

Revisiting Saka Nankana (1921): Potential Factors and Probable Effects

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The Saka Nankana took place on February 20, 1921, when Udasi Mahant Narain Das and his mercenaries killed more than 200 Sikhs in a row over the custody of the Gurdwara Janam Asthan at Nankana Sahib. There is a general agreement among scholars that the Sikhs sacrificed their lives in trying to free the Gurdwara from the Udasi Mahant and his associates, who reportedly were alleged to have violated Janam Asthan's sanctity by drinking alcohol and being involved in other immoral activities in its vicinity, and misusing its funds. However, Noori Kamboka's thirty-six dholas add to this narrative and reveal that the killing of the Sikhs was also driven by economic factors (the Gurdwara land became valuable after canal irrigation), revenge (stemming from the Sheikhupura battle), and ego. A qualitative content analysis of the primary and secondary sources suggests that, along with religious issues, there were contributing economic and personal enmity factors that probably added significant severity to the massacre.

1. Introduction

The *Janam Asthan* Gurdwara, located in Nankana Sahib, holds significant importance in the Sikh faith as it is considered the birthplace of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith. The *Janam Asthan* is the largest of the seven Gurdwaras dedicated to Guru Nanak's legacy, all established by his devoted follower, Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1799-1839), who started ruling Punjab after almost two and a half centuries since Guru Nanak's passing (Ali et al., 2024; Government of Punjab, 2021; Rai, 2017).

Nevertheless, the *Janam Asthan* has its complexities. On February 20, 1921, a tragic confrontation occurred between mainstream Sikhs and heretic Udasis competing for control of the revered Gurdwara. The violent clash, remembered as the Saka Nankana or the Nankana Massacre, resulted in over 200 fatalities and numerous injuries (District Courts Nankana, 2021; Government of the United Kingdom, 1921). The incident is an important chapter of Sikh history: it follows closely after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919, and it serves as the foundation of the Gurdwara Reform Movement (GRM hereafter) initiated by Akali Sikhs in the early twentieth century (Rai, 2017; T. Singh, 1922).

Scholars and academicians generally agree on the analysis of the Saka Nankana within a broader religious context (Kapur, 1986; Mehmood, 1999; Myrvold, 2025; Sahni, 1969; Yong, 2005). They hold that Sikhs sought to reclaim the Gurdwara from Mahant Narain Das of the heretic Udasi sect, the incumbent Mahant (religious authority or head of a place of Hindu worship) and his followers, who were alleged to have compromised its sanctity by consuming alcohol and participating in activities considered inappropriate and immoral within the compound of the *Janam Asthan*. Additionally, Das had encountered criticism from Sikhs, particularly those advocating for the GRM, who asserted that his practices were more aligned with Hindu traditions than with Sikhism. Furthermore, allegations of fund misappropriation from the Gurdwara had emerged, with estimates indicating that more than half a million rupees were annually diverted for the personal benefit of the Mahant.

Noori Kamboka's thirty-six *dholas* (a genre of Punjabi poetry that recounts historical events, like the genre of War poetry in Punjabi literature) challenged this established narrative and offered an alternative perspective on the issue. He attributes the violent incident to a variety of factors, including economic interests tied to the fertile land of the Gurdwara following the introduction of the canal irrigation system, historical grievances stemming from the battle of Sheikhpura between Mahant Narain Das and the mainstream Sikhs, as well as personal rivalries (Hussain, 2015).

Noor Muhammad, also known as Noori Kaimboka, was born in 1870 in Chak No. 8, Mahariwala, located in the Sharqpur Sharif Tehsil of the Sheikhpura District. He was the son of Muhammad Murad and Mai Bhagan. As a poet, Noor Muhammad often used the pseudonym Noori, but he was also known by other names such as Noor Muhammada, Noori Mahia, or simply Kaimboka. Noori Kamboka was renowned for his *dholas*, which celebrated figures such as Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH), Hazrat Imam Hussain (A.S.), and various local heroes, including Cheeras of Pindi Cheere, Unne Wasir, Gurmukh Singh, and the Pathans of Jandiala Sher Khan. He also commemorated historical personalities like Ghazi Ilm Din, Fatima Pinahan, Rahab Brahmin, Ghazi Abdul Khan Pathan, Kharak Singh, Ahmad and Ahmadi Kharal, as well

as Samanda Bhatti and Jaspals of Dandran, among others. A closer look at his *dholas* reveals that themes of hero worship and the bravery of youth were central to his poetry. Specifically, his verses often hailed the courage of Narain Das, suggesting a particular admiration for him over his rival figures, especially the Sikhs.

In contrast to Noori's portrayal, "Struggle for Reforms in Sikh Shrines" of Ruchi Ram Sahni (1863-1948) presents a clear argument for the Sikh perspective, rather than that of their rival, Mahant Narain Das. This suggests that while Noori advocates for Narain Das, Sahni effectively represents the case of the Sikhs. Although Noori and Sahni were contemporaries of the Saka Nankana, their accounts were written down only after they had passed away.

