

# SANT SOHAN SINGH MALACCA

by  
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## An Institution

On Wednesday, 24th May 1972 at 1.30pm in the General Hospital of Ipoh, 130 miles North of Kuala Lumpur, passed away at the age of seventy Sant Sohan Singh Ji of Malacca, which lies 95 miles South of Kuala Lumpur.

Sant Sohan Singh was a common man like any other Sikh hailing from a remote village in the Punjab. Over the years he so developed himself spiritually and so endeared himself to the Sikhs in Malaya and Singapore, that he became an institution by himself. He was head and shoulders above the average Sikh not only in matters spiritual but also in physical stature. Yet he moved about among them unassumingly, claiming no better place than the commonest of them and using no high sounding language to impress them with the spiritual stature he had attained.

Sant Sohan Singh exercised influence in the religious and social activities of the Sikh community of these regions. He performed the naming ceremonies of numerous children born in Sikh homes. He blessed innumerable newly wedded Sikh couples. He performed the last rites of many Sikhs. He addressed unaccounted congregations in different towns on Sikh festivals or other occasions. He visited Sikhs settled in remote areas whenever and wherever he was requested to do so.

He maintained these visits right into the eve of his life, notwithstanding poor health and difficulty in walking. Perhaps he was doing his best to follow: "Every day and night that passes lessens your remaining hours; so fulfill your mission in accordance with the will of the Guru."

Sant Sohan Singh was on one such tour when he was taken seriously ill and was admitted to the Ipoh General Hospital. After a brief period he passed on to Sachkhand whither everyone must proceed.

In the eyes of the Sikhs of this region Sant Sohan Singh was no common man. The news of his death spread very fast and Sikhs came to Ipoh from distant towns as far north as Penang. Under normal circumstances his remains would have been cremated in Ipoh soon after he passed away. But the community decided that the cremation should take place in Malacca, which was more or less his headquarters for a period of 45 years.

The cortege started on the last journey of 255 miles to Malacca at 1.00 am on 25 May 1972. At every town on the way Sikhs of all ages and both sexes came out in large numbers to pay homage to the man who had been one with them, many of whom he knew by name. From every town cars joined the great procession, the likes of which has not been known to the Sikh community. The cortege reached Malacca at about midday. Meanwhile large numbers of Sikhs converged on to Malacca from all towns in the South including Singapore 150 miles away.

The cremation over, for the first time the Sikh community felt a sort of vacuum around them. Very soon they were convinced that no other person could fill that vacuum. They stopped looking for a man to take the place of Sant Sohan Singh.

Instead gradually they developed the attitude that they could show his living spirit in a practical manner. They appreciated that the body dies, not the soul. They started the Sant Sohan Singh Memorial Fund and registered one society in Malaya and another in Singapore.

At the rear of the Malacca Gurdwara, which he managed for 45 years, they erected a new building to house a religious school - Sant Sohan Singh Dharmak Vidyalia - for training young boys willing to adopt the religious path and work as granthis, parcharaks and ragis.

There is dire need for such an institution under the present circumstances. There are few properly trained granthis in this region. In the near future the community can look forward to granthis raised in the local environment able to appreciate the problems of the local people.

This is indeed a fitting tribute to Sant Sohan Singh's indefatigable services to the community.

## Sohan Singh

In 1902 in the village of Phool (Mehraj) in the former State of Patiala was born to an army hawaldar (subsequently retired as jemadar) Punjab Singh and his wife Prem Kaur, their fourth and youngest child. He was in due course named Ude Singh.

Being the youngest he became the pet of the family who lovingly called him "Sohna Kaka (Handsome Boy). This pet child had more freedom than the average Punjabi boy of those days, and grew up taller, stronger and more handsome than other boys of his age. As he grew up the name given to him was forgotten and based upon his pet name he came to be known as Sohan Singh.

