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The Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement and Legislative Culture of the Punjab: An appraisal. 1920-25

Abstract

The record of the proceedings of the Punjab Legislature clearly shows that its members preferred to defend their communal interest's visa-a-vis of common cause against the British Raj. Given that the members representing their communities openly took communal line in their demands, thereby this state of affair sharpened the communal split in the society. Since the legislators were the policy makers in the province, therefore, their views and actions influenced the bulk of the society. Thus, this factor turned out to be a major factor in determining the future relations of the two-nations, namely Muslims and the non-Muslims, which unfortunately deteriorated to that level which brought about not only the partition of India but also the partition of the province on the communal basis.

This study explores the nature and working of the Punjab Legislature during 1920s with reference to the Sikh Gurdwara Reform. This study attempts to dig out primary and secondary sources which mainly targets Punjab Legislature and legislators, what was their respond to the Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement? The underling hypothesis of the paper is that the major communities of the province i.e. Hindus, Sikhs and the Muslims, were divided owing to their communal interests in the Punjab Legislature. Instead of strengthening unity and harmony, this institution served as one of the major arenas for Hindu-Muslim and Sikh conflicts which greatly influenced Muslim political thinking in the province as well as the centre. No wonder, after having a bitter communal experience in the Punjab Legislature, Allama Iqbal spoke out in the Allahabad Address in 1930 in which he suggested the partition of India into separate Hindu and Muslim majority zones. The ruling political party the Unionist Party (which was comprised of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) did not easy to deal with Gurdwara Reform in the legislature and unnerved its government as well. The question of communal harmony in the Punjab was not only shatter but also bleak in the coming years 1940s and its worst shape could be seen at the time of partition of India 1947.

The writings on the provincial history of India generally analyze the political development of some provinces by analyzing the party politics or highlighting the role of individual persons or party in the endgame of the Raj. David Page, Iftikhar Malik, Ikram Malik, Zarina Salamat, Tanwar, David Gilmartin, Ian Talbot and

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Dr. Abid have done the study of the Punjab politics on these lines. These and other historians have generally overlooked the importance of the role of Punjab Legislature in shaping the ideas, views, thoughts and actions of the communities. In fact, the Legislators took remarkable communal line during this period and therefore the Muslims and non-Muslims reached to a point of no return in the Legislature and it affected the overall outlook of the communities. Therefore, the present paper is of great importance as it analyses the Punjab politics by digging out those documents particularly the speeches, statements, debates, resolutions and legislation in the Punjab Legislature that have not adequately been explored by the historians.

Introduction

This study highlights an in-depth analysis of the the Sikh Gurdwara Reform which had perennial effects on the political mindset in the subcontinent. It unveils the culturally masked faces of three different communities, i.e., the Muslim, the Hindus and the Sikhs, erstwhile living together on the universal principle of mutual co-existence, but now being sharply differentiated from one another on religious lines into radicalized groups and factions. The paper discusses at length the role of the then political leadership in resolving the issue as guided and directed by their particular religious and political doctrines. This issue alone can be believed to have broadened the gulf between the two aforementioned communities never to be bridged over in the times to come.

Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement was an important issue in the council that dominated the discussions in the council and strengthened the anti-British temper in the Punjab to a considerable extent.¹ The Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement was an attempt reformation and resurrection of the Gurdwaras and to bring them under the auspices of the Shromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (S.G.P.C). The issue of the control of Gurdawars was sporadically taken up by the Singh Sabha,² a loyalist organization. And the strife between the Akalis and the Mahants caused a lot of bloodshed. To pre-empt this, government issued a communiqué³ showing the intention of legislation on the issue. They also gave the Sikhs the right to keep a *kirpan* and to retain other religious emblems in jail. But the Sikhs were not prepared to accept it and moved to possess the Gurdwaras with force. As a result, a number of Sikhs lost their lives in the incident of Tarn Taran (January 1921) and Nankana Sahib (February 1921) that made the political parties and national press and gave birth to a group who was defying non-violence and opted for violence as a creed. The group believing in violence was called Babar Akalis who targeted British officers and their Indian informers. They were the staunch believers of Sikh faith and were the patriots to the hilt.⁴

