. Some of the innocent men of the Patiala officials had been convicted by the Nabha courts on evidence which was entirely inadequate and the officers of the Nabha judiciary were guilty of complicity in the matter. The Government of India came to the conclusion that the campaign was sustained with the general approval and connivance of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh⁴⁰. According to official version, measures which it would have

been the duty of the Government of India to take, were under their consideration when Maharaja Ripudaman Singh upon his own initiative visited the Agent to the Governor-General and voluntarily expressed his willingness to sever his connection with the administration of the State⁴¹.

To avoid the influence of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, Ripudaman Singh recommended the appointment of a British Officer to carry on the administration of the State in place of a Council of Regency⁴². Accepting his recommendations, the Supreme Government appointed Mr. Wilson Johnston, I.C.S. as Administrator of Nabha. As Johnston was on home-leave at that time, so C.M.G. Ogilvie, another I.C.S. was appointed to officiate as Administrator. Without apprising the Maharaja, Ogilvie accompanied by Minchin went to Nabha and entered the Hira Mahal at 5:30 A.M. on 9 July, 1929. With the help of a battalion of armed British Infantry and detachment of mounted bodyguards they took Ripudaman Singh to Dehradun.

The forced abdication of Ripudaman Singh was not justifiable on the part of the British Government as the Maharaja was neither tried nor deposed but was given the option of abdicating. If the Government thought the abdication was voluntary, then why did they not ask the Maharaja to voluntarily leave the State? The Government was accused by many contemporary Native Newspapers⁴³ of having taken advantage of the Nabha-Patiala dispute in order to wrest the administration of the State from Ripudaman Singh, instead of trying to bring about reconciliation between the two Chiefs.

A great majority of the Sikhs and Akalis believed that the severance of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh from the administration of the State was not voluntary but was brought about by intimidation and intrigue in order to deal a side blow to the Gurudwara Reform Movement. They made requests to Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee to struggle for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh⁴⁴. In sympathy with the Maharaja Ripudaman Singh for his restoration, July 29, 1923 was fixed as a day of prayer and pledge⁴⁵. On 2 August, 1923, the S.G.P.C. gave challenge to the Viceroy that the Government

should satisfy the Sikh community by appointing a Commission of enquiry to vindicate its position about the abdication of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha. But the Government gave no reply. Meanwhile, the deposed Maharaja of Nabha was threatened by the authorities as being responsible for the Sikh agitation and the Maharaja Ripudaman Singh had to dissociate himself from the Akalis⁴⁶.

The S.G.P.C. authorised the Executive Committee to take all the necessary steps by peaceful means for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, and said that it was up to the Government to convince the Sikh community that his severance was voluntary, or they must right the wrong done.

A Dewan of the Sikhs was held at Jaito, a village near Nabha on 25 August, 1923, for three days. On the third day the police intervened and made arrests. Due to this highhandedness of the British authorities the Dewan which was initially started for three days was declared to be for an indefinite period. It was decided that September 9 will be observed as a 'Nabha Day' when there would be barefoot protest marches throughout Punjab towns and cities. Eventually the Akalis discovered Jaito⁴⁷ as a convenient base for their operation against the State and it was given out that the incessant reading of the Granth Sahib called 'Akhand Path' had been interfered with⁴⁸. The British officials tried to explain that the reading was continued upto the finish.

The interruption in the 'Akhand Path' was a grave desecration according to Sikh religion and this led to the well-known Jaito Morcha⁴⁹. A ceaseless campaign of Akali bands was led for continuous reading of Holy Granth in Gangsar Gurudwara, Jaito. The Akali ferment was not confined to Jaito itself nor even to Nabha State, but like a wild fire it soon engulfed the neighbouring Sikh States of Patiala, Jind and Faridkot, and hundreds of Sikhs were arrested from these places⁵⁰. The prohibition against freely visiting the Gurudwara began to be enforced⁵¹ strictly by the Administrator of Nabha.

Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, Mr. A.T. Gidwani and K. Santanum, who went to Nabha to watch the situation, were arrested under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code⁵². Pt. Moti Lal, who went to Nabha to meet his son, was not allowed

to do so, as he wanted to meet him unconditionally⁵³. Thus by imprisoning Nehru the British did not allow the Congress to enter the arena of battle-field for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. Nehru and his associates had to leave Nabha without making any sort of contact with the Akalis.

Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai and Maulana Muhammad Ali arrived at the decision after holding a conference that they should act promptly, and appealed to the Akali leaders to stop sending more Jathas to Jaito⁵⁴. They suggested that the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee should make a declaration in clearest terms that the object of the Jatha was purely to assert the aforeside right (of performing 'Akhand Path' in place of the one which was interrupted) and that it had no desire to carry on under the cover of 'Akhand Path' ceremony any prohibited propaganda in the State of Nabha. The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee replied that its resolution to the effect that they would leave no stone unturned for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, stood in full force. They disregarded the advice and despatched several other Jathas to Jaito which were arrested but not fired upon⁵⁵. The British Government soon became tired of the activities of the Akalis and entered into negotiations for settlement with them through the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir William Birdwood⁵⁶.

