

Historical Analysis of the Political Dilemma in Punjab: 1935-39

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Abstract:

Suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement created a dilemma in Punjab specifically for the Sikhs. The strategy of the government was to conceive a kind of self-government for the provinces and to some extent even for the nation. The political parties began to compete with one another to obtain representation commensurate with the percentage of their population or even more. The Sikhs, as it is evident from the proceeding discussion, had failed to secure representation of even 20 per cent which would have been proportionate to their population. The Indian national Congress also retracted from its commitment. This disappointed the Sikhs and created a gap between them and the Sikhs. The possibility of Muslim domination in Punjab politics disillusioned the Sikhs and accentuated the Muslim-Sikh communal conflict leading to Shahidganj Gurdwara dispute. The Present research paper deals with the political problems in Punjab from 1935 to 1939 because as this period was significant for the evolution of the history of Punjab as well as the Indian history.

Keywords: Sikh leadership, Chief KhalsaDiwan, ShiromaniAkali Dal, Indian National Congress, Khalsa National Party.

Aims and Objectives:

1.To study the dynamics of the relationship between the Political Parties during the period under study.

2.To analyse the level and nature of Political awareness of Sikh Community through different Movements.

3. To understand the imperatives behind the various initiatives of the Sikh Community.

During 1935-39 there were two major sections within the Sikh community having clearly demarcated political orientation. The loyalists and the moderate Sikh leadership held a position advocating that the Sikh community should form a united front for the elections.¹ According to one way of understanding this was done at the behest of Chief Khalsa Diwan. An alliance would restore the lost prestige of the Diwan.² However, Sikh leaders like Sunder Singh Majithia and Sardar Joginder Singh had established the Khalsa National party. Their aim was securing adequate representation for the Sikhs. As part of their political strategy they intended to collaborate with the government and seek its patronage, as was done by the Muslim League. Thus, this group did not endorse the idea of 'PuranSwaraj'.³

Since 1920 the Sikh masses had undergone considerable transformation in terms of political awareness. The Gurdwara reform movement revolutionary and radical activities of BabbarAkalis, Kirti Kisan Movement and revolutionary organizations like Bharat Naujawan Sabha had heightened the sense of political awareness which transcended even communal and provincial politics. In these circumstances, ShiromaniAkali Dal rejected the proposal of the Khalsa National Party and decided to contest elections on their own. The Shiromani Akali Dal expected the Sikh masses to support them as they had done in the recent SGPC elections. Moreover, they had apprehension that their alliance with the loyalist Chief Khalsa

¹ The Akali party Manifesto in The Tribune, June 20, 1936.

² Emerson to Linlithgow, Linlithgow Papers, NMML.

³ The Tribune, August, 13, 1936.

Diwan would have a damaging effect as it would leave the masses without no option, but to vote for the Congressite Sikhs.⁴

The Indian National Congress in an effort to maintain its place amongst the Punjabi Sikhs also established the Congress-Sikh party.⁵ A large number of progressive Sikhs like the Socialists, the Kirtis joined the Congress-Sikh party.⁶ JawaharLal Nehru's visits to Punjab also gave an impetus to the position of the Congress amongst the Sikhs. However, the political ferment brought the Congress and Akalis to an understanding mainly to combat the loyalists and the moderates. The coalition of Akali Party and the Congress clearly indicates that the Sikhs as a community valued national freedom and unlike the Muslims they did not stoop to an extremist kind of communalism. Moreover, Hindus and the Sikhs saw the political domination of the Muslims as a threat. The Congress began to acknowledge the injustice wrought by the Communal Award.⁷ In accordance with the compromise reached between the Congress and SGPC, the former was given 10 seats and latter 14 to contest.⁸

The union of the Congress and the Akalis under the leadership of SGPC was particularly intriguing both for the progressive thinking Sikhs and the conservatives. Ulterior motives were ascribed and there was scepticism about the intensions. This union, did not have an ideological basis. It was a pragmatic choice for both the parties as they suffered owing to their minority status in the Punjab. The first elections under the Act of 1935 were held in the winter of 1936-37. The unionist Party secured 96 out of 175 seats. Amongst these 96 candidates, an overwhelming majority were Muslims. Among the Sikhs, the Khalsa National Party secured 14, the Akalis 10 and the Congress Sikhs 5. In all the Congress got 18 seats. The strength of the Khalsa

⁴ The Tribune, June, 16, 1936.

⁵ The Tribune, June, 10, 1936.

