

Journal of Political Studies

Vol. 28, No. 1, January–June, Summer 2021, pp.01–09

The Sikh Struggle for Khalistan: Refocusing on the Punjabi Suba (Province) Movement in India

Amir Ali

PhD Scholar,

Department of History & Pakistan Studies,

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Muhammad Iqbal Chawla

Former Dean Arts & Humanities,

Former Chairman, Department of History & Pakistan Studies,

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Correspondence: chawla_iqbal@yahoo.com

Dr Muhammad Abrar Ahmad,

HOD,

History Department, Education University, Lahore

ABSTRACT

This study problematizes the Sikh's demand for Khalistan, a separate country of their own. To begin with, they demanded a greater degree of political autonomy within the domains of India. During the colonial period the Sikhs supported the Indian National Congress's demand for the division of Punjab and inclusion of the East Punjab into Bharat. But soon after the creation of Bharat (India), the Sikhs realized that they were betrayed and they started to vow for more autonomy. Initially, they felt that PEPSU was a step towards their aspirations but later they felt that they had missed the train and moved for Punjabi Province. After much deliberation and delaying tactics, finally the Punjab emerged on the Indian Territory in the form that always proved a nightmare for the Sikh community.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, European Union, Multiculturalism, Refugee Crisis, Syria*

Voices for Punjabi Province: An Historical perspective

“Sikhs only can survive if they have their own dreamland where they can practice all free and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their Khalsa forefathers” (Khushwant Singh: 1999, 234).

As Muslim demand for Pakistan grew, the Sikh State idea gained power. In 1940, Jinnah suggested the Two-Nation Theory in the Lahore Resolution. In crucial years of the “British transition of power”, the Sikh leaders allowed themselves led by I.N.C. leader irrespective to call for a separate homeland. As India's dividing wall inched closer, the Sikh representatives encountered themselves on the rocks of the challenge, wary of putting themselves to India or Pakistan. Jinnah asked Sikhs assuring that if they'd join him for Pakistan, their rights will be guarded, (G. Singh:

1988, XXVII). On the other side, the leaders of the Indian National Congress took them to confidence that they must feel India as their home, full of rights. Gandhi in March 1931 said during an address to the Sikhs at gurdwara Delhi that: -

“Sikhs must not worry that congress will deceive them, and if they did so, they will face the consequences. Moreover, the Sikhs are a great people. They know how to safeguard their rights by the exercise of arms if it should come to that” (Khushwant Singh: 291).

Nehru spoke in July 1946 session of the Congress Committee in Calcutta to reassure the Sikhs that they will be given special status and privilege, giving them full freedom. (Khushwant Singh, 291).

Sikh politicians agreed to promise their allegiance to the Hindus with the assurances and joined India. India’s Partition established a fresh scenario. Sikh relocation from Pakistani Punjab stopped on the “Ghaggar River”, resulting in the Sikhs forming a majority of the population in some Eastern Punjab tehsils and the Prince States (Sarhadi, 1970, 450). The struggle for land and industrial assets abandoned by Muslim refugees caused unwillingness among West Punjab’s Sikh agrarian population, Hindu migrants along with the Hindu districts of “East-South Punjab” (Haryana) seized ownership of belongings of left by Muslims. Sikh farmers bracket, western Punjab Sikh trading classes were significantly impacted by the bureaucratic disruptions in giving finances and spreading hate against others. Sikhs started to think that both the Muslims and Hindus got their cherished dreams but where the Sikhs are standing.

Sikhs started to doubt their choice to throw India into their assistance.

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Movement for the Punjabi Suba

In pursuit of this understanding, the Sikhs took a dreadful decision in 1946 under the leadership of Master Tara Singh. They rejected the tantalizing offer of a sovereign state by the Muslim League out of hand. With Congress support, they asked for separate divided Punjab.” In July 1947, their confidence in Congress was bolstered. The resolution enacted by the Punjab Legislative Assembly’s Hindu and Sikh members at their Delhi conference directing for separation of India kept the following phrase: - “In the divided Indian Punjab, Sikhs will be given special status. The Indian government demonstrated little intuition in coping with the Sikhs after the partition. The govt. took measures in 1948 which fostered the distinct Sikh state idea. Main states of Punjab were merged to one as *PEPSU* (Chawla, 2017, 81-90). Maharaja Yadaveendra Singh was Rajpraamukh and Gian Singh Rarewala as Chief Minister and mostly population was Sikhs. All that was to connect East Punjab’s Sikh majority districts to PEPSU in order to make the Sikh state a reality with a majority of Punjabi speaking but previously they forget all the commitments that Congress had made to them (K. Singh, 293-294). Mr. Hukm Singh refused to sign the constitution draft as all of his proposals were rejected by the congress authorities.

