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Mapping the ‘Khalistan’ Movement, 1930-1947: An overview

Abstract

This study attempts to understand the struggle of the Sikhs of the Punjab, during the colonial period (1930-1947), for their separate home-land- Khalistan, which to date have been an unfinished agenda. They still feel they have missed the train by joining hands with the Congress Party. There is strong feeling sometime it comes out in shape of upsurge of freedom of moments in the East Punjab. Therefore it is important to understand what was common understanding of the Sikh about the freedom struggle and how they reacted to national movements and why they filed to achieve a separate homeland-Khalistan. The problem is that the Sikh demands have so been ignored by the British government of India and His Majesty’s Government in England. These demands were also were not given proper attention by the Government of Punjab, Muslim leadership and Congress. Although the Sikhs had a voice in the politics and economic spheres their numerical distribution in the Punjab meant that they were concerted in any particular areas. Therefore they remained a minority and could only achieve a small voting strength under separate electorates. The other significant factor working against the Sikh community was that the leadership representing was factionalized and disunited, thus leading to a lack of united representation during the freedom struggle and thus their demand for the creation of a Sikh state could not become a force to reckon. Therefore, it is important to understand the Sikh demands for division of Punjab and the creation of a separate homeland for the Sikhs in Punjab. This paper merely tries to survey the efforts and events that led to the partition of India and the struggle of the Sikhs for the freedom of India and the establishment of ‘Khalistan’. The chronological scope of this study stretches from the Communal Award in 1932 to partition of India, 1947. In the beginning all communities of the Punjab were struggling to get their right of representation from British Government but later on their demand turn into partition. The Communal Award was mark of British Government acceptance of all communities as separate identities. The Communal Award evoked mix reactions in all over India and stirred up Communal consciousness.

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Introduction:

The last decades of nineteenth century witnessed rise in political awareness, identity consciousness and deep concern for constitutional rights in the Indian sub-continent. Political platforms were established by the mainstream communities; Muslims and Hindus. However, the All India National Congress was established in 1885 by the efforts of A.O. Hume to build harmonious working relationship between the rulers and the ruled. It was claiming itself as the representative of Indians but Muslim kept themselves aloof from the Congress believing as if it was overwhelming majority of the Hindus and working against the Muslim interests. Anyhow, Congress' anti-Bengal partition movement widened the gulf and as a result the Muslims established All India Muslim League, a separate political party to safeguard the interests of the Indian Muslims in 1906.

Muslims and Hindu were confronting each other in whole India at national level but political scenario in the Punjab was different from other provinces. The Punjab had a unique position in whole continent, here a third distinct community 'Sikh' was stake holder. Punjab was important for them as their religious homeland and economic hub as well. In the beginning of the twentieth century, strife on the question of separate electorate and representation in legislation arose among two major communities; Muslim and Hindu, the Sikh appeared as third player in politics. All communities of the Punjab were quite conscious for their identity and organized many political and religious associations to safeguard their special interests. In spite of the presence of Muslim League, the Unionist, and the Congress many other movements were active in the region; Ahrar and Khaksar were the leading Muslim movements. The Hindu Maha Sabha, Arya Samaj, Shudhi and Sanghtan were working for the Hindus, and the Singh Sabhas, Chief Khalsa Diwan, Sikh Central League and Akali Dal were representing Sikhs.

The Sikhs' struggle for identity started in the nineteenth century. During the War of independence 1857, Sikhs supported the British Government and showed their loyalty and fidelity. In the post War of 1857 period, the British required some props for their strong standing in the region and they were looking for new alliances. In 1860 during the period of Lord Canning, the British revived their policy regarding Sikhs. The British announced Sikh recruitment in army, framed the policy for the grant of pensions and rent free grants. The British gave them recognition in *Darbars* and opened the doors of modern education for them. The Singh Sabaha Association was established at Amritsar in 1873 by the help of landed aristocracy and orthodox Sikhs. It grew as religious reform movement committed to pristine Sikh identity (Talbot, 2006) and also aimed at protecting Sikh interests and cultivating loyalty to the Crown. The British groomed Sikh landed aristocracy and the Priestly class as their natural allies (Josh, 1995, p. 185). It was initiated earlier by John Lawrence, Governor General of India (1858-1869). Latter on an earnest plea was made to Lord Dufferin, the Governor General of India (1872-1878) for recognition of Sikhs as distinct community. Professor Teja Singh, an eminent theologian, noted "The spread of education, and the inculcation of the belief that the Sikhs were a separate community, which should have separate rights, separate institutions and separate provisions in the law to protect them." (Singh T. , 1944) Sikh had inimical feelings against Muslims, which they inherited from Mughal period and to Hindustani sepoys from Anglo-Sikh wars.