In this context, the goal of this paper is to revisit the Saka Nankana, investigating the factors that may have contributed to this incident and analysing its repercussions on both the Sikh community and the wider region. The research involves examining relevant sources such as the *dholas* of Noori, gazetteers, and other official documents, including but not limited to the assembly debates of the British Parliament and the writings of Ruchi Ram Sahni, to address the key research questions.

The paper is structured into four sections, apart from the abstract and introduction: an overview of the Saka Nankana incident, an exploration of the factors behind it, an analysis of the effects that followed, and a concluding section.

2. A Thorough Overview of the Saka Nankana Incident

Guru Nanak was born in Nankana Sahib and spent much of his life in Kartarpur, which is now in Pakistan. He promoted the idea of the oneness of humanity and criticised asceticism, advocating that a person should fully engage in the challenges of life as a householder while remaining detached from vices. His eldest son, Sri Chand, born in 1494, chose a different spiritual path from his father's and became an ascetic. He established the Udasi sect of Sadhus, which exists on the outskirts of the Sikh faith. The Udasis rejected worldly involvement, diverging from Guru Nanak's teachings and resulting in their view as a fringe group akin to Ahmadiyas in Islam and Mormons in Christianity (Butalia & Khan, 2025).

Starting with the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Udasis gained control over several historical Sikh temples, known as Gurdwaras. Led by a Mahant, they introduced Hindu practices into Gurdwaras associated with the Sikh Gurus and started exploiting the Gurdwara holdings for personal benefit. This was evident in both the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar and the *Janam Asthan* Gurdwara in Nankana Sahib. This situation caused significant distress within the Sikh community, which sought to reclaim their historical places of worship from the Udasi Mahants throughout Punjab (Butalia & Khan, 2025).

The Saka Nankana or the Nankana Massacre took place in *Janam Asthan* at Nankana Sahib on February 20, 1921, when the Akali jatha tried to enter the Gurdwara to take control from the incumbent Udasi Mahant, Narain Das. Therefore, a row over the control of the Gurdwara between mainstream Sikhs and the heretic Udasis resulted in the casualties of over 200 Sikhs, while leaving several others injured (Government of the United Kingdom, 1921).

Ruchi Ram Sahni (1863-1948), a prominent British Indian scientist and educator, recounts the narrative in his book, "Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines" (Sahni, 1969), in the

following manner (Sahni, 1969): on February 20, 1921, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) convened Diwan (religious gathering) a few miles from Nankana Sahib. Bhai Lachhman Singh, the Diwan's Jathedar (appointed leader), departed Chuharkana (now Farooqabad) early that morning with his jatha (group of trained volunteers) to prepare for the larger Diwan, which would take place March 4-6. After knowing this, Udasi Mahant Narain Das became concerned that Bhai Lachhman Singh was leading a huge Sikh group to take over the *Janam Asthan* Gurdwara. He increased his preparations to face the group on 20th February. Since Nankana Sahib was on their way, Bhai Lachhman Singh advised that his colleagues visit the Gurdwara. Responding to this, his colleagues and other Sikhs warned him that the Mahant had gathered a large crowd to defend the complex. Therefore, he should pay tribute from a distance rather than visiting the Gurdwara. However, Bhai Lachhman Singh insisted on going to the Gurdwara with his companions to offer his homage at the birthplace of Guru Nanak. After arriving at Nankana Sahib, the jatha bathed in Gurdwara Bal Lila's Tank and paid homage. The Bal Lila Gurdwara's Udasi Mahant inquired if they wanted to take control; he would give them the Gurdwara. The jatha asserted that they were there to pay tribute, not to take over the Gurdwara.

Taking it further, Sahni claims that after leaving Bal Lila Gurdwara, Bhai Lachhman Singh's jatha arrived at *Janam Asthan*. They entered the Gurdwara among other pilgrims and paid their respects to the Guru Granth Sahib. The Mahant's *karinda* (associate) welcomed them warmly. The jatha was unaware of any mischief by Mahant or his associates. As is customary, *Asa di Var* was sung when the Gurdwara's main gate was closed. This door, reinforced with hefty tin plates and openings, was placed a few days prior. After hearing the boom, the Akalis noticed the other gate had also been closed. Many people hiding on the roof then opened fire on them. In response, the Akalis retired in small groups to adjacent Gurdwara rooms, locking the doors. But the vicious marksmen arrived armed with rifles and other weapons. They barricaded the Sikh refuge rooms from the outside and fired through the holes, which were designated for visitors, in the doors and walls. Sikhs were wounded and died in large numbers. The government authorities discovered 150 gunshot marks in Bhai Lachhman Singh's Granthi chamber and 44 on adjacent walls.