For many Sikhs, including the Akali leadership, the Nehruvian secular settlement as encapsulated in the Constitution was problematic on two grounds.

- I. “First, The Sikh code was not adopted and it was merged to Hindu code. (K. Sangari, 2002, 3-33).

The Sikh Struggle for Khalistan: Refocusing on the Punjabi Suba (Province) Movement in India

- II. “Second, by rejecting arrangements of precincts at religious ground, Nehru and the nationalist movement had reneged on their alleged ‘promise’ to the pre-independence Sikh leadership of the Shiromani Akali Dal. In 1929, in the face of Akali opposition to the Nehru report, Congress had passed a resolution assuring all the communities that no legalization will be made before their consent. (M. Singh, 1997, 237). Furthermore, Hindi the “*National*” language of the Hindu majority and not Punjabi, the ‘spoken’ language of both communities, was acknowledged as the language of the state” (Mirza & Hassnat & Mahmood, 1985, 30).

After much time of distress and deception, Master Tara Singh decided to vow for *Punjabi* Province. By 1952, he called for the political formation of a Punjabi speaking Sikh majority province (K. Singh, 290). Providing a metacommentary of the Sikh Panth, Harjot S. Oberoi observes that “such a claim for a *Punjabi Suba* was legitimate because, during the nationalist era, the I.N.C. firmly accepted the principle of linguistic states for free India. On attaining independence, Nehru and his close associates opposed the principle fearing regional chauvinism and fissiparous tendencies. But, unable to resist the mounting popular pressure, they caved in and it was agreed to set up provinces based on the lingua franca of the region” (Oberoi, 1987, 38).

The Ministry of Home Affairs passed a resolution on 29th December 1953 appointing the *States’ Reorganization Commission*, which would recommend broad principles for governing the act of reorganizing particular states. Based on the proposals of the commission, the *State Reorganization Bill* was adopted in 1956 (Mirza & Hassnat & Mahmood, 1985, 81-90). The case of Punjab was very exhaustively examined but the demand for Punjab was however rejected on the ground that Punjabi was not considered significantly different from Hindi and because it generally lacked the support of the people in the region. Instead, the Commission concluded that the merger of the then-existing states of Punjab, Punjab and East Punjab States’ Union and Himachal Pradesh in a single integrated unit was the most satisfactory solution which could be proposed. However, the Akalis were adamant for a Sikh majority state and the Himachalis also did not relish the loss of their separate identity. Though Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru met Master Tara Singh towards the end of 1955 for negotiations, the Akali Dal launched a *Punjabi Suba* Slogan Agitation of 1955 adopting non-violent tactics and political demonstrations. On 24th July 1957, the Government of India notified its decision about the division of Punjab into two regions for the Constitution of the Regional Committees; the Hindi region comprising of Simla, Kangra, Hissar, Rohtak and so on and the Punjabi region consisting of Hoshiarpur, Jullundhar, Sangrur, Amritsar and others (Lal, 1984, 56-57, K. Singh, 290-296). As earlier *Commission’s Report* was rejected and the Sikhs termed it as the annihilation of the Sikhs, they started large scale demonstrations and protests against it. In *Akali Conference* held at Amritsar, Sikh leadership rejected that very scheme. After extensive series of deadlocks and gripes “*Regional Formula*” was brought forward with the efforts of Hukm Singh, Akaalis and Congress. As per of formula, PEPSU and Punjab would have to be merged, excluding parts of Himachal Pradesh or Uttar Pradesh ((Mirza & Hassnat & Mahmood, 1985, 199). So far, Punjab divided into two regions, Punjabi region and Hindi region, declaring newly created province as bi-lingual

(Kapur, 1987, 214). Thus, the Central government stimulated in an illusory way and Akali politicians conned into thinking that PEPSU's merger into Punjab proved a step for creation Punjabi Province. Arya Sammajists, who initially denied the implementation of "*Sachar Formula*" in schools, disapproved the scheme. They led for "*Save Hindi Movement*", with the title of "*Hindi Raksha Samiti*", denouncing Punjabi. Partap Singh Kaairon, gave some concessions to Hindi, failing the true sense of "*Regional Formula*" accorded by Nehru and Akaalis. When Akaalis felt this negation of formula, they started again their cause. A huge demonstration was held by Akaalis on 15th March 1959 at Delhi.