As a pet child, he had also the opportunity for basic Punjabi education in the village dera, where he reached the stage of pathi. He attained proficiency in this under the guidance of Sant Hari Singh of Jeon Singh Walla.

During the great epidemic of influenza in 1918/19 the family migrated to the village of Chathewal, near Talwandi Sabo (Damdama Sahib). This move had great influence on the development of young Sohan Singh. Under the influence of Sant Hari Singh, he became an Akhand-pathi and acquired some knowledge of Gurbani.

However at the same time as a young Punjabi he had inclinations towards kawishari (traditional poetry). He wrote poetry for the purpose and joined groups to Singhs at weddings mingled with

some mischief. He also took part to his heart's content in folk songs (bolian) popular among Punjabi youths in the villages.

His master for kawishari was Mit Singh Kawishar of Maoran Walla. He organised a Kawishari Troupe with Ram Singh of Bandran Walla and performed at melas (fairs) at different places. Rivalry at these melas frequently lead to quarrels which sometimes developed into fights.

To meet the exigencies of such fights Sohan Singh learned gatka, the Punjabi sport of fencing from a soldier by the name of Puran Singh. But his real master in the sport was the expert Leekal Singh of Saba. Sohan Singh has a fair share of violent confrontations with rival troupes. Once he is said to have relieved the opposite gang of a camel and brought it home as a trophy. He was duly admonished by his father for his misdemeanor, and the camel was returned to its rightful owner.

During the Gurdwara Reform Movement Sohan Singh's Kawishari Troupe turned its attention to efforts in rousing the spirit of the people in favour of the reform. This Movement was at its height from 1921 to 1925, the Gurdwara Act being passed in the last mentioned year.

Many people involved in the Gurdwara Reform Movement suffered death, many more suffered physical injuries at the hands of the police force, and still many more were arrested. Sohan Singh's troupe was arrested under Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code at Ludhiana. His elder brother, Kharak Singh, had him released on placing a bond to remain of good behaviour.

Sohan Singh's family made plans to separate him from his group to keep him out of trouble. In 1926 the opportunity came their way. His elder sister's daughter was married to one Nanta Singh, a policeman from Malaya. When Nanta Singh returned to Malaya, Sohan Singh was dispatched with him.

Hence, for the first time Sohan Singh arrived in Seremban, where Nanta Singh was stationed, in September 1926. Newcomers in those days usually stayed in Gurdwaras; so did Sohan Singh. From time to time he rendered kawishari in different Gurdwaras. In those days kawishari was very popular and Sohan Singh was in great demand on festivals connected to Sikh history or other large gatherings.

A certain measure of jealousy was roused by the popularity of this brash young man. After some time the granthi at Seremban, Inder Singh of Bukanwalla, could not retain himself. To him Sohan Singh appeared as his rival, and on several occasions he threw over the wall the latter's personal effects. This might have roused the anger of the healthy twenty-four year old six-footer, trained in gattika. However the young man by now apparently had appreciated the need to keep the peace, the idea behind his being sent to Malaya. This was the first change in Sohan Singh's life. He adopted the principle: Possessing Power Exhibit it Not.

## Giani Sohan Singh

In the Sikh community generally, in Malaya and Singapore particularly, any person who is known to be proficient in Punjabi is sometimes called 'Giani'. All persons performing the duty of granthi in Gurdwaras are also referred to as Gianis. Few people know that 'Giani' is an academic qualification, equivalent to B.A. Honours, in the Punjabi Language offered by certain universities. 'Giani' is also an honorific degree conferred by certain religious institutions after attainment of a certain level in scriptural studies.

When Sohan Singh arrived in Malaya he was an able Akhand-path; he was able to write and recite popular Punjabi poetry. His presence at Sikh gatherings was especially cherished by people of his age and the elder generation of the twenties. But it is nor clear when people began to refer to him as Giani Sohan Singh.