Sahni further adds that Sardar Dalip Singh, having a good socioeconomic position, was a Rais of Sargodha and the Secretary of the Sargodha Khalsa School. He was also known to Udasi Mahant Narain Das. As he was in Chuharkana, Jathedar Kartar Singh and other leaders tried to persuade Bhai Lachhman Singh not to visit Nankana Sahib Gurdwara because Udasi Mahant Narain Das was suspected of mischief. Bhai Lachhman Singh did not listen to him and proceeded with his plans to offer homage there. Then, Dalip Singh was advised to convince the Mahant that Bhai Lachhman Singh had come to the Gurdwara simply for offering homage and should not be mistreated. Upon arriving at *Janam Asthan*, Dalip Singh observed the Mahant engaged in his lethal undertaking. He shouted for him to halt, but was struck by a gunshot to the forehead and collapsed motionless. The Sikhs accompanying Dalip Singh remained at a Serai (rest house). The mercenaries contracted by the Mahant swiftly executed their task at the location.

Others claim that the critics of the Udasi Mahant, mainly those associated with the GRM, held public gatherings to express their discontent with the Mahant's behaviour and pushed for his removal from the Gurdwara, even threatening to oust him forcefully if he refused to step down. Despite the mounting pressure, the Mahant remained steadfast in his position, which only intensified the reformers' calls for action. This subsequently intensified demands for liberating action from the Akalis (Kapur, 1986; Kaur, 2021; T. Singh, 1922).

As public pressure failed to yield results, a confrontation between the Akali Sikh jathas and the Udasi Mahant of *Janam Asthan* Gurdwara seemed increasingly inevitable. On 27 November 1920, a group of Sikhs, armed with kirpans and axes, arrived at the complex, facing off against a large group of Udasi Sadhus, who were also armed, gathered to defend the Mahant. The police quickly intervened to disperse the gathering, preventing immediate conflict; however, threats against the Mahant persisted to hand over the birthplace of the first Sikh Guru back to the Sikh community (Rai, 2021).

Feeling unsafe, Narain Das urgently contacted the police for protection. However, the superintendent of police, adhering to strict guidelines for neutrality regarding Gurdwara affairs, dismissed his request as overly alarmist. Despite the efforts of Kartar Singh Bedi, a well-known Udasi leader among the Sikh landed gentry in western Punjab, to seek intervention from the commissioner of Lahore on behalf of the Udasi Mahant, the authorities refused to take any action. C. M. King, the Lahore commissioner, and D. Currie, the deputy commissioner of Sheikhpura district, reiterated that the government had no obligation to uphold the status quo of Sikh Gurdwaras and that police action would only be considered following a tangible act of violence against the Udasi Mahant (Sahni, 1969). The British authorities justified their decision claiming that

It appears that the Mahant of the shrine at Nankana, which is famous as the reputed birth-place of the Guru Nanak, and is very rich, was much alarmed at the success of the Akali Jathas in other places. On November 27 a band of reformers came to the temple armed with kirpans and axes, and a party of Sadhus, friends of the Mahants, prepared to oppose them, but violence was prevented by the tactful action of the police (Government of the United Kingdom, 1921).

Left without governmental protection, Udasi Mahant Narain Das felt compelled to reinforce his Gurdwara grounds, hiring armed mercenaries—largely Pathans—and amassing weapons and munitions. Tensions escalated until reaching a critical and deadly climax on 20 February 1921, when a Sikh jatha took matters into their own hands and attempted to seize control of the shrine. The Akali jatha arrived in Nankana on the night of February 19, 1921, and spent the night at the Chopra Cotton Rice Mill. They stormed the Gurdwara at dawn. Shortly after the procession reached the temple, they were shot at by mercenaries hiding on the rooftops of the temple structures. The Akalis who attempted to find sanctuary were pursued and dismembered. The deceased and the mortally wounded were subsequently gathered into piles and incinerated, seemingly to eradicate evidence of the slaughter (Abbas & Rai, 2021). It

is worth mentioning here that this timeline and series of events, along with their causes, differ from the account of Ruchi Ram Sahni.

Reports indicate that over 200 Sikhs were killed, with numerous others sustaining serious injuries during this violent confrontation. Conversely, some reports suggest that fatalities may be higher, although verification remains difficult. For instance, the debates of the British parliament conceive

It has been stated that between 200 and 300 lives were lost, but, as many bodies were burned immediately, the exact figures will probably never be obtained. At any rate, it seems clear that this sectional quarrel caused the loss of more than half the number of lives sacrificed in suppressing the most dangerous conspiracy since the Mutiny (Government of the United Kingdom, 1921).

