

A Historical Analysis of Politics of the Partition of Punjab with Special Reference to Shiromani Akali Dal

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Abstract: In the Punjab, religion was used to mobilize the Sikh community for political action and politics to consolidate religious bonding among the community in the Punjab. The *Akalis* believed their own advertising that they were the only true voice of the Sikh people. The Sikhs gained a new sense of identity based on religion. The Sikh minority was trying to establish its distinct identity in the Punjab. It is often held that Sikhism combines religion and politics. The new institutions and leadership emerged among the Sikhs to reform and their community. Economically the Sikhs are highly a secure community in India. The Sikhs have higher per capita income. They make up a larger share of the Indian armed forces and of all federal government workers. About two percent of India's total population comprises as Sikh. In the history of Punjabi politics, the Sikh community has been pivotal. Punjab was the seat of political power of the Sikhs and centre of their religious activities. In India political movements have been organized to fulfill the claims of religious communities for sharing power and to fashion them in a way that would ensure the permanence of politics of the community.

Index Terms: Population, Higher Proportion, Distinct Identity, Leadership Emerged, Religious Bonding.

Introduction

The beginning of twentieth century is marked by hectic political activities both at the national and provincial levels which gave new complexion to the Indian politics. One of the most striking features of this period was the process of maintaining communal identities which was gaining force simultaneously with the growth of nationalism in India. The term

politics has broad connotations. Politics of the Sikhs as a minority community in a plural society like India cannot be dealt in a narrow sense. The Punjab was one of the last regions to come under British rule so political consciousness started late in the Punjab in comparison to other places.

Reform movement among Sikhs started after establishment of colonial rule in form of conscious about separate identity from Hindus and gasp for so called purification of *Khalsa Panth* from so called *Brahminical* influences, all customs and traditions related to *Brahminical* practices meant to be purged through *Singh Sabha* in 1880's, the reform movement got more intense after first World War. *Gurdwara* reform movement begins for liberation of the temples from the British control for the purpose Central Sikh League was formed in March for looking after the religious places of the Sikhs. The *Shiromani Akali Dal* was founded in December 1920. The *Gurdwara* Reform Movement played very important role in establishing separate identity of the Sikhs in Punjab.

Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana was put in a tough position after the 1946 elections when the majority of Muslim Unionists defected to the Muslim League, leaving just nine Unionists in power. Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana sought to put together a coalition of fifty one Congress and twenty three Sikh legislators in spite of the Muslim League's resistance. His administration failed to get off the ground and was short-lived. The outbreak of racial violence spread over the whole province of Punjab. The violence in Rohtak was taken extremely seriously because of its connections to similar incidents in western Utter Pradesh. In order to address the problem, the Unionist government introduced the Punjab Public Safety Ordinance in November, 1946. There was a feeling of civil war at the time in the Punjab. The *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak*, National Guard and *Akali Sena* were private armies formed by the Hindu, the Muslim and the Sikh population. The government reinstated the Criminal Law Amendment of 1908 after outlawing both the Hindu *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak* and the Muslim League National Guard in January 1947. Mr. Attlee was successful in persuading the Sikhs to join the Congress party in the Interim government. The Muslim League calls for 'Direct Action' on August 16, 1946 and the savage riots which followed that call in Calcutta, Dacca, Noakhali and Bihar once again prompted Sikhs have understanding with the Congress.

In order to set up a Constituent Assembly, the Cabinet Mission sought to establish an interim administration in the Punjab that would include the Muslim League, the Congress, Sikhs, and other ethnic minorities. They were immediately faced with opposition because, despite the presence of a powerful minority like the Sikhs in the Punjab, they grouped Punjab along with the North - West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. The Punjab question got linked up with the all India question and Muhammad Ali Jinnah preferred to opt out of the Congress Assembly over Congress insistence on the sanctity of the rights of the Sikhs.