⁶ The Tribune, June, 9, 1936.

⁷ AICC File No. E.17/1937, NMML

⁸ Ibid.

National party later increased to 18 out of 33 seats in the assembly.⁹ The results indicate a split of Sikh votes. While the Muslims voted for the Unionist Party and the Sikhs were divided between the Moderates and Loyalists on the one hand and the Nationalists and Progressive on the other. Several tentative conclusions can be drawn. One, by and large the people in Punjab were averse to extreme position including communalism. Two, a large section of the Punjab is particularly Muslims and to some extent Hindus and Sikhs were led by the landed aristocracy, commercial and nascent industrial bourgeoisie. The traditional leadership of the rich aristocratic families was still accepted. After the elections, Sunder Singh Majithia joined the Unionist government and became the Revenue Minister. The party justified this by saying that they had joined the government to protect the interests of the Sikh community and to help in keeping communalism under check and restrain. Sikander Hayat Khan as the Chief Minister of Punjab was determined to keep the Unionists in power. He, therefore, kept his ministry quite broad based by offering the non-Unionist members like Sunder Singh Majithia, ManoharLal, places in the ministry. Moreover, he wanted to win the confidence of all communities. Some of his decisions were unpopular with the Muslims. He rejected the Muslim claim on Shahidganj Mosque and strongly dealt with the Khaksar Party.¹⁰ When Sikander Hayat Khan began to lose his credibility as a Muslim leader he was pushed him to the other extreme. He, therefore, signed a pack with Jinnah known as Sikander-Jinnah Pact of October, 1937. This was a political gimmick on the part of Sikander Hayat Khan with the sole aim of strengthening his political position. Both Sikander Hayat Khan and the Punjab Government were aware of the close alliance between the Sikhs and the Akalis. Therefore, they made efforts to glorify the Khalsa National Party and enhance the credibility of loyalists and moderate Sikhs to weaken the Congress as well as the Akalis in the Punjab. On the other hand, the Sikander-Jinnah Pact created suspicion and anxiety which was partly overcome by the assurances of the Unionist leader.

⁹ The Tribune, March, 3, 1937.

¹⁰ The Tribune, November 18, 1936.

The Sikander-Jinnah Pact imparted a creditable image of being a Muslim government to Sikander Hayat Khan's government. Sunder Singh Majithia, therefore, felt a greater need to project his image as the protector of the interest of his community. He was successful to some extent in softening the communal attitude of the government. The perception of public support favouring the Akalis was so great that the government launched a campaign of suppression of the Akalis. In this, Sunder Singh Majithia and his party collaborated. The government fabricated cases of embezzlement against the Akalis.¹¹ As the Khalsa College in those days had become the centre of the Sikh Political activities, Sunder Singh Majithia as the chairman of the Management Committee, terminated the services of five teachers. Moreover, the Khalsa National Party opposed the Gurdwara Amendment Bill.

The Akali Party was constantly raising issues dear to the masses and criticized the government as excessively inclined in favour of the Muslims. This sentiment finds articulation by Master Tara Singh to Sikander Hayat Khan in his letter.¹²

"It is my conviction as well as that of my colleagues that whatever by your personal views; your personal efforts are directed to consolidate the Muslim position and to establish Muslim domination in the province.... Ever since you have taken charge of the government, the conditions have distinctly worsened... You are striving to give to the Muslims the same status in the province as was enjoyed by the Europeans, before your regime".

Master Tara Singh severely criticized the attitude and politics of government and its officials. The SGPC made efforts to prove that the interests of the minorities had been compromised during the rule of the Unionist government and the policies and politics of the Khalsa National Party. As the Khalsa National Party went closer to the Unionist, the SGPC came nearer the Hindu Mahasabha, obviously under the compulsion of the situation in Punjab. Thus, before the Second World War broke out, the Sikh leadership was sharply divided. In the absence of any organized political

¹¹ JawharLal Nehru to Master Tara Singh ,SGopal (ed.) Selected works of JawharLal Nehru Vol-II, pp. 383-85.

¹² The Tribune, March 7, 1937.

activity, it is not possible to assess the political outlook of the community as the whole. During these two years, their primary concern of the Akalis was to counteract the Khalsa National Party and Unionist Party's politics of patronage. Secondly, both the sections of leadership made efforts to consolidate their following in the community. And lastly, the politics of the Indian National Congress operated at two levels national and provincial. Often there were major contradictions in the course adopted by the party at national level and at level of Punjab. Due to all this the loyalties of the community in political terms was getting profoundly confused. One section of the community was inclined towards the government, the other, towards the Congress and still another exclusively towards the SGPC.