It is also not clear on what specific date Sohan Singh was appointed granthi at the Malacca Gurdwara. However the main record of the Gurdwara shows Sohan Singh's own handwriting on 8th November 1927. Probably he took over the duties of granthi from one Fateh Singh at the commencement of November 1927.

From this time the word Giani came to be attached to his name, though people elder than him still referred to him as plain Sohan Singh. From this time began his association with granthi working in other towns of Malaya. Of specific importance was his association with Sant Gulab Singh at Taiping, Giani Gurbax Singh 'Pundit' at Tapah and Giani Chanan Singh Gurne at Bentong. All three of them were highly learned in Sikh scriptures and enjoyed high respect in the community. The last mentioned returned to Gurne and taught at Damdama Sahib in the mid-thirties and was subsequently conferred the title of 'Pundit'.

The association of these persons roused in Sohan Singh the realization that he lacked a great deal where knowledge of the scriptures were concerned. He felt that he did not reach a stage to deserve to be called a 'Giani'. He availed of all opportunities to be with them to learn as much as he could. This association developed in him the desire for a systematic scriptural education to make him worthy of being called 'Giani'.

Meanwhile, his family back at Chathewal, were happy that Sohan Singh has successfully settled down in a peaceful life as a granthi. In contrast with this his life in India has been full of turbulent activities, for which reason there was no proposal for marriage up to the eligible age of twenty four. In difference to the change in his life in Malaya, his elder brother Kharak Singh has arranged in 1930 with his parents-in-laws to give the hand of their youngest daughter to Sohan Singh. When Sohan Singh arrived at Chathewal in November 1932 the family desired to have the marriage performed.

Sohan Singh performed an Akhand Path under the supervision of his first master, Sant Hari Singh of Jeon Singh Walla. All relatives from far and near were invited for the festivities and there was a very large gathering.

His family considered this an opportune time to broach the subject. Sohan Singh rejected the proposal outright. If he had desired family life he would have settled down earlier. He wanted to be free from personal family responsibilities to carry on the mission of Guru Nanak in the wider family of the Khalsa. He resolutely resisted even the persuasions of his mentor, Sant Hari Singh.

This was the second major change in Sohan Singh's life. It was clear that he wanted to adopt the life of an ascetic. He wanted no family attachments, though he was by no means a recluse.

When Sohan Singh left for India on 29th October 1932 his mind was made up to join Gurmat College, Damdama Sahib (also known as Guru Ki Kashi) managed by Pandit Kartar Singh of Dhaka, a famous scholar of Sikh scriptures. Here he not only acquired the degree of 'Giani' but also was conferred the title of 'Kawi Kawya Mahan Giani'. With this he returned to Malacca on 10th June 1934. During his absence in India his Kawishari companion, Bhai Pal Singh of Daudhar acted for him as granthi in Malacca. On this day, for the first time, upon receiving charge of the Gurdwara from his companion, he wrote with his name the title he had earned - K.K.M.G.

Following his return from India in June 1934 he was recognised as 'Giani' throughout the length and breadth of Malaya and Singapore. Even people older than him began to call him Giani Sohan Singh. People began to look to him for guidance. The three senior persons whose guidance he had sought from 1927 to 1932 were no longer in Malaya. Indeed he had filled the vacancy left by them in the community in this region.

He devoted a great deal of time in 'jap and tap' to develop himself spiritually. He did not achieve this in the hermit's retreat or in intellectual insularity. He moved about freely among Sikh families as a true religious person as advocated by the Gurus. Giani Sohan Singh was in the true sense

physically distinctive, mentally alert and spiritually enlightened. As he progressed in this direction he gave up kawishari, except only where it was concerned with Sikh history and Sikhism.

He had complete control over the five human weaknesses - Lust, Anger, Greed, Pride and Passion. He had the contentment of mind without which no one can attain true tranquility. Within a few years he ceased to use the title of 'Mahan Giani' or even 'Giani', which he had earned through study. He adopted the principle: Possessing Honour Exhibit it Not.