After the arrest of Tara Singh (12th March 1959) (Bajwa, 1979, 95), Atmma Singh, Saarup Singh and Partap Singh walked out of assembly (Bajwa, 1979, 96). The rally of Delhi was joined by round about 3 lakh Sikhs. This demonstration proved the popularity of Tara Singh and finally under pressure government released him on 21st March 1959 (Bajwa, 1979, 96). On 19th January 1960, Tara Singh with the support of supporters of Punjabi province defeated the I.N.C., Communist Party, and other anti-province groups, winning the elections of S.G.P.C. by winning one hundred thirty-two seats out of 139 seats. On 24th January 1960, all the winners pledged at Amritsar to sacrifice everything (*Tan, Man, Dhan*), for the cause of Punjabi province (Sarhadi, 318-319). Meetings of Tara Singh, Fateh Singh and Nehru failed which led towards the observing of fast till death by Tara Singh but he broke the pledge on 1st October at the insistence of Haardik Singh, a close aide of Nehru who gave words that demands will be accepted. Master Tara Singh was never pardoned by the community (Kumar & Siebrer, 1991, 183).

The loss of elections of 1962 was dreadful for Akaalis as they're split. In this scenario Fateh Singh emerged as a strong leader of the community, pledging to work for the cause. In 1965 elections, Fateh Singh group emerged as victorious defeating Tara Singh (Kapur, 215-216). After defeat, Tara Singh openly backed the call for an independent state where Sikhs can enjoy full freedom (Sarhadi, 400). All this was due to consistent deceptive political measure adopted by the congress and to keep his stakes with the community. Fateh Singh also vowed for the legitimate right of Punjabi speaking province and termed it as "discriminatory". He met the new Prime Minister; Laal Bahadur Shastri on 7th-8th August 1965 and after meeting announced that he will go for fast on 10th September but had to delay because of war. After the end, a committee was constituted to work for the Sikhs demands under Hukm Singh. New committee was constituted and members were Mr. Naanda, Mr. Chaavan and Jag Jiwan Ram (The Tribune, 23rd Feb 1966). It was decided that the committee will give its findings to the cabinet rather than parliament. 27th Feb 1966, Sant Fateh Singh refused the proposal of Mrs. Gandhi offer to nominate his nominees for committee.

On 9th March 1966, the C. W. C. accepted province mandate and asked authorities to make Punjabi province. The resolution was to carve out Punjabi speaking state and authorities should take proper measures (Sarhadi, 425-426).

Indira Gandhi put pressure on her party to accept the *Punjabi Suba* (Bajwa, 100-101). Following the acceptance of the Working Committee resolution to create a Punjabi speaking state by first the government and then Parliament, Punjab was divided into Punjabi-speaking (Punjab) and Hindi-speaking states (Haryana and Himachal Pradesh) on 1st November 1966 (Kapur, 216). The new Punjabi-speaking

The Sikh Struggle for Khalistan: Refocusing on the Punjabi Suba (Province) Movement in India

state consisted of 41 percent of the area and 55 percent of the population of the old Punjab, with the Sikhs in a majority (Narang, 263). The C.W.C. decision was greeted. Sikh leaders remarked that it was an accurate, very exact and a timely decision (Joshi, 86). Sant Fateh Singh guaranteed all the sections of the society that all of them would live together and in peace. Jaan Singh, AryyaSammaj, Sanatan Dharam and businessmen criticized the decision of C.W.C. Mr. Yaagya Dut, Secretary-General of Punjab and Himachal Jan Sangh fast observed Punjabi Suba's establishment (Kapur, 217).