During the closing years of 1930's two problems, namely the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the Pakistan Resolution of the Muslim League of March, 1940 plagued the Sikhs in the Punjab. The Second World War provided an opportunity for the rural Sikhs to get recruited in the army. However, this was also one of those rare opportunities when they could strike a bargain with the government to secure their interests in return for services in the war. It would be imprudent to give unconditional support to the government. Even the Chief Khalsa Diwan had also rained the demand that the Sikhs should be recognized as an important minority community and their rights privileges, cultural and religious freedom should be safeguarded.¹³ The Akalis had come to represent the Sikhs and they were suspicious of the intentions of the government because of the following facts. First, that during the First World War, the Sikhs extended their support to the government, but their interests were ignored in the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919. Rather, they were put under Muslim Majority rule in the province. Secondly, due to the closeness of the Unionist Muslims with the government, the Sikhs were suspicious of the intentions of both. Thirdly, both Akalis and the Congress in the Punjab had been collaborating in the fight against the Muslim domination. Therefore, the Akalis along with the

¹³ Sikhs and the War (A Pamphlet), Shiromani Akali Dal, 1931.

Congress wanted the government to declare the war aims. The Viceroy's declaration obviously did not satisfy the aspirations of both the Congress and the Akalis.¹⁴ However, the Akalis were in a dilemma as they did not desire to deprive the Sikhs from acquiring military positions in the army. They could not blindly follow the Congress and boycott of the war efforts. On the other hand the lure of freedom made it difficult for them to support the government as that would have weakened the freedom struggle.¹⁵ The Akalis desire to encourage the recruitment of the Sikhs in the army was dictated by the desire to strengthen their bargaining power.¹⁶ In the given situation the Akalis Dal and the Unionist ended up competing with each other in the recruitment of their community members in the army. The Muslim League had not rejected the Viceroy's statement on war aims.¹⁷ Thus, the opposition of the Congress, and the heavy dependence of the government on Muslim League's supports forced the Sikhs to decide in favour of the Sikh recruitment.¹⁸ The Akalis had to perform a balancing act in the light of the developing understanding between the Congress and the Muslims on communal issue. The Akalis had to make sure that the Sikhs interests were not ignored. On the other hand the Congress and the Akalis still had a common interest in the Punjab politics. The Akalis, therefore, demanded from the Congress a clear statement of their policy regarding the Sikh rights and privileges and interests in the new constitutional settlement. The Congress did not support the Akali's stand on the recruitment of the Sikhs in the army.¹⁹ Therefore, we may say that the political situation which emerged with the outbreak of war caused more confusion amongst the Sikhs, both with regard to the freedom struggle and the war efforts of the government. Their attempt to stand on two stools is, of course, understandable when we view the immediate situation with which the Sikhs were confronted. The leadership could not transcend the immediate compulsions and failed to evolve a long term prospective.

¹⁴ The Tribune, October 22, 1939.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ GianiGurcharan Singh, *AnkhiSoormaJiwan Master Tara Singh Ji* (Delhi 1950) p. 126-31.

¹⁷ V.P. Menon, *Transfer of Power of India* (Bombay 1957), p. 67.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Letter of GianiKartar Singh to Rajendra Prasad in *JawharLal Nehru Papers*, NMML.

The Pakistan Resolution of the Muslim League has its origin in the late 1930s. It took the form of a challenge and a threat for the Sikh community. This brought the moderates and the extremists together as both of were apprehensive of the threat to the existence of Punjab. Master Tara Singh expressed his determination and that of the Sikhs to defeat the Muslim League's attempt to establish a separate Muslim state.²⁰ The Sikhs reaction to the Pakistan resolution was two-fold. All sections of the Sikhs rejected the proposal and majority of them felt that collaboration with the congress and independence of the country with its territorial integrity were essential for the political existence of the community. Their aspirations were unequivocally expressed by Master Tara Singh, when he made the statement in April, 1940:²¹

"While opposing the Pakistan scheme some Sikhs have lost their heads and they are preaching the establishment of Sikh rule. This will simply be adding to the confusion already created by the Muslim League-Swaraj is the only solution of our country's misfortune".