## Sant Sohan Singh

In the Sikh community there is no institution awarding the title of 'Sant', which is equivalent of 'Saint'. There is no course of study to entitle anyone to use the word with his name. But in the Guru Granth Sahib a great deal is said about the 'Sant'.

Saint is he, by associating with whom one is saved. Thy saints are people who have overcome lust, anger and greed. To the saints nothing is sweet without Him, all other pleasures are insipid. Sweet is the company of God's saints. The company of God's saints is obtained by good fortune. By associating with the saints, lust, anger, greed, and passion will be washed away. The more intimate the association with the saints, more the love of God is attained. Men can obtain peace by association with the saints. By good fortune the company of saints is attained.

The above are all extracts from different verses in the Guru Granth Sahib. The Guru prays: "O merciful God, bestow upon me this favour, that my mind may become the dust of Thy Saints." The Guru exhorts: "Pray to the saints with your hands folded; for it is a great virtue; prostrate at their feet, for it is a good deed." The company of saints is heaven. To extol the glory of saints is difficult; it is beyond one's effort.

So the title of 'Saint' is given by the community with no particular ceremony. It is a recognition by the community in a person of the traits expected of a saint. This generally happens spontaneously at first usually by an individual and gradually it spreads to the whole community.

It is seen that Sohan Singh associated himself with various learned persons some of whom were accepted as saints by the community. Hence by a course of events he was following the path laid down by the Gurus.

Gradually by stages Giani Sohan Singh was moving on to the path which had been traversed by few people before him. Many persons began to visit him as they would a saint; they made clean breast of their problems. He succeeded in helping some alcoholics to break their habit. He helped to settle many family quarrels. The Guru's word goes thus: "One who has conquered the mind, has conquered the whole world." Giani Sohan Singh had controlled his own mind and hence he was able to control other people's mind.

Other religions have adopted certain types of robes, certain colours of robes, to signify different stages in the process of raising a person from the common level to the saintly level. In Sikhism shape, size or colour of robes has no significance. Indeed there is criticism which runs thus: "However saintly a garb a man may wear, he cannot conceal his inward impurity."

Giani Sohan Singh was known to wear only one distinctive type of dress from 1926 to 1942. His turban, long kurta (shirt) and trousers were always white. It is recalled with interest that his trousers were rather heavy shalwars like those worn by Pathans. This went well with his six foot stature. His gait too was distinctive like that of a pahalwan (wrestler). He also has a black scarf of about four feet wrapped around his neck. This was considered the identity of a granthi in those days.

Until the War broke out in the East, Sohan Singh continued to be called a 'Giani'. It is not clear when he was first referred to as 'Sant'. Very likely it happened some time during the war when the Japanese armed forces captured Malaya.

When the Japanese began to bomb Malayan towns many people evacuated to live in the countryside. Giani Sohan Singh did not leave the Gurdwara premises. He also refused to enter any air-raid shelter when raids occurred. He maintained his daily routine and kept himself busy with reading the Guru Granth Sahib daily abiding by the rule of 'black outs' at night. By God's grace no mishap took place in or around the Gurdwara.

When the Japanese occupied Malacca and as a matter of routine examined all buildings, it is said, Giani Sohan Singh was reading the Guru Granth Sahib. It is said he did not stop reading the when the Japanese party came at the main door of the Gurdwara. The Japanese did not disturb him and went off after doing obeisance.

During the Japanese occupation period from 1942 to 1945, Giani Sohan Singh faced no problem. The Guru's kitchen continued to function, though only porridge or even tapioca was served. Many widows and orphans were accommodated in the Gurdwara premises until the war ended in 1945. The Indian Independence League branch official in Malacca gave due respect to Sant Sohan Singh. They supplied him with food materials and clothing which were distributed to needy people of all races who came to the Gurdwara.

