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Shahidgang Mosque Dispute: A Reappraisal.

Abstract

Shaheed Ganj Mosque dispute between the Sikhs and Muslims erupted in 1935 and contaminated the peaceful religious atmosphere of Punjab. Overreaction of both the communities particularly of their religious and political leaders complicated the issue which finally was addressed by the Lahore High Court. But this dispute had created a wide gulf between the Sikhs and the Muslims which culminated into the open hostility in 1940s especially on the eve of the partition of India and the division of the Punjab. Much has been written on the causes, events and the implications of the Shaheed Ganj Mosque Dispute but historians have not given academic attention to the response of the Punjab legislature which consisted of the elected members of the main communities of Punjab namely Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Their views, actions and policies determine the future of their communities. Therefore, it is of immense importance to study the response of the legislators of these communities in the Punjab Legislative Council. While focusing on the Sikh-Muslim relations during 1930s with reference to the Shaheed Ganj Mosque issue, the paper tries to uncover the thoughts and actions of the Legislators of the Sikh and Muslim communities in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. This paper, hopefully, will a research gap in the existing historical literature in the history of colonial Punjab.

Introduction

The writings on the regional 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. A number of historians including Iftikhar Malik, Tanwar, Ikram Ali Malik, David Gilmartin, Ian Talbot and David Page have penned on the dynamics of the Punjab politics. Though their main scheme study was not look into the Shahidganj Mosque issue but they have shed some light on it which provides general information about the origin and development of the dispute. But these historians have generally overlooked the importance of the role of Punjab Legislature

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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.

This study presents an in-depth analysis of the Shahidganj Mosque dispute which had perennial effects on the political mindset in the subcontinent. It unveils the culturally masked faces of two different communities, i.e., the Muslims 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.

The Shahidganj mosque issue was the most significant political issue in mid 1930s. This issue not only influenced the legislative politics of the Punjab but had social repercussions too. As the Shahidganj remained the burning issue among the communities of the Punjab, it also exposed the reality of the secular politics that the Unionists had been advocating. The three communities that had been working under the flag of the Unionist Party, (mention the three parties) suddenly got split and involved in a heated debate against each other. In order to investigate further the Shahidganj Mosque, files in the India Office Record can help us understand the issue in its true context.

The Gurdwara was situated in the Landa Bazar midway between the railway station and the Delhi Gate of Lahore City. It occupied a considerable area of which the greater part was covered by a number of buildings built by the Sikhs after the collapse of an old Mughal *Hamam* some times during the first half of the last century. On the eastern side of the site was an old building, originally built as a *Masjid* by a Mughal Governor of Lahore about 250 years ago. It was this building which the Sikhs were then trying to demolish. Syed Alam

Shah, extra Assistant Commissioner, reported in 1883 to his senior officers after inspecting the Gurdwara, that one third of the Masjid was used as a Dharamsala; one third as a *Langar* and one third as shed for storage of Bhoosa.² The last judicial decree against the Muslim's stance was issued by the Sikh Gurdwara Tribunal in 1930. Even the Viceroy of India had dismissed the Muslims' claim when a delegation of the Anjuman-i-Islamia met him regarding the Shahidgang issue. Viceroy told them that in his opinion the Muslims had been "flogging a dead horse, the mosque has since long ceased to serve as a sacred place. It is an established fact that the Masjid has been used for private purpose since 1852." The Anjuman could file an appeal in the High Court but it did not do so and considered the decision of the Tribunal as a final verdict. All the judicial decisions went in favour of the Sikhs. It was then impossible even for the Punjab Government to implement section 295 of the Indian Penal Code for apprehending persons involved in demolition of the Masjid.³ Surprisingly enough, even the Governor of the province had asked the Sikhs to demolish the masjid but they could not dare to do so. The Governor instigated them and he said that if they were reluctant to demolish the masjid, he would call the armed forces to do the job. The Commander-in-Chief rebuked the Governor for his irresponsible remarks and said that his incompetency for the job could flare up mutiny against the government. However, the Governor's hatred for the Muslims did not lessen and he became harsher towards the Muslims of the Punjab. The very next day, he ordered to open fire on unarmed Muslims which continued for the whole day. This ignited communal riots in the province where four Sikh were attacked, two being killed. However, the communal riots were soon stopped because the matter was changing into an anti-government movement. The riots were contained owing mainly to the good conduct of the Sikh community in the Punjab. They did not retaliate; rather they had been showing patience because they had already demolished the Masjid.⁴ At the time when the Masjid was being demolished, the Muslim leaders were in a very difficult position. For face saving, they blamed the government for the demolition of the Masjid. During this period, lies were told to the Muslim masses which instigated them to agitate against the government. In fact, they were more interested in getting their votes for the future legislative councils

¹ The Shahidgang Gurdwara. A brief account of its history compiled from Judicial records, L/ PJ / 7/931, IOR.

³ Discussion between Muslim Deputation and the Viceroy, L/ PJ / 7/931, IOR.