Following the notification about the tragic incident, military personnel and law enforcement officials arrived at the designated location. Soldiers then secured the site, and the Udasi Mahant, accompanied by approximately twenty-six Pathan mercenaries, was taken into custody and transported to Lahore for further processing. As reports of the massacre circulated, it stirred much discontent among the Sikhs. A large gathering assembled in Nankana to honour the memory of the deceased while expressing their objections to the recent atrocity. Jathas, numbering between 500 and 1,000 participants, began arriving, armed with kirpans and axes, to establish a permanent presence near *Janam Asthan*. To address the concerns of the Sikh community and to prevent a potentially volatile situation, the Commissioner of Lahore and the Deputy Inspector General of Police engaged in discussions with the leaders of the jathas. They agreed to withdraw the troops from *Janam Asthan* Gurdwara and to transfer its control to a representative committee from the SGPC (Myrvold, 2025). The Commissioner later explained his decision

The jathas were apparently in a defiant mood, and angered by the hideous crime which had been committed against the Akalis; they were not in a mood to be stopped from entering the temple by the troops, and were apparently resolved to advance on the soldiers to be shot down, a catastrophe which, in the existing state of feeling, might have permanently alienated the community (Quoted in, Yong, 1995).

Notwithstanding, this sad occurrence exacerbated the divide between the government and the Sikhs, fostering an environment of suspicion and hostility. As rumours and suspicions concerning the government's role in the violence emerged, a significant wave of distrust developed, deepening a widespread sense of betrayal among the populace. The already tenuous relationship between the government and the Sikh community was irreparably damaged, leaving enduring scars (Rai, 2021).

Rumours persisted, suggesting that the severe actions taken against the Sikhs would not have happened without the involvement of government officials. Specifically, both the commissioner of Lahore and his deputy were accused of working in concert with the Udasi

Mahant to target Sikh reformers. Moreover, allegations emerged that the Punjab government had knowledge of Mahant's plans but failed to take any preventive action. The sentiments of the Sikh community in the wake of the massacre were powerfully expressed by an Akali newspaper, which captured the widespread anger and disillusionment with the government. The news reads as

The butcherly Narain Das maintained a regular workshop for the manufacture of chavis (billhooks) and other arms for use against the Sikhs. . . . four thousand chavis are reported to have been found in his possession, besides sixty rifles and a large quantity of ammunition. And as is well known that his preparations were not secret . . . but it is nothing short of a miracle, if not a mystery, that all this escaped the notice of the police, the magistrate of the station, and the deputy commissioner, and the commissioner . . . those who know . . . that the mahants and his proteges have very often been going to see the officials, cannot be led but to only one conclusion that all the preparations went on progressing under official connivance (Quoted in, Kapur, 1986).

3. An Exploration of the Potential Factors of the Saka Nankana

The incident has been examined from a religious standpoint by several scholars, including (Kapur, 1986; Mehmood, 1999; Myrvold, 2025; Sahni, 1969; T. Singh, 1922; Yong, 2005). They argue that the Sikhs sought to regain control of all Gurdwaras, especially the prominent Gurdwara *Janam Asthan*, which had fallen under the management of Udasi Mahant Narain Das, who faced backlash for failing to uphold the sanctity of the Gurdwara and for installing Hindu idols at a site of deep spiritual significance for the Sikh community.

In the early twentieth century, Gurdwara's management deteriorated under the Udasi Mahants, particularly due to the actions of individuals such as Sadhu Ram and Kishan Das. Reports suggest that these Mahants partook in activities deemed sacrilegious within the sacred space, such as drinking alcohol and hiring sex workers for dance performances. After the death of Kishan Das, Narain Das assumed the position of Mahant and asserted his intention to avoid the contentious practices of his predecessors, but he was reportedly observed to replicate their behaviour (Kaur, 2021).

Udasi Mahant Narain Das confronted significant accusations indicating a marked bias towards Hinduism, eclipsing the principles and practice of the Sikh faith and actively endorsing actions linked to the former, frequently to the detriment of the latter. This distressing revelation provoked indignation throughout the Sikh community, especially among adherents of the GRM, who perceived a threat to their faith. Second, compounding the situation, disturbing claims surfaced about Narain Das and his companions, who were allegedly observed consuming alcohol and seeking sex workers inside the revered Gurdwara. This conduct was regarded as a serious breach of sanctity expected in a place of worship. Third, financial misbehaviour introduced a concerning aspect, with estimates indicating that an alarming amount, exceeding half a million rupees, may have been plundered each year for personal benefit. This violation of trust not only compromised Gurdwara's integrity but also the

confidence of its supporters. Fourth, Narain Das sporadically participated in festivals by assisting pilgrims, although his presence markedly diminished on regular days, casting suspicion on his authentic dedication to the community he was intended to serve. Fifth, troubling allegations concerning the safety of young girls at the Gurdwara Sahib had surfaced, suggesting that employed personnel and maybe Udasi priests may be implicated in acts of sexual violence against vulnerable visitors. In 1918, the situation intensified as two distinct episodes of molestation involving female pilgrims emerged, exacerbating the Sikh community's anxieties and displeasure. Finally, serious reports emerged indicating that individuals linked to violent activities were being hired, prompting concerns regarding the acquisition of weapons and the stockpile of possibly hazardous items. Alterations to the Gurdwara's entryway, which had assumed a fortified look, elicited heightened apprehensions regarding the potential use of firearms. These activities were perceived as a blatant violation of the fundamental principles and tenets of the Sikh faith, underscoring the pressing necessity to preserve the purity of places of worship and shield the community from such dangers (Kaur, 2021; Sahni, 1969; T. Singh, 1922; Yong, 1995).