Some time in 1942 people began to address Sohan Singh as Santji. It appears that he gave up wearing the shalwar in November 1942 and in its place began to wrap himself in a plain white sheet of about nine feet. He also discarded the black scarf. However when he was in Malacca he always performed the duty of granthi including the distribution of parshad. When doing so he did not wear the white chadra -sheet. He only has the long kurta and the kachehra (under pants) which was larger than the average Sikh wears in this region.

Though people began to address him as Santji, Sohan Singh maintained his simplicity. He adopted the principle: "Always look up to the Highest, living among your kith and kin, like the lotus that has roots in the mud." He is not known to have taken any pride at any time being addressed as Santji. Many people touched his feet, even though he tried to dissuade them by moving backward. He found that he could not stop people behaving as they did, and towards the latter part of his life he gave up.

However it is interesting that many persons, usually senior to him in age continued to address him only as 'Gianiji'. Whenever any of these seniors came to Malaya or Singapore he made it a point to meet them, as also they did to meet him. There was a true bond between the Sikhs who had been in this region during the fourth and fifth decades.

## Foot Prints

People educated in the modern ways usually keep notes of the places they visit, interesting events in their lives, impressions made on their minds by various events, what difficulties they faced or what joys they derived, at different times. If they write poetry or songs they keep copies of them and collect them in time to publish as books, Even some people of no great significance derive much satisfaction out of publication of whatever they write.

People of religious trend of mind rarely consider of personal satisfaction from publication of whatever they write or sing. Common people think of the importance of collecting their works after they have passed away. They try to trace their foot prints on the sands of time in the hope of learning lessons.

The same is true of Sant Sohan Singh. He sought no publicity and preferred to remain away from limelight while he lived. After his passing away now efforts are being made to collect pieces of his poetry or kawishari with the idea of publication in book form. Some of the manuscripts are available, but when they will see light of print is not clear. Some tapes of his lectures are also being transcribed for publication. His expositions of Gurbani were in simple language for simple folks. He did not indulge in hair splitting explanations as is common with some high level scholars of today. That was the measure of the impact he produced on the Sikh community in South East Asia.

Nevertheless Sant Sohan Singh continued to meet and patronise the Sikh scholars who visited Singapore and Malaya. These include Sant Teja Singh, Double M.A., Dr Gopal Singh, M.A., Ph.D and Dr Ganda Singh, M.A., Ph.D. He took pleasure in helping in the conduct of lecture tours of the latter two modern scholars.

Out of this association developed the publication of the complete works of Bhai Nand Lal Goya, the eminent Persian poet of Guru Gobind Singh's time. The collection was edited by Dr Ganda Singh, first published in Urdu script in 1963 and then rendered into Punjabi in 1968. These books were published under the patronage of Sant Sohan Singh with the help of S. Joginder Singh, M.Sc(Ed.) of Sultan Idris Malay Teachers' Training College, Tanjong Malim. The entire funds for these publication were raised in Malaya under the patronage of Sant Sohan Singh. This has been duly acknowledged in the preface to both the volumes.

Sant Sohan Singh was the patron of several non-sectional Sikh institutions including Malayan Granthi-Parcharak Sabha, Guru Nanak Guru Gobind Centenary Society, Malayan Sikh Naujawan Sabha and Singapore Khalsa Association. The last mentioned association has started a library dedicated as a memorial to Sant Sohan Singh. (\* Note - The library now functions from the Central Sikh Temple Annex Building). In several Malayan towns also similar memorials are being set up.

In common with all Sikhs of his generation the Punjab was very dear to the heart of Sant Sohan Singh. He patronised funds raising campaigns whenever the land of his birth and youth was devastated by floods.

Sant Sohan Singh also took keen interest in the Punjabi Suba Movement in common with most Sikhs of this region. This he did for no political reasons, but only for the development of the Punjabi Language. In this connection he went to India in August 1964 and returned in September 1965. While there he met Sant Chanan Singh and Sant Fateh Singh, the Akali leaders who held the reign of the community.