Population of Various Religious Communities in Punjab

The Sikh population was dispersed over the province, but the five key districts of Amritsar, Lahore, Ferozepur, Jullundur, and Ludhiana were where the majority of Sikhs lived. At the start of the 20th century, the proportions of Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims in the Punjabi population were as follows.

Table-1

| S. N. | Year | Total Population | Hindus | Percent | Muslims | Percent | Sikhs | Percent |
|-------|------|------------------|----------|---------|----------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. | 1901 | 26880217* | 10287700 | 38.9 | 14141122 | 52 | 2130987 | 7 |
| 2. | 1911 | 24204814 | 8773621 | 36 | 12275477 | 50 | 2883729 | 11.7 |
| 3. | 1921 | 25589248 | 8779651 | 35 | 12813363 | 50.6 | 3110060 | 12 |

*Including North West Frontier

The Sikh population in the Punjab was much less in comparison of the Hindus and the Muslims but it had rapidly increased in comparison to other communities. The Hindus were also in minority in the Punjab. The number of Hindus had further decreased mainly due to a sizable number of conversions to the Christianity and the Sikhism.¹ The Muslims were in majority in the Punjab. Increase in the Muslim population resulted in the decrease in the

Hindu population. It was one of the main causes of conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab.

Early Socio-Religious Reform Movements

Singh Sabha Movement

In response to missionary hubris that dismissed all religions except Christianity as primitive, the *Singh Sabha* Movement helped modernize the way Sikhs thought by not only stressing the importance of rational thought and behaviour in accordance with Sikh scriptures but also by preparing them for the future.² Sikhs in the Punjab did not revert to Hinduism due to the efforts of the *Singh Sabha* Movement. Many Hindus in northern and western Punjab and Sindh converted to Sikhism, underwent *Sahajdhari* Sikh baptism, and finally joined the *Khalsa*.³

The Sikh population in Punjab was profoundly affected by the *Singh Sabha* Movement. The educated class people believed that socio religious reformation in the Punjab was not possible without making the people aware of their cultural heritage. Sikhs with higher education flocked to the *Singh Sabha* movement. The *Singh Sabha* Movement of Punjab stayed away from politics in favour of advancing socio-religious development and sharing of knowledge. The social and religious ills that had crept into Sikh society were wiped out by socio religious movements. The rise of nationalism in the country, the influence of the nationalist press and the increasing political unrest in Punjab at the turn of the twentieth century all played an important role in rising unrest among the populace and prepared the ground for the forthcoming *Akali* struggle against the *Mahants* and other vested interests in the Sikh shrines as well as against British imperialism in Punjab.⁴

The *Singh Sabha* aimed at reforming the Sikhs of the numerous abuses that had crept in the Sikh fold during the period it exercised political authority during the *misl* and Ranjit Singh's period. The Sikhs, influenced by Hindus in the 150 years after Nanak had died, had adopted a number of harmful practices. The reformers of the *Singh Sabha* advocated that the Sikh people be recognised as a unique religious community apart from both the Muslim and Hindu faiths.⁵

Chief Khalsa Diwan

The Chief *Khalsa Diwan* grew out of the *Singh Sabha* and *Khalsa Diwan* movements offered exemplary leadership in the fields of learning, literature and theology.⁶ The Chief *Khalsa Diwan* was formed in 1903. The Chief *Khalsa Diwan* became the Sikh community's political, social and religious voice to regulate and direct the many *Singh Sabhas* and to look after the interests of the Sikh community. The major goals of Chief *Khalsa Diwan* were to raise Sikhs in social, political, spiritual, moral, and economic domains. It also promoted education, protected the political rights of the community and used legal methods to spread Sikhism. By stressing the ideological and political divisions between Sikhs and Hindus, it heightened the hostilities between the *Singh Sabha* and the *Arya Samaj*.⁷ It was not anticipated that the Chief *Khalsa Diwan* would support the Congress party's call for independence for the nation.⁸