Noori Kamboka's thirty-six *dholas* present additional perspectives on the Saka Nankana (Hussain, 2015). Several contributing factors are highlighted, including economic interests associated with the fertile land of the Gurdwara after the introduction of the canal irrigation system, historical grievances arising from the battle of Sheikhpura between Narain Das and the Diwan Sikhs, and existing personal rivalries.

The Sheikhpura incident involved a contentious confrontation between the Sikhs and Udasi Mahant Narain Das (Though this incident cannot be denied, yet we could not verify it from other contemporary sources. Some evidence and a series of events suggest that this could have happened in reality). Noori remarks on this confrontation, emphasising the severity of the conflict that transpired

نارد پیا کابلا

لدھو چیل سدا نند دا آکھے باوا دل بڑا منکھیندا اے جیہڑا اوس دیہاڑے سکھاں ڈھاہ کے میرا چھڈیا مونہہ کالا

In this poignant *dhola*, Noori tries to record a conversation between Narain Das and his chela (servant) Ladhoo where the latter recollects sad memories referring to the tragic events of that day [the Sheikhpura battle]. On that day, the Sikhs demonstrated their strength by forcing him to the ground, marking his face with soot, which served as a clear symbol of his defeat. The significance of that moment is evident in his words, reflecting a deep sense of loss and heartbreak for the individual who courageously confronted formidable challenges. Adding to it further, Noori utters

ہن بدھا اے مڈھ بونی دا جس ایلے لہوروں نکل کے گیا اے شیخوپورے دے وڑ بازار نوں
لگا ہویا اے دیوان سکھاں دا پئی آوندی گھوک چکارے دی سکھ شروع آہے اپنی کار نوں
لدھو چیل تماشا ویکھن لگا اے جانڈیاں ڈھاہ کے بوتل اچ گھت کے بول پوایا نیں نالے کیتا مونہہ کالا گل گھت لتراں
دے بار نوں

جے کدیں احموں ماچھی نال نہ ہندا سکھاں باوے نوں شیخوپورے پک مار گھتتا آہا اوہ ناہے کرو کوئی پل ادھار
نووں

اوس ایلے لچھمن حجت نال بولیا اوس آکھیا اوئے ماما میں ترینی پھگن آلے دینہ سہرے بنہ کے ڈھک پونا ای
مری دیہندار ہیں قطبوں بوندی جنج تیار نوں

Noori reports that Narain Das suffered a significant defeat during the intense confrontation between him and the Sikhs in Sheikhpura. In the face of considerable challenges, he secured an unforeseen ally in his dedicated employee, Ahmoo Macchi, who skillfully facilitated their escape from the intensifying chaos. Simultaneously, the Sikhs issued a firm declaration, expressing their intention to return to Nankana on the third day of “Phaggan,” the twelfth and final month in both the Punjabi and Nanakshahi calendars. Their steadfast resolve to reclaim the sacred Gurdwara *Janam Asthan* instilled a sense of purpose, driving their preparations for the forthcoming confrontation.

Narain Das promptly contacted the police for assistance due to feeling threatened. The superintendent of police, maintaining a neutral position on Gurdwara matters, characterised his concerns as alarmist. Noori documents it as

باوا پلس دے ترلے پیا لیندا اے ہتھ بدھی کھلا اے علی محمد ٹھانے دار نوں
علی محمد میرا دربار کھس جاو اے، یاں تاں بن وسیلہ کوئی یاں چھٹی لے کے توں تاں جھنگ گھت آء گھر دھوار
نوں
اکبر خاں ٹھانے دار توں باوے سکھاں تے چپاتی دوئیں عرضیاں دوا چھٹیاں نیں، کیمبوکے آکھیا اے میں وی
دعائیں دیندا رہنا ٹھانے دارا بھئی شالا تیرے وی لگے رہن پھل پروار نوں
ننکانیوں کار تے چڑھیا اے تے ناتھے اپڑ گیا اے جاندیاں راولپنڈی دتی گیا اے تار نوں
شالا کوئی سکھی وسدے بندے نوں وخت نہ پے جاوے، پٹری نہر دی ملی آوندا اے کردا آوندا اے تیز کار نوں
لہور اپڑیا اے کنگ صاحب نول گلاں کیتیاں نیں جیہڑی ہوگئی تے ہونا ایں ایہہ سارے حال بیان چھٹیا لکھ سرکار
نوں

ضلع دے صاحب نوں وڈھی دتی اے گن گن کے اگے رکھ دتا اے پورے تریہہ ہزار نوں

Noori describes Narain Das's appeal to the station house officer (SHO), Ali Muhammad. He notifies Ali Muhammad of the potential loss of custody of the Gurdwara and advises him to either assist in maintaining his position or consider taking an extended leave to return to Jhang (his hometown). Noori Kamboka articulates the aspiration that the position of SHO and the accompanying respect will persist indefinitely. He subsequently details Narain Das's high-speed journey along the canal bank, moving from Nankana to Nathe and then to Lahore, where he communicated a message to Commissioner Lahore, King Sahib. He requested that the police and government guarantee his safety from a potential threat posed by the Sikhs. Upon receiving no favourable response, he resorts to offering a bribe of thirty thousand rupees to the district officer. Coupled with this, Kartar Singh Bedi's efforts in this matter also could not bear positive results (Myrvold, 2025).

