

## Previous “Panth Rattans”

The title Panth “Rattan” literally means “Jewel” of the Panth (*nation*) and is a title of honour and distinction for the excellent and meritorious service rendered by any individual to the Sikh panth.

Historically, Gurcharan Singh Tohra was the first Sikh who received this honour from the Akal Takath. Tohra’s Sahib’s contributions to the panth in his role as the President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee were immense.

Gurcharan Singh Tohra was born in 1924 in Patiala district. He was a man of modest learning. However he had a very good command of the Punjabi language and the Sikh scriptures. He made his debut in Sikh politics while he was in his mid-twenties.

Tohra Ji was elected member of the SGPC in 1960. In 1973 he was elected its president for the first time. And he was re-elected 26 times till the day he



died. Tohra was scrupulously honest in money matters. Also, unlike other politicians he was a puritan: he did not drink, did not stay in five-star hotels; did not own a car or a bungalow.

He remained head of SGPC for a record 27 years, and was one of the most influential and controversial Sikh leaders of the 20th century. He started off as SGPC chief way back in 1973 by initiating kar seva at the Golden Temple sarovar. That is how he closed his life 31 years later.

Mr Gurcharan Singh Tohra was the most celebrated leader of the Khalsa Panth for about four decades. Despite the fact that he was not well read, he had the superb knack to give a new slant, twist or turn to any political debate, controversy,

movement and agitation. In fact, he was the last Panthic leader of his genre.

To head the mini-parliament of the Sikh Panth for such a long period – with only small breaks in between – is a signal achievement in itself. He made it all the more glorious with several accomplishments like restoring the glory of Akal Takht. The length of his service as the SGPC head is matched by his longevity as a parliamentarian. Just before his death he was elected to the Rajya Sabha for a record sixth time. It is a pity that he had to go even before his term could begin.

Mr Tohra neither accumulated any wealth nor made any personal property. The ancestral house and land in Tohra village were all that he had to show for more than half a century in public life. The cash-rich SGPC could not have asked for a more upright custodian.

He had a heart attack after doing kar seva at Harminder

Sahib on March 25. This proved fatal and he died of a heart attack in New Delhi on 31 March 2004 at the age of 79.

### Master Tara Singh

Prior to Mr Tohra, Master Tara Singh was the only other Sikh who was known by the honopur of “Panth Rattan”. Master Tara Singh was born on 24 June 1885 at Rawalpindi, Punjab.

He was a prominent Sikh political and religious leader in the first half of the 20th century. He was instrumental in organizing the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee, in organizing Sikhs politically, and guided the Sikhs during the Partition of India, and later led their demand for a Sikh-majority state in Punjab, India.

In the case of Master Ji however, the honour and designation of “Panth Rattan” was not presented to him by the Akal Takht or any institution.

Master Tara Singh took over the reins of the SGPC from 1930 and with that, the importance of the Shiromani Akali Dal increased in Sikh affairs. His thought process, ideology and leadership style were shaped and conditioned by a strong desire to protect the distinct Sikh, socio-cultural identity and to promote Sikh interest and aspirations which were directly linked with the independence of the country. Under his leadership the primary political objective of Shiromani Akali Dal became the pursuit of greater political leverage for the Sikhs as a community.

**During his time, Master Tara Singh clearly emerged as the undisputed leader of the Sikhs.**

The success of Master Tara Singh in emerging as a powerful leader of the Sikh community could be made possible only by his unrelenting pursuit of Sikh interests. To safeguard Sikh interests he joined the struggle

against British imperialism. Strategy of combining the movement of Sikhs for the liberation of Gurdwaras and his goal of protecting interests of the Sikh community with the struggle against British imperialism.

He was also able to enlist the support of the Indian National Congress for the struggle of Sikhs.

**The greatest assets of Master Tara Singh, which ensured his leadership during this period was his continued ability to equate the Shiromani Akali Dal with the Khalsa Panth. His popularity as against the other leaders could also be attributed to the fact that although he combined the struggle of the Sikh community with the National Movement, yet, he always gave priority to the cause of the panth.**

He did not hesitate to reject the 'Nehru Report' as it did not comply with the Sikh interests. His ascendancy was also possible due to his control over

the SGPC and Shiromani Akali Dal, which provided him with organizational structure and patronage to consolidate his position. It also gave him the effective media for political communication.



As the SGPC had emerged as the religious parliament of the Sikhs, the dominance over it gave him the legislative authority to be the chief representative of the community. His dominant and charismatic personality also helped him to emerge supreme. By his gallant and fearless participation in 'Gurdwara Reform Movement'

as well as the movements started by the Indian National Congress for liberation of the country, he acquired the image of a hero.

He was able to project himself as a selfless, honest and an incorruptible leader who was not interested in power but was dedicated to the cause of his community. Thus after the 'Gurdwara Reform Movement' from the cluster of leaders it was Master Tara Singh who was able to emerge as a leader, to provide leadership to the community for the next turbulent years, which were once more to change the course of the Sikh community and the history of the country.

He passed away on 22 November 1967 at Chandigarh.