Sikh nobles and educated middle class Sikhs took the helm of the Chief *Khalsa Diwan*. Sunder Singh Majithia, A Sikh leader, belonged to the landed aristocrat class. Trilochan Singh, Bhai Vir Singh and Jodh Singh belonged to the Sikh middle class. They believed in social equality, eliminations of the caste system and development of education in the Sikh community. The Chief *Khalsa Diwan* held conferences, issued pamphlets and maintained loyalty to the government. It was successful in maintaining separate identity of the Sikhs.⁹ The highest authority among Sikhs was the Chief *Khalsa Diwan*. It stayed loyal to the government and did not join the Congress party.¹⁰ Many works, like as novels, monographs, tracts, and even a newspaper, were produced by the Chief *Khalsa Diwan*. The *Khalsa Samachar*, a periodical published by Bhai Vir Singh. He was the inspiration behind the *Khalsa Tract Society* which held a great influence over the Sikh elite for decades.¹¹

Shiromani Akali Dal

The *Shiromani Akali Dal* was the highest-ranking Sikh political group. The *Akalis* came together on December 14, 1920 to form this central organization to assist the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak* Committee. First president of the *Akali Dal* was Sardul Singh Caveeshar. The *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak* Committee was established on November 16, 1920. The *Shiromani Akali Dal* was very powerful in controlling the religious and political matters related to the Sikhs. The *Shiromani Akali Dal* organised a number of

political campaigns with the goal of improving the lives of Sikhs. For achieving the political goals, the *Shiromani Akali Dal* used religious slogans and religious places. Guru Gobind Singh used the word *Akali* for the first time for his selected followers who were ready to take risk for safeguarding places of importance for the Sikh religion. Because of their boldness, they are known as *Nihangs*. They got respect among the Sikh community as they were famous for purity and sincerity. *Akali* became shorthand for virtue and moral rectitude. Guru Nanak had originally used the word *Akal*, meaning "timeless one," to refer to God as *Akal Murat*, or the Eternal form.¹²

The Recruitment system of the *Akali* volunteers was not properly handled earlier. The custodians of the Sikh shrines were misusing the *jagirs* and the *Gurdwaras* as their hereditary property. The *Akalis* were the people who wanted to join the reformers and were willing to make sacrifices for the cause.¹³ The *Shiromani Akali Dal* chose to build its own road toward the same goal, the creation of a political party while keeping many of the same beliefs and ideas. This prevented it from becoming a subset of the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee*.¹⁴ The *Shiromani Akali Dal* actively engaged the Sikh peasants in political agitations and the Sikh faith served as the most influential ideology among Sikh farmers. The *Shiromani Akali Dal*'s religiously inspired politics prevented it from becoming a serious challenger to the Congress in the Punjab. It was in charge of the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee*'s finances and workforce.¹⁵

The *Shiromani Akali Dal* has held a position of great political strength and influence since the *Akali* movement. In both the religious and political sectors, the *Shiromani Akali Dal* became recognized as only official representative of the Sikhs. The *Shiromani Akali Dal* also provided the necessary initiatives, leadership, and support in the form of *Akali Jathas*, was the catalyst for the major demonstrations in Punjab. Massive protests were organized by the *Akali Dal* for secular and religious causes. The *Shiromani Akali Dal* and the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* were the most powerful and reputable organizations within the *Akali* Movement.¹⁶

Rajagopalachari Formula and the Sikhs

Chakravarti Rajagopalachari published a formula on July 16, 1944. He was the Congress Party's sounding board for new initiatives. He offered the right to secede to Muslim provinces with their majority population. This gave 17 districts to Pakistan and 12 to India. Mahatma Gandhi supported Raja Ji formula. Muhammad Ali Jinnah on August 5, 1944 gave a statement to the Sikhs, "Sikhs are a separate nation and that Muslim League would deal with their demands judiciously. The Sikh leaders would give their demands in writing."