The British exploited their feeling against Muslims and considered them more important for the British rule. The British awarded them *jagirs* and titles. In October 1890 Viceroy Lord Lansdowne said at Patiala “we appreciate the admirable qualities of Sikh nation, ... while in days gone by we recognized in them a gallant and formidable foe, we are able to give them a foremost place amongst the true and loyal subjects of Her Majesty the Queen Empress”. (Singh K. , 1977) The Sikhs were so satisfied by all these privileges that a Sikh newspaper *Khalsa Akhbar* termed the British rule as a great blessing for the Sikh community merged in main stream politics from the beginning of the twentieth century. Sikh organizations strived to the Sikhs in all directions and to maintain Sikh identity in religious, social and political spheres. Sunder Singh Majithia established the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902. This organization dominated by Sikh aristocracy. Somehow a little number of educated Sikh from middle class had joined the organization. It always claimed that its object was to protect the interests of the Sikhs. A new political organization, the Central Sikh League was formed in December 1919. In the beginning, Central Sikh League was in the hands of middle class and moderate Sikhs of urban areas. By the time the wave of Indian nationalism arose in India. On the one hand, under its influence the Sikhs associated themselves with the anti-imperialist struggle in the Punjab and on the other hand a body ‘Shiromani Akali Dal’ formed in 1920 with the aim of protection of *Gurdwaras* and against the *mahants*. Master Tara Singh had firm belief in the unity and integrity of India, and loyal to Sikh Panth as well. He emerged as revolutionary leader of Akali Dal. He gave strong call of resistance against demand for Pakistan during the last crucial decade of the freedom movement.

In upcoming years Sikhs consolidated themselves in educational, Political and religious dimensions. Communal identity became a fundamental concept of the Sikh struggle and religion became focus of the variety of their activities but factional interests were more significant. Factional politics could be vigilant specifically during elections. The Sikh leadership primarily came from the educated elite but landed gentry were dominating the Sikh politics (Josh, 1995). Landed aristocracy also developed the communal consciousness among the Sikhs (Josh, 1995) but their aspirations were not only socio-religious but also economic and political. They stood with the government during the agitation of 1907, the Ghadar uprising and the Gurdwara reform movement and tried to attain large share of power and influence at all levels. Sikhs started organizing themselves politically for the preservation of their community against the challenges of Hindus and Muslims. The Sikh as a minority demanded weightage in the Punjab and in the center as similar to what was conceded to the Muslims under the Lucknow Pact. The Sikh gave a proposal of readjustment of the Punjab boundaries in 1931 during the Round Table Conference. The founder of Chief Khalsa Diwan Sunder Singh Majithia demanded the return of the Punjab of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to the Sikhs on 29 March 1940 in the response of Pakistan resolution. Shiromani Akali Dal outlined Azad Punjab on June 5, 1943, comprised of Ambala, Lahore, Jallundhur Divisions and districts of Lyallpur, Montgomery and a part of Multan. Soon after in 1946 a resolution was passed in which Akali Dal demanded separate Sikh state on the basis of holy shrines, property language, and traditions. (Kapur, 1985) The Sikhs construed the Cripps proposal as conceding Pakistan. Master Tara Singh protested against the Cripps proposals in these words; “We have lost all hope of

receiving any consideration. We shall, however, resist by all possible means for the separation of the Punjab from an all India Union.” (Singh K. , 1977, p. 250) The Sikhs always opposed the slight possibility of the Muslim state and retaliated vigorously all proposals of the political solutions of the region. However the Communist Sikhs sided with the Pakistan demand like Sardar Baldev Singh who was in the Unionist Government in the Punjab.

Till the Montague Chelmsford reforms 1919, Congress and Gandhi always sympathized with the Sikhs in their reform movement and supported the Sikh community and considered their status equal to Muslims. Later on the Congress supported the communal demand of the Sikhs with a view of bringing Sikhs as a community in the national movement. (Tuteja, 1995) On the one hand Congress tried to boost up the Indian nationalism and on the other hand made every effort to strengthen the communal consciousness among Sikhs. Sikhs co-operated with Congress during the Civil disobedience and Non-cooperation movements but in return of their loyalty Congress swindled them. As their demand for communal representation was thrown out in scrap in Nehru Report and at the same time they assured the Sikhs that in the future no solution would be acceptable to the Congress which did not give satisfaction to them.