But the negotiations failed as the Government was unwilling to make any confidential agreement. They also backed out of their promise to release all the prisoners and showed readiness to review the cases of only certain classes of prisoners. Moreover, the British authorities now wanted to abandon, and not merely suspend, all the Akali propaganda against the Government⁵⁷.

The question of Jaito struggle was settled when the Provincial Sikh Sudhar Committee performed the incessant reading of the scripture ('Akhand Path') 101 times on 6 August, 1925 without interfering in any way with the administration of the State⁵⁸. The main question of Nabha Maharaja's restoration was almost given up by the Akalis.

Maharaja Ripudaman Singh was not happy with the settlement. He accused the Akalis of having betrayed his cause. He said that it was under the

similar helplessness that he had signed the abdication letter under which the Akalis had given up his cause⁵⁹. He exhorted the Akali leadership not to give up the issue of his restoration.

The Maharaja was for once to prove partly right⁶⁰, for soon after the passage of the Gurudwara Act and the dropping of the Nabha question by the Akali leadership, he was suddenly removed from Dehradun to far off Kodaikanal in the South (under Regulation II of 1818) on the charges of his participation in meetings and demonstrations, his press campaign, his attempt to create difficulties in Nabha, his encouragement to Akali Movement and his constant attack on Government and Maharaja of Patiala⁶¹. He spent the remaining part of his life in virtual exile till his death on 14 December 1942.

Neither Ripudaman Singh's own representation to the Viceroy nor the Akali agitation could win back the throne for him; rather it worsened his position. Yet the Maharaja did not give up hope. Even from Kodaikanal the Maharaja kept the question of restoration alive and made several representations through the political leaders like Moti Lal Nehru and Ali Brothers to the Government of India⁶². The Akalis too did not altogether leave the question but adopted a lukewarm attitude neither to drop it nor to make it a life and death question.

Though the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee and Shiromani Akali Dal had forgotten the Nabha issue but the general public did not leave this issue from their minds⁶³. On 9 July, 1939 under the auspices of the Sikh Naujawan Sewak Society, 'Nabha Day' was again celebrated in 'Pari Mahal' Lahore⁶⁴. In 1940 the Sikhs in order to show their feelings, celebrated Nabha Day thrice.

Thus Maharaja Ripudaman Singh till his end tried his best to get back his lost throne but he remained unsuccessful. The British were prepared to give him back his State if he tendered an unqualified apology. But he did not do that⁶⁵.

Conclusion

The abdication of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh was not voluntary but was brought about by the mechanisation of British Government. The Maharaja was not willing at all to leave the

Gaddi of Nabha. He was hesitant, nay reluctant, to sign the letter of abdication. Corruption, conspiracy and intimidation of the Political Department were the cause of his misfortunes. If the Maharaja Ripudaman Singh had willingly left the throne, why were the leaders of different political parties bent upon making the Maharaja re-occupy the Gaddi? Maharaja Ripudaman Singh had been deserted and defied by his own officials. Asa Singh, A.D.C. of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, took away the confidential papers of the Maharaja and handed them over to the Maharaja of Patiala. After all the Maharaja had not raised a standard of revolt or committed any political sin, had not joined hands with any other power to draw arms against the British, then why was he dethroned? The reason was that he was a man of independent outlook who did not want to play a second fiddle to the British authorities. He was truly a 'Patriotic Prince' who was having some connection with Nationalist leaders of the Congress and Akali parties.

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45. Home-Political, File No.401, p.44, 1924.

46. S.G.P.C.'s Telegram to Viceroy, Amritsar 2 August, 1923, Ibid., p.111.

47. Ruchi Ram Sahni, op. cit., p.201.

48. The Tribune, September 19, 1923.

49. The Struggle for Reform of Religious Worship in Jaito, published by the S.G.P.C., p.2(Amritsar, 1924).

50. Zamindar, 16 September, 1923, Report on Native Newspapers, Punjab States, p.513, 1923.

51. Indian News Agency, Telegram No.26 (s) Simla, 15 September, 1923, Home-Political, File No.401, p.182, 1924.

52. The Tribune, 3 October, 1923; also Jawahar Lal Nehru, An Autobiography, pp.110-112(New Delhi, 1962).

53. Telegram from Pt. Moti Lal to Viceroy, 25 September, 1923, Home-Political, File No.401, p.200, 1924.

54. M.N. Mitra, op. cit., pp.112-112(a).

55. Ganda Singh, op. cit., p.51.

56. Crown Representative Record, Punjab States, Reel No.14; also see Ganda Singh op. cit., pp.74-92.

57. Ganda Singh, op. cit., pp.102-103.

58. G.R. Sethi, Sikh Struggle for Gurudwara Reform, p.13(London, 1927).

59. Ganda Singh, op. cit., pp.172-74.

60. Mohinder Singh, The Akali Movement, pp.80-82(New Delhi, 1978).

61. Crown Representative Record, Punjab States, Reel No.7.

62. Moti Lal Nehru to Viceroy Lord Lytton, 20 May, 1936; Maharaja to Lord Linlithgo, Crown Representative Record, Punjab States, Reel No.8.

63. Appeal of the Nabha State subjects to Viceroy, Nabha State Records, File No.10298 E (PSAP).

64. Gurmukh Singh 'Gurmukh', op. cit., p.68.

65. The Tribune, 18 January, 1976.