Mahant Narain Das, an udasi managed the sacred birth place of Guru Nanak-Nankana Sahib. But he was a debauch who was very much fond of debauchery and the dances of the prostitutes. It highly irked the Sikhs who wanted his expulsion even by force. Mahanat requested for the security and hired four hundred guards to safeguard his interests.⁵ Narain Das' men killed the non-

violent Akalis ruthlessly when a jatha of Akalis led by Lachhman Singh Dharowala entered the gates of the Gurdwara the bodies were set on fire. One hundred and thirty Akalis had been burnt when the police and the local Sikhs arrived on the spot. Ironically, for such huge carnage of Akalis, only three persons were sentenced to death and two including the Mahant were imprisoned for life. The Sikhs gathered at Nankana Sahib held the strong opinion that the commissioner of Lahore was also involved in that carnage. Resultantly Commissioner of Lahore hurried to Nankana Sahib and handed over keys of the Gurdwaras to the Chieftains of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee. It is to the credit of the Akali Sikhs that they remained patient and carried out *morcha* in a peaceful manner. Mahatma Gandhi who was shocked at the bloody incident, paid homage to the martyrs, he described it as a “second edition of Dyerism at Jallianwala Bagh”.⁶ Since the situation was getting from bad to worse so Sikhs introduced Gurdwara Bill amid the strong resistance of the Government.⁷ Sir Fazl-i- Husain proposed the members of Muslim and Hindu communities might also be included in the managing board. But the bill failed to get the consent of Sikh members, as they boycotted the bill so it was dropped⁸ in November 1921.⁹

Because of the wrangling between government and the Sikh members, the ones was on the Sikh members of the legislative council to bring forward a fresh bill or not as they thought best in the interests of their constituents.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, government was unable even at that time to understand the enormity of the issue of the spiritual affairs of the perceptive community¹¹ whose participation in the army meant so much to them.¹²

So, in the eyes of the government, Sikhs had violated the law and justice so a punishment was waiting them. But having made the Gurdawara Bill a benchmark, government expected all the Sikhs to adhere by the Bill. Measures were adopted to cast away all doubts in the minds of the Sikhs hoping that Sikhs would realize that the administration was not “Satanic” but anxious and ready, as indeed it had always been, to befriend and assist those who stood by it in the days of Mutiny.¹³ Akali movement got impetus due the impact of financial limitations and tyranny. Radical leaders who came to the forefront were of different shades of political opinion and religious enthusiasm, Baba Kharak Singh, Mehtab Singh and Teja Singh Samunderi were inspired by religious considerations. Master Tara Singh and three brothers-Amar Singh, Mukh Singh and Jaswant Singh of Jhabal were religious fanatics. Baba Kharak Singh was not credible in the eyes of the Government and the keys of the Golden temple were taken away by the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar on the 7th November, 1921. Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar sought to hand over the keys to a person of his own choice which was resisted to by the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee) On November 21, Baba Kharak Singh, Mehtab Singh, Master Tara Singh and over 1,200 others members of Akali were arrested by police and sentenced with various terms of imprisonments. However, were released on January, 22 1922 they including Baba Kharak Singh. On this occasion, Mahatma Gandhi congratulated and said, “First battle of India’s freedom won, Congratulations”.¹⁴

Sunder Das, a Mahant and also baptized as Sikh, was bestowed with the keys of Guru Ka Bagh, a Gurdwara near Amritsar by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee. But having been affected by the sympathetic treatment of the Government, he claimed Guru ka Bagh as his personal property and resisted cutting of timber by the for *Langer* (food-meal). As a consequence, five Sikhs were arrested on the charges of trespass and sentenced to the six month of rigorous imprisonment on 9th August 1922. Government showed its heavy handedness to Mehtab Singh and Master Tara Singh by not only blocking their way to Guru ka Bagh but also by beating them to the extent of their becoming unconsciousness. At the same time, Akali Jathas comprising about 100 volunteers were proceeding to Guru Ka Bagh in installment and remained non- violent in word and actions. They were given a sound beating by the police and this thrashing continued for long nineteen days.

The leaders like Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. Rajinder Parsad and C.F. Andrews observed the non violent attitude in the face of the worst aggression of police force. Their struggle was hailed as, "A new heroism being learnt through suffering". It was observed that a new lesson in moral warfare has been taught to the world."¹⁵ Hindu-Muslim relations were at the lowest ebb but Hindu-Sikh relations were going well in the legislative council but urban Hindus who were considered to be the real power of Congress did not side by them. This was the reason that Malaviya and Lajpat Rai could not win Sikh support for Congress and Gandhi had a little concern for them.¹⁶ Though Hindus put up an artificial resistance to the Gurdawara Bill but government made a serious mistake in dropping the said bill. It might have been the sole satisfaction for the Sikhs.¹⁷ It was very strictly ordered by the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab ordered police to withdraw from baton charge on the Satyagarhi Akalis. At that time arrest toll was 5,605 out of which 936 were hospitalized for treatment. So, Sir Ganga Ram, a retired engineer and charity donor, bought the land and donated it to Akalis on the request of the Governor.