Unionist Party emerged as secular party in the Punjab politics in 1923, and subsequent years prove its standing. Unionists always tried to unite all communities but in the subsequent years especially after the appointment of the Simon commission, Nehru Report, Jinnah’s fourteen points and Allama Iqbal’s suggestion at Allahabad regarding a separate homeland for the Indian Muslim turned the Punjab political situation. Every community became more conscious regarding their constitutional rights.

Meanwhile the British arranged the Round Table Conferences and invited the Indian delegates to resolve the Indian constitutional problem. In the Round Table Conferences Indian political leadership could not reach any solution. The Round Table conferences (1930-32), a mile stone of Subcontinent history. As final declaration of the Round Table Conferences, the British Prime Minister announced the Communal Award in respect of the composition of provincial legislatures as a further step in the transfer of responsibility to the Indian people. British Parliament issued a white paper on 16 August 1932 under the title of Communal Decisions. The term ‘Award’ defined the methods of selection and the relative strength of representation of various "communities" in the legislatures, which was given a final shape later in the Government of India Act of 1935. In effect, the Award was a political settlement that worked out for the people of British India by officials in London. The Communal Award changed the whole political setup in the Punjab. Particularly Sikh as minority more disturb than other communities because this Award pushed them in worst condition. It evoked confounds reactions in all over India; it sowed the seeds of division of India and communal politics.

The communal leadership of the each community endeavored to derive maximum benefits for their community but the implication of the Communal Award effected the political situation. Among all three communities of the Punjab various factions mobilized for the reason of their diverse socio-economic and political interests, Factionalism became significant feature of the Punjab politics and not,

even single political party; national or regional was free from factionalism. Under this Award the British made India Act 1935 and first general election held in the India. As the result of the election 1937 Unionist party formed ministry in the Punjab, it tried to unite all communities for the stability of regional peace, But due to awarded communal representation, internal insecurities of all communities always create hurdles. Meanwhile in 1939 World War II broke out which changed the economic and political scenario of the Punjab and during upcoming years Unionist Party could not maintain its position in the Punjab.

The Lahore Resolution was passed on March 23, 1940. It grimed communal rift. The Sikhs opposed the Muslims' idea. In response of Pakistan Resolution, Hindu-Sikh co-operation increased but Congress rejected the Azad Punjab proposal which meant to change the boundaries of the Punjab. On the June 5, 1943 Sikhs claimed separate state even fixed its territories including the divisions of Jullundur, Lahore and Ambala, districts of Lyallpur and Montgomery and a part of Multan. Sikhs hit a plan to Muslim League; to set up an autonomous region within the new Muslim state. British Government closed eyes to their demand. Sikh community was educated and identity conscious, they were politically more organized and had its clear objective for fortification of their community but intra party politics damaged their goal. Sikhs were 14 percent of the Punjab population and Quaid-i-Azam offered them 30 percent representation in the Punjab. Sikhs refused this offer and merged in India. The question arises if they were feeling danger of absorption by both Muslims and Hindus why they accepted India? The region of the Punjab was focal point in their religious and economic and political concerns. The evidence suggests that Mountbatten and his advisers gave little thought to the Sikhs and attempted to ignore, rather than placate them. This situation raises many questions; why Sikh community was ignored? Was their demand had worth? What was basis of their demands? What were the loopholes in their political struggle? Akali Dal was playing as religious stake holder, Sikh Central League was representative of educated middle class and Chief Khalsa Diwan was pro-British but economic interests of all three groups were more vigilant in their politics. How factionalism affected the Sikh politics and why they could not achieve their goal at the time of partition. Sikh political leadership had divided three groups; moderate, extremist and communist. All three factions had a desire to gain power and safeguard their own interests. Why Sikhs were not integrate on their demand. This situation gives birth to some pertinent questions such as why did factionalism exist and how it operated within Sikhs? How far it has affected the electoral prospects of the Sikhs? How far it has affected Punjab politics?