Realising the gravity of the threat posed by the Sikhs, Naraian Das took immediate action. He enlisted 400 Pathans from Rawalpindi to ensure his safety and that of the Gurdwara. Additionally, he reached out to his allies around Nankana, including Bhatti, Kharal, Shah, Watto, and others, informing them about the conflict and the impending threat, and urged them to be prepared to lend their support (Rai, 2021). To support these developments, Noori recounts

دلے شاہ پیر نوں چاڑھیا سو راولپنڈی، پنجاب تے چالی پٹھان پستول لے کے لہہ بیٹھا اے، چل کھاں اوہناں پٹھانان
دا ظل وکھساہیں

احموں تے شاموں ماچھی انہاں نوں مہندیاں لاویناں تے گانے چل بنساہیں

پتر غلام دے تے دوہترے مگروں اوس نہالو ماچھی دے، جیہڑا اجوں ہن تائیں رہیا موہری بیگے کا، ایس جھگے
دی کوئی ہن نویں گل سنسایں

تریخ تریئی پھگن دی سائیں رجسٹر دے اتے لکھی بیٹھے نیں چل کھاں مڑ اسیں وی طامان اوتھے رج کھسایں

Her further adds

وٹو آہے جھڈو تے نال نوحیں کے، باوے سبھ بلا لئے وچ تھیہاں دے چھڈیا پھیر للکارا
بجانیوں ٹردے لچھمن نوں سابویاں جو گنیں نیں اوئے موری چڑھ کے سردار دی دتا کاگ بلارا

Despite making necessary preparations for a scheduled fight from both sides, the Sikhs did not appear on the scheduled date. During a trip to Lahore with his servant, Narain Das acquired tickets at Nankana Railway Station and awaited the train's arrival. As they prepared to board, a woman who had just disembarked from the train asked the servant, "What happened to your fight?" He stated, "The Sikhs have not yet arrived." The woman said, "They are gathering at the previous station." You need to make the necessary arrangements. The servant quickly communicated this information to Narain Das, who promptly returned his ticket and informed his friends and colleagues about the situation. This suggests that entrenched personal grievances, a desire for retribution, and heightened egos may have contributed to the conflict, ultimately leading to the tragic events of Saka Nankana in 1921. The intense emotions escalated tensions and converted a precarious situation into a catastrophic outbreak of violence.

Thus, it can be inferred that lingering tensions of their prior conflict, deep-seated personal animosities, and inflated egos that fueled the fire contributed to making a bad situation even worse

Coupled with this, as Noori emphasises, economic factors also may have influenced the conflict. The development of an advanced canal system led to significant wealth generation in the lands linked to the Gurdwara, transforming the area into a fertile expanse comparable to producing gold. The increasing prosperity seemed to have intensified existing rivalries and stimulated ambition and greed among Sikh community and Mahant of the Udasis. The tangible benefits of agricultural production may have served as a catalyst for conflict, inciting intense competition and strife among those seeking control and access to these valuable resources. For example, he states

پر ایہہ دین دا جھگڑا کوئی نہ سکھاں دا دل پئی موہندی ایس دربار ننکانے آئے دی کھٹی
اگلی واریں ڈھولے آہندیاں سکھاں میرے دھکے نال پونا این بکھی
اوئے نوری ماہیا توں کیویں کھتری نوں گاونا این، میں تے نگیں مار چھڈی وچ پنج دریاواں، ایڈی غرقی کسے راٹھ
نہ گھتی

Noori asserts that this conflict was not rooted in religion but was fundamentally an economic struggle, as the revenue generated from the fertile land of Gurdwara *Janm Asthan* was not benefiting the Sikhs but Udasi Mahant Narain Das. Noori seems to completely ignore the religious nature of the conflict, which puts his assertions into doubt. He states that in the future, the Sikhs will fight with me while singing songs. O Noori! How can you sing the songs of Khatri (how can you hail a Khatri—Hindu)? We have vanquished Nagin in five rivers. No prince would have committed such acts of cruelty. To support his viewpoint, Noori goes on to say