All India Sikh Conference was held on August 20, 1944 which opposed Raja Ji formula. In a subsequent *Akali Dal* Conference at Delhi in September 1944, Azad Punjab Resolution was reiterated and Raja Ji formula opposed. Giani Kartar Singh declared that, to get results of the Sikh sacrifices, Sikhs will have to go openly with the Sikhs. Master Tara Singh in a *Akali* Conference on at Lahore on October 14, 1944, said that the British have not given anything to the Sikhs, Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah in their mutual negotiations were sacrificing Sikh interests. Raja Ji formula was again rejected.¹⁷

Chakravarti Rajagopalachari's famous formula from 1944 included the division of India, the Punjab, and Bengal on the basis of this idea. He counted on Mahatma Gandhi's approval. For the Indian National Congress, this formula had special significance. This was not a formula that was accepted by Sikhs. Sikh authorities started thinking about the prospect of the Sikh state as alternative to Pakistan in October 1944. Primary complaint of the Sikhs was that the Indian National Congress had failed to fulfill a promise made to them in 1929.¹⁸

Simla Conference and the Sikhs

On March 21, 1945, Lord Wavell left India for England and returned back to India on June 4, 1945. On June 14, 1945, he gave a broadcast address in which he advocated holding a meeting at Simla on June 25, 1945, and inviting twenty-one leaders from India. In the Central Legislative Assembly and the Council of States, leaders of the Congress Party and the Muslim League Party, as well as Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah were present. The leaders of the Nationalist Party, the European group in the Central Assembly, members from the Sikh community and the Scheduled Castes were all expected to attend the Simla Conference.¹⁹

Cabinet Mission Proposal and the Sikhs of Punjab

The Cabinet Mission comprising Sir Pathic Lawrence, Sir Stafford Cripps, and Sir A.V. Alexander landed in India on March 23, 1946, with the goal of speaking with Indian officials about the Constitution and other politics. The Cabinet Mission did not bring a pre-conceived scheme. He invited Indian suggestions hoping to evolve from them a plan agreeable to the representatives of different political opinions. In April 1946, the Cabinet Mission met with the heads of different political parties, communities, and organizations to debate and solicit their opinions. On June 16, 1946, the Cabinet Mission made a recommendation for the establishment of the Interim Government of India. The Sikh emissary, Sardar Baldev Singh was invited to the Viceroy of India's court. The *Panthic Pratinidhi* Board rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan and Sardar Baldev Singh was told not to join the Interim Government as a consequence. In an appeal for help on behalf of the Punjabi Sikhs, Sardar Baldev Singh wrote to the British Prime Minister. The Cabinet Mission acknowledged the unfair treatment of Pakistan's non-Muslim regions. Even while the Cabinet Mission acknowledged the severity of Sikh concerns over Muslim majority dominance, the group structure it advocated would equate to permanent Muslim communal authority. Sardar Baldev Singh said in writing that the Sikhs were not included in the Cabinet Mission Plan.²⁰ Master Tara Singh warned that, "the establishment of Pakistan will lead to conflicts within the Sikh community in a report to the Cabinet Mission. Sikhs would desire a separate Sikh state with the choice to join either India or Pakistan if Pakistan were to be established".²¹ The *Akali Dal* formally embraced the idea of a separate Sikh state in March, 1946.

According to the resolution adopted by the *Akali Dal*, "whereas the Sikhs being attached to the Punjab by intimate bonds of holy shrines, property, language, traditions, and history claim it as their homeland and holy land and which the British took as a trust from the last Sikh ruler during his minority and whereas the entity of the Sikhs is being threatened as a result of the persistent demand for Pakistan by the Muslims on the one hand and of danger of absorption by the Hindus on the other and Executive Committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal demands for the preservation and protection of the religions, cultural and economic rights of the Sikh nation, the creation of a Sikh state."²² A three-tier confederational organisation was proposed in the Cabinet Mission Plan dated May 11, 1946. The Cabinet Mission paid little

attention to the concepts of Sikhistan, Azad Punjab, or Khalistan, seeing them instead as a barrier to Muslim ambitions erected by the Indian National Congress.²³