Denominations among the Akalis

In 1966, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, relented in an attempt to further divide the Akali Dal between the faction led by the "communal" Tara Singh, with his base amongst the urban Khatri refugees from West Punjab, and that led by Sant Fateh Singh, a more "secular" leader representing the interests of the predominantly Jat farmers of East Punjab. Sant Fateh Singh had succeeded Master Tara Singh as leader of the 1960-1961 "*morcha*" upon the latter's imprisonment (Bajwa, 94-97). His emphasis upon language rather than Sikh identity earned him the support of other political groups such as the Communists and Socialists and lessened the animosity of the Punjabi Hindus. After the 1962 elections in which the SAD again failed to capture a majority of votes in the Punjabi-speaking region of Punjab, winning just nineteen seats to the INC's forty-nine (Election Commission 1963), the Akali Dal split between the 'Master' and 'Sant' factions with the latter emerging dominant (Bajwa, 100-101). Sant Fateh Singh interpreted the election defeat and the resulting split not as a defeat for the *Punjabi Suba* but as a rejection of how Master Tara Singh sought to secure that end. By making the case for the *Punjabi Suba* exclusively on linguistic grounds, Sant Fateh Singh managed to win over the Hindu Congress and Jana Sangh elites in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh who were eager to establish states of their own (K. Singh, 306). The significance attached to the formation by the SAD of a Punjabi-speaking state, one in which Sikhs will constitute a majority, and the declaration of a religious war, Dharam yudh, testifies to the fundamental nationalist essence of the Akali demand in order to achieve this objective. The Sikh leadership's adoption of Punjabi as the language of the panth left the non-Sikh majority with little choice but to record their language preference in the 1951 and 1961 censuses, Hindi, rather than the language spoken at home, Punjabi., although this view ignores the role played by Punjabi Hindu elites in the RSS and INC in "communalizing" the demand for a Punjabi speaking state (Nayar, 1990, 150). This further strengthened the religious boundaries between Sikhs and Hindus which had been constructed during the colonial period by the Tat Khalsa reformers and institutionalized by the establishment of a Sikh 'political system' within independent India. Indeed, the protracted struggle for the Punjabi Suba "cemented territoriality into Sikh identity" (Oberoi, 1987, 39-40) as SAD argued that the Punjabi language, and through it the Punjab, was solely on behalf of the Sikh community.

Violence after announcement of Punjabi Suba

On 12th March 1966, there were some incidents of violence by students reported in four major towns "Amritsar", "Jalandhar", "Ludhiana" and "Hisar" (The Tribune, 13 March 1966). Fateh Singh vowed for Hindu-Sikh unity and peace. He blamed

the Punjab C.M. Mr. Raam Kiishan and the Home Minister, Mr. Darbaara Singh as they were trouble makers, asking for “*Governor Rule*”. There were also some reports of violence in Ambala cantonment, Aboohar and Jiind. Police retaliation to these protesters led into clashes which resulted into the death of 14 people and many injured. Tara Singh alongwith 17 other Akaalis were arrested and sent to Rohtak jail (The Tribune, 15th March 1966). Although violent, the anti-Suba frustration was very short as not only the Sikhs as well as the Hindi speaking community of the Hindi region endorsed the decision to diverge the old area.

On 18th March 1966, Committee recommended the restructure based on language (Bajwa, 94-97. The Committee announced particular commendation that

- I. “The area of Punjab defined in the First Schedule of the 1957 Order of the Punjab Regional Committee will establish a unilingual state of Punjabi” (Kapur, 216).
- II. “In the event of any modification of the boundaries between the three States, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, an expert committee should be set up immediately to recommend these changes” (Sarhadi, 431-432).

The Punjabi Province consisted of 13 districts those were majorly Sikh populated areas. (K. Singh, 306).

Conclusion

The establishment of Punjabi Suba in 1966 although gave political life to Akali Dal as well as the Indian National Congress’s repute in Punjab but it also led towards the disharmony and violence in the name of Punjabi Suba. The right-wing Sikh leadership felt betrayed and disillusioned with the Indian establishment. Now their political struggle was directed towards the establishment of a separate, sovereign and independent Sikh state. The Congress political tools and more centralization of power led towards the unrest among the Sikhs. Although the authorities tried to make the Sikhs peaceful by accepting much-voiced demand of Punjabi Suba but a large number of the Sikhs conceived it as a deceptive tool of Indian National Congress. The main reason was that they felt that by giving Sikh majority areas to Himachal Pradesh and declaring Chandigarh as Union Territory was a planned tool to not to give a clear majority to the Sikhs. Since then, Sikhs adopted militancy as a tool to struggle for separate and autonomous homeland for the Sikhs namely, Khalistan, in Bharat.