نارد اٹھیا لے توار نوں

کل آکھیا نارد جتنی آمدن ہن سکھاں نوں چوہڑکانے، ایس گل دے کرے کون شمار نوں

To back up his point of view, Noori continues by stating

آمدن ویکھ دربار دی سکھاں نیتاں نیں چا بھوائیاں
 کل آکھیا ناردا اللہ اگے دعائیں منگ کھاں شالا باویاں تے سکھاں دیاں نہ جاون بو رسائیاں
 نارد آکھیا مل توں نارائن داس نوں اوہنوں بھل بٹوں نہیں جانیاں جیہڑیاں گلاں توہیں سمجھائیاں
 ستے پئے باوے نوں کل مٹھ چا بھری اے اٹھ وے باوا آہے جوں اٹھاراں ہزار گھماں دا رقبہ اے نال آمدن دربار دی
 توں نیندر دیاں چھڈ للہائیاں
 سکھاں سیالکوٹ آلا دربار قبضے کر لیا اے اجکل بن گرداس پور تے نیں انہاں دیاں ودھائیاں
 سچے سودے چھڑیاں کر کہانیاں درباروں چک چھڑیا ذات دا ورخ حال حال کردے دیاں ڈاگیاں جاہ للام کرائیاں
 امینداں ڈاھڑیاں نیں پر سکھاں تے باویاں دیاں ترن تارن پونیاں پک لڑائیاں
 وے نارائن سنگھ سرگودھے دا اے تے کلنار سنگھ جہیراں دا لکھا سنگھ گھہوگا جی دا تے لچھمن سنگھ رندھاوا
 دھارووال دا وے باوا کل ایہناں میرے کول ایس ترے دربار دیاں وی گڈھیں نیں بہہ پکائیاں

Observing the influx of income at the *Janm Asthan* Gurdwara, the determination of the Sikhs appears to be wavering. Noori expresses that a good and noble individual should pray to Allah for peace to be restored among the Sikhs. He further suggests that a wise and discerning person should meet with Narain Das to remind him of the wisdom he previously imparted. During a massage session with Narain the day before, Noori commented that the eighteen thousand acres of land associated with the Gurdwara *Janm Asthan*, generating significant income, had been troubling the Sikhs and affecting their sleep. Noori notes that the Sikhs had already taken control of the Sialkot Darbar and were now planning to seize the Gurdwara in Gurdaspur. From this, Noori knew that Akali Sikhs had already reclaimed other historical Gurdwaras from the Udasis and that it would only be a matter of time before they seized control of Nanakana Gurdwara. Additionally, he mentions again that Narain shared his concerns regarding the lucrative land. Narain Singh hails from Sargodha, Kultar Singh is from Jhabran, Lakha Singh is from Gahoga, and Lachhman Singh Randhawa is from Dharowal. All of them have confirmed the dates for the upcoming battle in my presence.

4. An Analysis of the Probable Effects of the Saka Nankana

The Saka Nankana had profound repercussions, generating significant sympathy for the Akali cause and leading to a notable increase in support for the movement within the Sikh districts of central Punjab. This surge in backing was reflected in the growing number of Akali volunteers participating in SGPC recruitment campaigns in these areas. Sikhs began contributing to a 'Shahidi (martyrs) Fund,' established initially to support the families of those who lost their lives at Nankana. Over time, this fund was repurposed to reward the relatives of volunteers dedicated to the efforts aimed at reclaiming control of Sikh Gurdwaras (Kapur, 1986).

This massacre intensified anti-government sentiments among Sikhs, who viewed their struggle as a confrontation with corrupt Mahants and the colluding Punjab government. This rising unrest underscored the significance of the SGPC, enabling it to reduce its reliance on governmental intervention for Sikh Gurdwara reform and establish itself as a leading force in the movement to reclaim these sacred sites (Rai, 2021).

The British administration raised concerns about the recent killings in Nankana, recognising that their earlier hesitance to intervene in what was seen as a religious dispute had led to this outbreak of violence. They acknowledged that taking a non-interventionist approach

in Gurdwara disputes could pave the way for future tragedies. Consequently, the government concluded that adopting a proactive stance was crucial, subtly endorsing the Akalis' goals for managing Gurdwaras and encouraging them to pursue these ambitions through constitutional and legal channels. To implement this strategy, the Punjab government decided to take a legislative route to tackle Gurdwara governance, arguing that passing legislation through the newly formed Legislative Council would offer a more effective solution for managing gurdwara administration than the drawn-out process of civil litigation, which could heighten frustrations among Sikhs and fuel more militant tactics advocated by certain factions within the SGPC. As a result, the Minister of Education, Fazl-i-Hussain, was tasked with drafting a bill to amend current legislation concerning 'charitable and religious endowments of the province' to resolve disputes related to Sikh Gurdwaras (Sahni, 1969).

In July 1921, the Punjab Legislative Council received the initial Gurdwara Bill. The Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Act of 1921 sought to create a provisional board of commissioners tasked with reviewing disputed shrines and, if necessary, assuming control of them for a period not exceeding three years. Throughout this period, the board would seek to determine the legitimate ownership of the Gurdwaras. The board's findings would supersede conventional court decisions concerning Gurdwara ownership, thereby establishing a foundation for forthcoming legislation related to the administration of contested Sikh Gurdwaras. The board was to be structured to include an official nominee, ensuring equitable representation of all stakeholders' interests. This legislation aimed to resolve the religious issues influencing conflicts regarding Gurdwara management, assigning the board of commissioners the responsibility of overseeing the disputed shrines. The Punjab administration posited that this structure might reduce the likelihood of violence; however, if unrest continues, the government is expected to receive heightened public backing for its suppression measures (Myrvold, 2025).