Maharaja Ripduman Singh of Nabha, being sympathetic towards Akalis was an eyesore for the Government. The Government created a fake case on the complaint of Maharaja Bhupindar Singh of Patiala who referred to British court of inquiry a boundary dispute with Nabha state. The court gave verdict in favor of Patiala. The political agent compelled Raja Ripduman Singh to abdicate. This really hurt the Sikhs. The S.G.P.C. passed a resolution demanding the restoration of Maharaja and asked the Sikhs to observe 9th September, 1923 as Nabha Day. At this volt face, Sikhs got angered and they organizes Akhand path at Gurdwara Gangsar in village Jaito. The Punjab police and Nabha state police attacked the august shrine and put a stop on the recitation of the Granth and put some Akalis behind the bars. It was a total affront. The Government declared ban on S.G.P.C. and Shiromani Akali Dal and also declared them quash bodies. Akali leaders including Mehtab Singh, Teja Singh Samundri, Teja Singh Akarpuri, Bawa Harikishan Singh, Gyani Sher Singh, Prof. Teja Singh, Prof. Narinjan Singh, Sarmukh Singh Jhabal, Sohan Singh Josh, Gopal Singh Qaumi and Sewa Singh Thikriwala were arrested on the charges of treason and waging a war against the Crown and were brought to the

Lahore Fort. But the Jathas kept on marching towards Jaito despite the fact they were severely beaten. So much so that on 21, March, 1923, they were fired upon and many Sikhs were shot dead. The Indian Congress declared its full support for Akali Morcha at Jaito. Jawahar Lal Nehru, Santhanam and A.T.Gidwani, who were the members of Indian National Congress rushed to Jaito for the evaluation of the actual situation but they were arrested on September, 21, 1923 and they were produced in the court of Nabha on 3 October, 1923 for trial. During the trial Nehru strongly criticised the administration as well as court.

The governor of the Punjab Malcolm Hailey, in the meanwhile, was not at all hesitant to fulfill the demands of the Sikhs for having a full control of all the significant Gurdwaras in the province. And the decision was taken by the five-member committee set up by the Sikh members of the legislative council. Hailey sent a new draft of Gurdwara Bill to the detained Akali leaders, Master Tara Singh, Baba Kharak Singh and Sardar Teja Singh Samundri in Lahore jail, and after their thorough examination it was negotiated.¹⁸

But the Sikhs showed no sign of reconciliation because of their detained companions. And the government was not clear on the point. The decision was taken by the same committee of five members. They were of the opinion that the interference by the government was not acceptable at any cost but at the same time government failed to give clear direction as to who would take control of the Gurdwaras.¹⁹ In his speech at Punjab Legislative Council Sir Malcolm Hailey made the important announcement that the Punjab government was prepared to release most of the Sikh prisoners, whether convicted or under trail, whose offences arose out of the Gurdwara movement and were not convicted of violence, after they had showed their willingness to follow the Gurdwara Bill.²⁰ He showed a great deal of sympathy towards the Sikhs in his speech.²¹ The question of prestige did not therefore arise, for they (Sikhs) had won the battle, and it was needless to process this question any further. In the opinion of the governor of the province, it was very necessary that the Sikhs should take over the management of the Gurdwaras according to the law.²²

In fact the measure to support the Sikhs on Gurdawara Bill was adopted by the Hindus in order to ensure the cooperation of the Sikhs against Muslims without any regard to right or wrong. But the Bill was passed even in the face of huge opposition. However, such opposition rendered it valueless and almost impracticable.²³ The Hindu-Sikh alliance was a transient measure and not a genuine one. Both the communities did not agree on the Land Alienation Act. There was a sharp divide of urban and rural sections on the matter. Sikhs belonging to the rural strata sought to safeguard their own interests. And the natural effect of all this on the Hindus was to rethink on Swaraj and the Congress politics. They were totally cognizant of the fact that the Muslims got politically activated because of their participation in the Khilafat Movement and Hindu politicians, infact, were responsible for making Muslims conscious of their political course. Now the urbanite Hindus were keen to have good relations with the Government instead of with the Congress. By the time, Communal dissension and discard had taken root in the hearts of Hindus and Muslims but Hindus did not

want to embark upon any open wrangling on account of Muslims being a powerful community.²⁴