Sant Fateh Singh paid a visit to Malaya and Singapore in August 1966. Sant Sohan Singh gave him full support. He exhorted people to collect funds which were presented to Sant Fateh Singh by way of a siropa- token of esteem.

Within Malacca Sant Sohan Singh exercised great influence in the Sikh community in settling family quarrels. He also successfully settled some business disputes of Sikhs. As far as possible no Sikh dispute went to Court. He also settled a few factional disputes of committee members of different Gurdwaras throughout Malaya and Singapore.

On a few occasions it was noted that Sant Sohan Singh did not wish to displease any person or faction in some of the community's feuds. To some extent he was able to gauge whether or not his intervention would succeed in settlement. He followed the principle: "Where speech does not succeed it is better to be silent." In such circumstances he tried to please both factions by giving equal patronage.

However this was perhaps appropriate to a sant as it is said: "Become the dust of everybody's feet, and behold everyone as your well-wisher." Hence in spite of feuds in the committees of Gurdwaras Sant Sohan Singh never objected to anyone inviting him to speak at any occasion at any place.

Indeed he laid the foundation stone or performed the opening of many Gurdwaras including those at Alor Star, Batu Gajah, Parit Buntar, Tanjung Rambutan, Green Town, Ipoh, Jalan Kampong Randan, K.L and Petaling Jaya.

In and around Malacca Sant Sohan Singh maintained close relations with leaders of other communities. He invited them on important Sikh occasions and was himself invited on non-Sikh festivals. He enjoyed respect among non-Sikhs as much as he had among Sikhs. He was a member of the Malaysian Inter-Religious Organisation.

There are no proper record of the number of persons who were saved from alcohol by Sant Sohan Singh. There are several prominent Sikhs throughout Malaya who rendered yeoman service to the community having obtained guidance from him. A few names may be mentioned - the late Bhai Piara Singh, the late Bhai Ghamdoor Singh, the late Master Gurbachan Singh, DSP Sudarshan Singh and Prof. Joginder Singh.

While Sant Sohan Singh wielded great influence with almost all Sikhs throughout this region including wealthy followers, there is no indication whatever over the period of 45 years of any attempt by him to gather wealth for his private purposes or for the purpose of his own relatives.

On the contrary there was an interesting incident in 1952. A Sikh singer, popular in Malaya, noting that Sant Sohan Singh traveled long distances by train, bus, taxi or on foot, suggested to him that he wished to present to the Sant a car which would be claimed to be donated by no one particular person. Sant Sohan Singh showed him his dusty shoes and said, "Even these are not cleaned. Hold not the dust in derision; none is like the dust; while living we keep it under our feet, but after death it covers the body."

"Once I accept a car now," he continued, "I will cease to be what I have been all these years. Now people refer to me as Sant. With a car I may be referred to as 'saan' (bull). The comparatively young singer had no further words.

So Sant Sohan Singh came from India with only his white clothes. He left for the True Abode with only the white chadra. In the true sense of the verse: "The pious man after a well-spent life proceeded to His presence. Arriving at the True Abode he occupied a favoured place."

May God give us the grace to find from among us some who could find the courage and fortitude to make an effort at least to walk in the foot steps of this simple man of God.

*The above biography of Sant Ji have been taken entirely from*

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## **PREFACE of Booklet**

This booklet is prepared specifically at the proposal of Sant Sohan Singh Memorial Society for the information of those people who may not be able to read Punjabi.

The Society commissioned Tara Singh Hitaishi to collect material for a biography of Sant Sohan Singh in the Punjabi Language. That manuscript is scheduled to be ready by end of December 1975, and may be published just before the next anniversary of Sant Ji's passing away in May 1976.

Following that may be published, also in Punjabi, a volume containing Sant Ji's lectures.

Whatever chronology and facts about Sant Sohan Singh's life were available from Tara Singh Hitaishi have been used in this booklet.

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