In reaction to the proposed Bill, the SGPC voiced strong objections against establishing a board of commissioners to investigate disputed Gurdwaras. The SGPC contended that this proposal represented

a veiled extension of the present defective law under which Gurdwaras are being attached and which treated the whole Sikh Panth, the rightful owners, as a mere party against its servants, the mahants. The effect of such legislation will be that instead of one sabrah [manager], whom the Sikhs have with great difficulty ousted, there will be many sabrahs, and instead of one Golden Temple, the government will be controlling all Sikh temples (Quoted in, Yong, 1995).

The Sikh community viewed any government or non-Sikh involvement in the management of Gurdwaras as a breach of their religious freedom. During a significant gathering in Nankana, the SGPC emphasised that any proposed measures would only be acceptable if the new board of commissioners consisted entirely of Khalsa Sikhs, with two-thirds of them appointed by the SGPC. They also made it clear that they would not engage in the legislative process unless all Sikh detainees related to Gurdwara reforms were released (Kaur, 2021).

The Udasi Sikhs and the Hindu community voiced their strong opposition to the proposed bill. They challenged the corruption allegations against various mahants, arguing that the government should avoid interfering in traditional Gurdwara management practices, especially as a concession to the Akali faction within the Sikh community. The government's attempt to resolve the crisis faced significant hurdles in gaining support from both factions. Tensions rose within the Provincial Legislative Council, particularly between legislators representing Khalsa Sikhs and those backing the Udasi Sikhs. Despite these divisions, the bill moved swiftly through two select committees. However, ongoing disputes about the board's composition continued to present challenges. Ultimately, the government decided to delay the passage of the law because Council members could not reach an agreement, leading to the abandonment of Law 1921 in November 1921 (Myrvold, 2025).

Following this tragic event of the Saka nankana, several notable leaders, such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Lala Donichand, Dr. Kitchlew, Malik Lal Khan, Sardar Harchand Singh, and Sardar Prem Singh, travelled to Nankana Sahib. They attended to express their condolences and demonstrate support for the Sikh community, which was experiencing significant distress due to these atrocities. On March 3, 1921, Gandhi publicly condemned the massacre, drawing parallels to the actions of General Dyer and emphasising its devastating impact on the Sikh community (Kaur, 2021).

The British government also recognised the potential threat to their authority, considering increasing unrest, particularly given the region's historical context of resistance during the 1857 War of Independence. In response to these concerns, they strengthened their military and administrative presence in the region, resulting in the official designation of Nankana Sahib as a Tehsil on April 1, 1922. A police station was established, and a tehsildar was designated to supervise the area, with the administration of the Gurdwara returned to the Sikhs.

The British authorities also worked with Sikh leaders to formulate a strategy for Nankana Sahib, resulting in the enactment of the Sikh Gurdwara Act in 1925. This legislation sought to address enduring conflicts by reassigning Gurdwara management from the Udasi Mahants to the Sikhs. Consequently, modern educational institutions were established, and there were notable enhancements in the communication infrastructure of Nankana Sahib (Rai, 2017).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a notable consensus among scholars regarding the motivations behind the Nankana Massacre, an event where Sikh devotees exhibited significant courage while attempting to reclaim their historical Gurdwara from a heretic Udasi group, its Mahant, and his associates, who were accused of hinduizing the Gurdwara and desecrating it through behaviours considered immoral, such as alcohol consumption and inappropriate sexual conduct in the compound of the Gurdwara. Furthermore, they faced allegations of embezzling funds meant for the Gurdwara, diverting resources intended for spiritual purposes to personal interests.

Noori Kamboka's narrative, articulated through his thirty-six *dholas*, adds additional contributing factors to the conflict, which extends beyond a purely religious conflict. His perspective highlights a range of underlying factors contributing to violence, asserting that economic transformations influenced the event in the region. The introduction of canal irrigation improved agricultural productivity and increased the value of land surrounding the Gurdwara, drawing interest from various parties, including commercial entities and landowners. However, Noori's assertion that this was not a religious conflict undermines the authenticity of his claims.

Additionally, the historical context, particularly the outcomes of the Sheikhpura conflict, contributed to heightened tensions. The lasting effects of this conflict intensified personal grievances and aspirations for retribution among the groups involved. This combination of personal animosities and competitive conflicts fostered an environment that may have added severity to this religious conflict.

To sum up, a comprehensive qualitative content analysis suggests that, along with religious issues, there were contributing economic and personal enmity factors that probably added significant severity to the massacre. This multifaceted approach adds more historical information to oversimplified narratives of religious conflict, and it underscores the various factors that shaped this historical event.

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