The Bill was not resisted by the Hindus on the whole despite the fact that it had treaded on their corn. It was a generally agreed truth that Udassies were orthodox Hindus. That was why they were not happy with Malaviya who had not tackled the issue in an appropriate manner for the Hindus. But Malaviya, being a congressman wanted to support Akalis because of some political considerations. So Hindus had to gang up together to support Sikhs even against their own interests. The support of the Hindu members attributed either to political motives of the same kind, or to open bribery on the part of the S.G.P.C. It was simply in fact reduced to them somewhat critical position of having to depend entirely on government. The net result was that Hindus outside the council were not happy with the Congress-Akalis cooperation and abandoned their support to the Hindu members of the council. On the whole it depressed them and their credibility had a question mark in the eyes of their own co-religionists. If government were not lent a hand to the Hindu legislators they would have lost the game.²⁵

The Gurdwara Bill was passed without any opposition from the Hindus while many of them were offended by the Bill. Now Hindu and Muslims contended that they had given the Sikhs what was due to them and now they could bring the Sikhs around their point of view.²⁶ Thus the bill met all the Akali demands and was passed into law on July 28, 1925 by the Governor General of India after its authorization by the Punjab legislative council. The Act became law on November 1, 1925 with a gazette notification from the government of Punjab. According to the Act, a Central Gurdwara Board elected by the Sikhs was to be the custodian of all-important Sikh places of worship. The first meeting of the Gurdwara board passed a resolution that its designation be changed to Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, which was accepted by the government.²⁷

Notes & References

¹ *Desh Lahore* 5th November 1921. L/R/5/202.

²From the Mughal's times, the Sikh Gurdwaras were run by the udasis, later its governing body shaped an inherited, all lands and properties attached to the Gurdwaras were registered in the name of mahants (administrators). Over the years, certain Hindu idols were also placed in these temples. The Singh Sabha was able in getting the idols and corrupt mahants eliminated from the premises of the Golden Temple in 1905.

³ *Tribune*, 10 February 1921.

⁴ sikh-history.com/sikhhist/institutes/babbar.html accessed on 25/8/08.

⁵ Jogiwan Mohan Wala, 'The Role of the Sikhs in the National Freedom Struggle', *The Journal of the Punjab Past and Present*, XXIV-I, (April 1990) 146.

⁶Wala. 'The Role of the Sikhs in the National Freedom Struggle', 147.

⁷ *Civil and Military Gazette 11th July, 1925*. Hailey Collection, E.220/ 8A.

⁸ *Cell, Hailey, 110*.

⁹ Tai Young Tan, 'The Akali Movement 1921-1925', *Modern Asian Studies*, 28- 4,(1994), 675.

¹⁰ *Desh Lahore* 5th November 1921. L/R/5/202.IOR.

¹¹ PBLCD, Vol. 1, 1921, 532.

¹² *Cell, Hailey, 109*.

¹³ *Civil and Military Gazette 11th July, 1925*. Hailey Collection, E.220/8A.

¹⁴ Wala, 'The Role of the Sikhs in the National Freedom Struggle', 146.

¹⁵ http://www.archive.org/stream/gurdwarareformmo00singrich/gurdwarareformmo00singrich_djvu.txt accessed on 21/1/09

¹⁶ Hailey to Daniel Isaacs, Hailey Collection, E.220 7/A.

¹⁷ *The Loyal Gazette* of 25th June 1921. L/R/5/202.IOR.

¹⁸ *Desh Lahore* 5th November 1921. L/R/5/202.IOR.

¹⁹ *The Tribune* 9th April 1921. L/R/5/202.IOR.

²⁰ *TheTribune*, 11th July, 1925, Hailey Collection, E.220/8A.

²¹ *Ibid*, 12th July, 1925.

²² *Bande Mataram* 28th July, 1925. Hailey Collection E.220/8A.

²³ PBAR., 1923-24, V/10/365.

²⁴ Hailey to Daniel Isaacs, Hailey Collection, E.220 7/A.

²⁵ Hailey and select Committee Talk. Hailey Collection, E.220.7/A.

²⁶ Hailey to Maclagan July 9th 1925.

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