A small section of Sikhs, however, proposed the creation Khalistan as a way of countering the Pakistan demand. It may however, be mentioned that the scheme of Khalistan did not get popular support. It was merely suggested to negotiate and counterbalance the demand of Pakistan. The main issue before the Sikhs was to safeguard the rights of the community. The scheme of Pakistan revived the Sikh memories of the Muslim rule in the 18th century and the oppression of the Muslim rulers over the Sikhs during that period. It was natural for the Sikhs to evolve a strategy and a plan to fight against the Muslim domination. Internally, the Sikhs set out on a course of avowing belonging to their common identity in order to effectively negotiate with the government.

The congress, on the other hand, dominated by the middle class was anxious to take advantage of Britain's involvement in the war to gain freedom. This had made

²⁰ File No. 18/6/1940. Home Political, NAI, New Delhi.

²¹ The Tribune, April 18, 1940.

Congress more accommodative of the Muslim League. Moreover, .during this period differences began to grow between the Congress leaders and the Akali leaders. Gandhi did not appreciate Master Tara Singh's deep concern for the Sikh Community. He also did not like Akali's traditional belief in violent methods and resented the Akalis campaign for recruitment. He perhaps could not grasp the inner crisis of the community and the political situation which prevailed in Punjab. Gandhi's exclusive concern for the freedom of the country made him ignore the aspirations of the Sikh communities, which in their political dimensions were local and immediate. Gandhi practically elbowed Tara Singh out of the Congress as he wrote to him:²²

"My plain suggestion is that by remaining in Congress, you will make your community weak and on the other hand, make Congress weak".

Akali Dal did not appreciate Gandhi's attitude and therefore, the gap between the Akalis and the Congress increased so much that Master Tara Singh resigned from the Congress Working Committee.²³ Acting with restraint, the Akali leader was wary of permanently ending all relations with the Congress which had been built and maintained during the last twenty years. Therefore, he advised his followers not to resign from the Congress. There was still scope that the two would come together again. Some thinkers have attributed the ambiguous stand of Master Tara Singh to the Sikh minority in the Punjab and the desirability, in the opinion of the Akalis, of having link with the Indian National Congress, a national organization. But, the fact remains that a large number of the Sikhs including Akalis had never thought of a separate state for their community. Their political consciousness had two facets -one they were committed to the complete freedom of India: and two, within that framework, protection of the rights and privileges the Sikhs as the community in the future constitutional arrangement of India.²⁴

²² The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol, LXXII, p 395-96.

²³ File No. 18/9/40 Home Political NAI.

²⁴ Master Tara Singh to Gandhi, Jaswant Singh (ed.) JiwanSangarshTe-Udesh, p. 168-70

To say, that the Akalis or the Sikhs, in general, desired to be with the Congress because of sheer convenience would not be correct. The Indian National Congress was a National organization. At the national level, unlike the Muslim League, the Akalis or the Sikhs had no clash of interests with the Congress while at the regional level, Congress had generally favored the Sikh political aspirations and frequently assured protection of their political rights and privileges.

To conclude it can be said that if the Akali-Congress dynamic in the Punjab had been based purely on the considerations of convenience, it would have collapsed at that time under the pressure of political agitation which followed 1940. The two organizations, despite differences continued to maintain the political understanding with each other. The government on the other hand felt relieved at the growing differences between the Congress and the Sikhs. It tried to give the impression that the Sikhs were permanently interested in the recruitment in the army and therefore the Government of India began to make efforts to win their confidence by increasing their recruitment in the army.

The Pakistan resolution thus set a new trend in the Punjab politics. It led to greater unity and cohesion amongst the Sikhs. They developed a unified vision that their interests which under the Muslim rule in Punjab were not secure. This can be illustrated by the fact that even • the Khalsa National Party condemned the scheme of Pakistan. This helped the Sikhs and the Akalis, particularly, to grow into a political force in the province. Now their political awareness was characterized by autonomy and fraternity. Politically, the Sikhs could not stay completely subservient to the Congress as they had to safeguard the interests of the community. To say that the Akalis largely depended on the favour of the Government as a bargain for their recruitment in the army should not be delinked from delinked from the pragmatic considerations in the given context. The semi-agrarian tribal community of the Jats had a tradition of serving the army and if the Akalis had dissuaded them from recruitment in the army they would have become disaffected. This can be safely

surmised on the basis of the history. Their cordiality with the Hindu MahaSabha, a conservative organisation, is quite understandable because these two communities faced the common challenge of Muslim domination in the Punjab.