Master Tara Singh and the Demand for *Sikhistan*

Master Tara Singh declared in 1945, "There is not the smallest question that the Sikh faith can endure only as long as the *Panth* remains as an organized organization."²⁴ The *Akali Dal's* competing idea for territorial adjustment advocated for revision of boundaries of Punjab in order to form a brand-new geographic region named *Azad Punjab*. The plan calls for dividing the province of Punjab and separating the districts where Muslims constitute a majority. A new province would be established in which no one religious group has a majority. In a statement detailing their strategy, the *Akali Dal* said under June 1943 that "in the *Azad Punjab*, borders would be set after taking into account the population, property, land income and historical traditions of each of the communities."²⁵ *Akali Dal* issued a pamphlet mentioning its proposal. According to the pamphlet, the *Azad Punjab Scheme* proposed creating a province called *Azad Punjab* with a population that was split evenly between Hindus (40%), Muslims (40%), and Sikhs (20%) in order to preserve political harmony between the Hindu and Muslim groups. In this way the Sikhs can take sides and can get maximum political benefits. The Sikh population can be raised to 24 percent after merging princely states to the new province came into being. The *Akali Dal* believed, "since the Sikh population had been expanding quickly during the years before, it would soon reach 30 percent of *Azad Punjab*, which would be even better."²⁶

Master Tara Singh planned to start a large protest against the Congress ruled central government for failing to keep its commitments to the *Akali* leaders over the transfer of power. After two failed coalition attempts by the *Akali* Congress in Punjab, the *Akali* leaders had no choice but to push for a reorganization of the state to guarantee that the Sikh population would form a clear majority.²⁷ During the ensuing Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement, the *Akali* leaders backed the initiatives of the Indian National Congress. When the Congress party did not step up to protect the rights of the Sikh minority, they took a stand against it. Master Tara Singh resigned from the Indian National Congress as a consequence of its decision to oppose the British military effort during Second World War. It was largely because to the foresight of *Akali* leaders like Master Tara Singh that

Sikhs were able to rise to high positions in free India's armed forces and other government agencies.²⁸

The Indian government did not consider the *Azad* Punjab Scheme put forward by the Akali Dal. In 1944, Sikh leaders convened for a meeting when it was proposed that a committee be formed to study the prospect of a sovereign Sikh nation. Master Tara Singh, head of the *Akali* movement, vowed that the Sikhs would not be subjugated to either Pakistan or Hindustan since they were also a country.²⁹

Sikh Responses to the Partition Riots

In practically all of the major Punjabi towns, including Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan, Jhelum, Amritsar, and others, riots over the partition of the country broke out in March 1947.³⁰ To avert a violent sectarian conflict, it was thought that the Punjab's approval of the partition plan was the only peaceful option. The division plan was supported by the Muslim League, the Indian National Congress and the *Akalis*. Separation of the Punjab did not result in a resolution of the sectarian issue. The Muslim League slaughtered 2,000 Sikhs in Rawalpindi in March 1947. It happened again in the months leading up to August 15, 1947, when independence and division were declared. To establish a clear demarcation between Muslim and non-Muslim territory in the Punjab and the Bengal, a Boundary Commission headed by Cyril Radcliffe was established. The Muslim League insisted that Pakistan include non-Muslim territories in order for the country to function effectively on an administrative and economic level. On the basis of ownership of landed property and religious places, the Hindus and the Sikhs demanded boundary extension to include Lahore, Sheikhupura and Lyallpur.

Giani Kartar Singh, the President of the *Akali Dal*, protested to Evan Jenkins, the Governor of Punjab and told him that the Sikhs should fight a guerrilla war for survival. Lord Ismay thought that the Sikhs were aggrieved but the Viceroy did not think it possible to change the terms of the partition. So the war of succession started. There had been Communal riots in the Punjab at short or long intervals From March, 1947 to August, 1947. Mass killings, train killings, arson, plunder and kidnapping started in the Punjab. The Atrocities took place in the west Punjab were reciprocated in the east Punjab. The government of Pakistan blamed the