The Punjab was more active in politics than any other Muslim majority province and all communities were fully conscious to their importance as separate identity but within communities persons were associated with different factions on the basis of their interests. All the historians stressed that religion was used as political tool especially Muslims arose the slogan "Islam in danger" to gain the masses favor but Sikhs desired to save Sikhism through safe political standing. Within the decade of the Freedom Movement, religion was not a single factor of animosity and communal rift. The Muslims, Hindu and Sikhs were far away from each other on religious basis but this is also matter of fact that in rural areas

cultural bindings and economic interdependence were significant within all three communities however, urban society of the Punjab was contaminated with communalism and all communities contending to secure more and more political, economic concessions. Urban as well as the rural societies were under the hold of landed gentry and aristocracy. Sikhs were threatened by the Muslims not only on basis of religion but their political identity was also in danger. Sikhs had vigilant feelings that if they would be able to retain their political identity and power in region they can easily safeguard their religion at the same time they were defending their economic interests. Political changes of the region cannot be understood without great emphasis on different factions.

The epoch of the Freedom Movement is politically very important in respect of communal drift. The Sikhs were important community of the Punjab so the Punjab political history cannot be completed without discussion of Sikh politics. Internal factionalism was dominating factor among the Sikhs' political organizations, which kept away them from their destiny. Various studies are available concerning the Congress and Muslim League's struggle and rivalries. However, this period is enigmatic and obscure in terms of the politics of Sikh nation. This study has confined the Sikh politics and their struggle for their interests such as separate identity and separate state. This study will throw a light on many infuriating questions regarding Sikh politics such as did Sikh leaders confused? Did the absence of a precise Sikh point of view main reason of their failure to achieve their goal? Why they reacted violently and with brutality on the eve of transfer of power? Did the religion focal point of their struggle or other factors played a role? It will also an attempt to evaluate the dynamics of Sikh politics in the Punjab by analyzing the rise, growth and effects of factionalism within Sikh community.

Different studies covered different aspects and chronological time line of the Punjab politics but effects of the Sikh factional approaches on the regional political scenario during Communal Award to partition are not solely discussed in any other study. Sikh politics was always handled comparative to the Muslims and Hindus. On the Sikh, factional parties' studies also available but except one or two other are studies written by Indians and mostly Sikh scholars as nationalist and patriotic perspective. This study will fill the gap with different perspective, and tried to unfold the Sikhs' political confrontations among different factions of Sikh community and its impact on their demand.

Political leaders of the period have different approaches such as nationalist, communal extremist, pro-British and anti-British. Among Sikhs' Sunder Sikh Majithia was an Aristocrate and known as pro- British politician although his party Chief Khalsa Diwan always adopted contradictory stand over the serious issues but the main objective of the Sundar Singh Majithia and his companions was development of the community and fight for the Sikh rights and he fought this battle without confronted to Government and tried to prevent Sikh community violence and bloodshed (Rekhi, 1999).

Conclusion

The Punjab had inimitable status for the Sikhs. They considered themselves real owner of the Punjab due to their past legacy particularly the Sikh regime (1799-1849). Their religious, economic and social standings deeply bonded with the Punjab and it was sanctuary land as for as their identity concerns, but internal factionalism of the Sikhs' political organizations weakened their demand for a separate homeland. Sikhs wanted a separate state for preservation and protection of their religious, cultural and political rights just for their dominance on the means of economic gains but they failed due to disunity among their leadership but also in none of the districts they were in majority where a Sikh state can be carved out. Jinnah wanted them to give maximum religious, political and economic freedom if they join Pakistan but they did neither trust Muslims nor Jinnah, may be, because of their past experiences with the Mughal rulers. Moreover, they relied heavily on the Congress promises and soon felt that they were betrayed. By the 2000s, studies provide the basic understanding to understand the British policy in the Punjab, origin and nature of those elements and problems which greatly affected the governance of the Punjab during the transition of power and in later years (Vohra, 2000). The Sikh community was recognized as third community of the India by British in the cabinet Mission proposal statement. Before that Sikh community was important as marshal race of the Punjab but Cabinet Mission statement is significant as landmark period of the Sikh constitutional struggle. Sikh response on this move should rational but their rivalries and weak performance affected their demand (Singh K. , 2006).It was because of their demand for division of Punjab Lord Mountbatten agreed on the division of Punjab.

In short, the Post- partition history of India shows how much the Sikh community felt betrayed and made efforts for the creation of Sikh state-Khalistan. Now, the Khalistn movement is getting currency among the Sikhs throughout the world and the Sikhs hope that soon they will get their 'Khalistan' in East Punjab.

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Mapping the 'Khalistan' Movement, 1930-1947: An overview

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