The Sikh Struggle for Khalistan: Refocusing on the Punjabi Suba (Province)
Movement in India

References

- [1] Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs*, (New Delhi: Oxford University, Press, 1999).
- [2] Glancy in a letter to Linlithgow wrote "Some of the more influential Akalis are fond of saying that they now understand the folly of having started from the right path a few years ago and made common cause with Congress; they indicate that they no longer consider 'Khalistan' as a practical idea; That the notion of "Pakistan" is, of course, rather unacceptable and that they are even more hated by the possibility of closer union with the Congress Party, since that would eventually lead to their political identity being submerged".
- [3] However, by 1944 the partition of India became a distinct possibility, and the Sikhs became restive and alarmed. Master Tara Singh, the then leader of the Akali Dal had warned Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942 that the Sikhs would never tolerate Muhammadan rule, open or disguised.
- [4] Singh Gopal, *A History of the Sikh People*, Chapter XXVIII, "Jinnah met the Maharajah of Patiala and his Prime Minister, H.S.Malik, I.C.S., in the house of Malik's elder brother, Sir. T.S.Malik in New Delhi
- [5] Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs*, 291.
- [6] Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs*, 291.
- [7] Sarhadi, Ajit Singh, *Punjabi Suba*, (New Delhi: U.C. Kapur and Sons, 1970), 450.
- [8] *KHALISTAN: The Politics of Passion*, 5.
- [9] *KHALISTAN: The Politics of Passion*, 5.
- [10] Chawla, Muhammad Iqbal, The Khalistan Movement of 1984: A Critical Appreciation, *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, January- June 2017, 81-90.
- [11] Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs*, 293-294.
- [12] Sangari, Kumkum, A Narrative of Restoration: Gandhi's Last Years and Nehruvian Secularism, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 30, No. 3/4 (Mar - Apr, 2002), 3-33.
- [13] Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1997), 237.
- [14] Mirza, Sarfraz Hussain, Hasnat, Syed Farooq & Sohail Mahmood, *The Sikh Question*, (Lahore: Center for South Asian Studies, 1985), 30.

- [15] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 290. The Indian Government after partition committed for reorganization on the bases of language model but later on they reverted back from their policy.
- [16] Harjot S Oberoi, "From Punjab to "Khalistan": Territoriality and Metacommentary", *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 60, No. (Spring 1987), 38.
- [17] Sarfraz Hussain Mirza, Syed Farooq Hasnat & Sohail Mahmood, *The Sikh Question*, 30. See also, Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, The Khalistan Movement of 1984: A Critical Appreciation, *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, January- June 2017, 81-90.
- [18] Pandit Mohan Lal, *Disintegration of Punjab*, (Chandigarh: Sameer Prakashan, 1984), 56-57. See also, Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 290-296.
- [19] Sarfraz Hussain Mirza, Syed Farooq Hasnat & Sohail Mahmood, *The Sikh Question*, 199.
- [20] Rajiv A Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, 214.
- [21] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics, 1920-1970*, 95.
- [22] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics, 1920-1970*, 96.
- [23] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics, 1920-1970*, 96.
- [24] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics, 1920-1970*, 96.
- [25] Sarhadi, Ajit Singh, *Punjabi Suba*, 318-319.
- [26] *KHALISTAN: The Politics of Passion*, 5. see also, Ram Narayan Kumar & Georg Siebrer, *The Sikh Struggle: Origin, Evolution and Present Phase*, 183. For more study, see, Khuswant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 300.
- [27] Kapur, Rajiv A, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, 215-216.
- [28] Sarhadi, Ajit Singh, *Punjabi Suba*, 400.
- [29] *The Tribune*, 23 February 1966.
- [30] Sarhadi, Ajit Singh, *Punjabi Suba*, 425-426.
- [31] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, 100-101.
- [32] Kapur, Rajiv A, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, 216.
- [33] Narang, A. S. "The Movement for a Punjabi-Speaking State", in I. Banga (ed.), *Five Punjabi Centuries*, 263.
- [34] Joshi, P.C. (ed.), *Punjabi Suba- A Symposium*, 86.
- [35] Kapur, Rajiv A, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, 217.

The Sikh Struggle for Khalistan: Refocusing on the Punjabi Suba (Province)
Movement in India

- [36] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, 94-97.
- [37] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, 100-101.
- [38] Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 306.
- [39] Nayar, B.R., *Minority Politics in the Punjab*, 150. See also, Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990).
- [40] Oberoi, H.S., "From Punjab to Khalistan": Territoriality and Metacommentary', *Pacific Affairs*, 60 (1), (1987): 39-40.
- [41] *The Tribune*, 13 March 1966.
- [42] *The Tribune*, 15 March 1966.
- [43] Bajwa, Harcharn Singh, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, 94-97.
- [44] Kapur, Rajiv A, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, 216. See also, Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 306.
- [45] Sarhadi, Ajit Singh *Punjabi Suba*, 431-432.
- [46] *The Tribune*, 19 March 1966. See also, Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 306.