Sikhs for rioting, saying , “they had been supplied with weapons and ammunition by the Sikh kingdoms of Faridkot, Nabha, Kapurthala, and Patiala”.³¹

The casualties were announced by the Punjab Government on March 20, 1947. 2049 people were killed out of which 1538 people were from rural areas. 1103 people were seriously injured. As per estimates taken on account on later dates for casualties from March to August 1947, there 5000 people were killed and 3000 people were seriously injured and most of these casualties took place in the month of March. Assurances of protection of minorities were given by leaders of the two countries who were united in the determination not to tolerate violence in any form in either country. All Sikh leaders were located in Indian territory and Sikhs all around the world were loyal to the territories and colonies they had long found shelter.³²

Partition of the Punjab and the Sikhs

India was divided in to two nation states and as a result Punjabi History, Culture, Language and Heritage got affected. So the concept of the Punjabi nationality was affected. On August 15, 1947, the British partitioned the Punjab and effectively broke up the Punjabi people into two different nations. The Partition Plan of June 3, 1947, did not satisfy the Sikhs. In the event that the Border Commission ruled against the Sikhs, Baldev Singh agreed to the idea that all necessary sacrifices would be made to restore the Sikhs' honour.³³ In 1941, the pre-Partition Punjab comprised of an area of 148610 square miles. Punjab shared borders with Tibet, Kashmir, the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan on its north and western sides respectively. The United Provinces formed the eastern boundary of the Punjab. Punjab's southern border was shared with the states of Rajputana and Sindh. The Punjab Province's capital was Lahore. The political landscape shifted on August 15, 1947 when India declared its independence and the Punjab was partitioned between India and Pakistan based on the percentage of Hindus and Muslims in each country respectively.

When the religious riots started, the entire Hindu and Sikh population of the western parts of the Punjab fled to India. Muslims in East Punjab in India, migrated to western province of Punjab. The Indian Punjab's religious composition was altered by the significant inflow of immigrants. In what is currently known as the Hindu-Sikh province of Punjab, the Sikh community in the Punjab increased from being a small religious minority in a multi religious

region to a sizeable one. In the pre-Partition Punjab in 1941, the Hindus composed of twenty six percent and Sikhs comprised of thirteen percent of the population.³⁴

Conclusion

The *Akali Dal* Party maintained a cooperative stance with the Congress Party right up till the eve of the Indian and Punjabi partitions. Many rural Congress members identified as Sikh, particularly those who had been influenced by the *Ghadar* Party and the *Kirti Kissan* Party. The Unionist Party of Punjab failed to get traction in Central Punjab, while the Congress and peasant movements failed to gain traction in the other areas. The Unionist Party fought against Muslim League interference in Punjab politics and was ultimately successful in weakening the Muslim League's position there until 1945. The Punjab's political environment in 1946, when the Punjab Legislative Assembly was up for election, may be summed up as follows, The Muslim League gained 79 seats out of the total of 175 seats, followed by the Congress with 51, the *Panthic Akali* Sikhs with 22, the Unionists with 10 and the independents with 10 per.

When it came to the Muslim League and the many political movements taking place in Pakistan, the province of Punjab was crucial. On August 15, 1947, several people were killed in communal riots on both sides of the border because of the Muslim League and Muhammad Ali Jinnah's promotion of the "Two Nation Theory" on religion basis. The Hindus in Punjab were in a different position than those in other provinces with a Hindu majority. They felt threatened by the Muslim majority and need protections to preserve their way of life and civil liberties. The Muslim League, sensing a sectarian climate in the Punjab, pushed for representation in the region's institutions of higher learning, economy, and government equal to its demographic representation. So a large number of the Hindus in the Punjab got an attachment to the fold of the Hindu *Mahasabha* and the *Arya Samaj*. As the sectarian violence escalated, the general public of the Punjab Province, the public that had no voice in political concerns or the decision surrounding the drawing of the line of partition, suffered the most for the independence of the nation from foreign control. As a result of Partition, most Sikhs now live in only a handful of Indian Punjab areas.

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