⁴ From Government of India Home department to under Secretary of State for India Office, Dated: 22 July, 1935.

than in the peace of the province. Certain leading agitators hoped to make money out of the movement by a wider circulation of their newspapers. Indeed, a deplorable picture of the affair had been the failure of all but a few persons in Lahore who realized the gravity of the situation and refrained from involving in personal and party intrigues.⁵ Whatever the causes might have been, it was made clear after a few days that the Muslim's claim of the masjid was unnatural. As far as the Shahidgang issue was concerned, the Muslim organizations and individual agitators were committing themselves wholeheartedly to these two demands: Firstly, the possession of the mosque should be restored to the Muslims. Secondly, wherever in the country, if such a situation arises where the law of the country comes in conflict with the Sharia, the latter should prevail.⁶

In the same way, Members of the Punjab Legislative Council attended a conference at the Council chamber on the 17th of July, 1935. Members present made an appeal to the public:- We members of the Punjab Legislative Council, representatives of all communities and parties in the council appeal to our brothers throughout the province to assist in restoring peace between the communities the good relations which have been affected by the Shahidganj affair. We regard this issue as of paramount importance and we consider that it transcends all considerations of community and party and all individuals' interests. We believe that the press of the province can be of the greatest assistance in promoting the conditions necessary for reconciliation both by abstaining from the publication of reports or articles that are likely to inflame communal feeling, and also by bringing home to every section of the public the profound necessity in the interests of the people of restoring harmony and good will.⁷

The Governor addressed to the members of the Legislative Council on Wednesday 17th July 1935, denying all rumours about the government's involvement in Shahidganj case. Rumours regarding Muslim police officers' conduct were also contradicted. It was made clear categorically that there was not and never had been any cause

⁵ Telegram: From Government of India Home department to Secretary of State for India, R.No. No.4332 dated 22 July, 1935. IOR: L/PJ/4/886.

⁶ Telegram: Appreciation of the situation arising out of the Shahidganj affair. R. No. 2427 dated 11 September 1935.

⁷ Press Communiqué Abstract 1435, Chief Secretary to government of the Punjab. Dated 19 July 1935.

whatsoever to doubt the complete loyalty of the police. They performed their duties impartially and devotedly.⁸

According to the government's reports on Shahidganj dispute Muslim Community might be divided into three classes. Moderates did not want to be involved in a conflict with the Government. Muslim masses were in a resentful and puzzled mood, a state of mind which provided very suitable ground in which seeds of trouble might be sworn. A group of agitators would not allow the agitation to drop. They had various motives: some wanted to sell their papers, others to boost their political careers by appearing as the champion of Islam, still others were by nature agitators and perhaps one or two were genuine religious fanatics. This movement was a serious menace to peace in the Punjab and NWFP along with borders of the Hazara District. The recent raids and gatherings of Lashkars were due to propaganda emanating from the Punjab and it was resulting in killings of the non-Muslims and destruction of their properties and religious buildings. Orders were issued to District police officer to curtail their activities and take steps to combat this threat of civil disobedience. Similarly, instructions were given to detach Pir Jamaat Ali Shah from the Movement, otherwise to restrict him or arrest him as the last option and to enforce Press Act rigorously against persons who made inflammatory speeches.⁹

Chaudhri Afzal Haq criticized the Government for allowing the mosque to be demolished. He said that this act became all the more condemnable as the authorities had assured its safety. He asserted that the Government had failed terribly in this case and as such it had lost the right to come to the House for additional expenditure on the police. He blamed that the Government had provided the machinery for the demolition of the mosque building to the persons involved in this action. Shaikh Mohammad Sadiq demanded that an enquiry be made into the firing. He also urged the authorities to award compensations to the survivors of the people killed in the firing and to restore the rights of the Muslims over the mosque.¹⁰

The Muslim members complained that the government officials were using the Criminal Law Amendment Act

⁸ From Government of India Home department to under Secretary of state for India Office, Dated: 16 August 1935. IOR:L/PJ/7/886 .

⁹ From Secretary, Public and Judicial Department to Government of India Home Department, Dated 23/9/1935.

¹⁰ PBLCD (Punjab Legislative Council Debates), Vol.27, 1935,657-8,666,670-1.

indiscriminately against the Muslims and making no distinction between the terrorists and the common Muslims. The Shahidganj mosque issue intensified the communal rift between the Muslims and the Sikhs. The Akalis and the Ahrars were dissatisfied with the Government's handling of the situation. The long discussion followed the allegations and counter-allegations but the Nationalist and the Unionist members remained neutral. However, the motion was passed by 44 votes to 24.¹¹ By and large it was a communal voting. The members who claimed they were secular also voted in favour of their respective religion fellows.

In order to convey their concerns on the issue of Shahidganj a delegation of the Muslims of India met the Viceroy. The Deputation, which was apparently appointed by the Muslim members of the central legislature and which was headed by Mr. K. L. Gauba, submitted a Memorandum expressing their considerations in return for which the Muslim Members of the central legislature would advise their community to abandon Civil Disobedience as means of "recovering" the Mosque. This looked rather like blackmailing, but the deputation was given a sympathetic hearing. It was made clear to the deputation that Government could not release prisoners or remove the restrictions placed on the press until they were certain of a complete abandonment of agitation including the Muslim economic boycott of the Sikhs. The Governor Sir H. Emerson reminded the deputation of the legal position and said that he saw no chance of Sikhs handing it back to the Muslims. But if agitation ceased they might agree to a settlement on the terms that had already been proposed to them by the Governor and members of the Punjab Legislative Council shortly after the demolition of the mosque. The suggestion that legislation should be introduced to protect mosques, etc. from claims on the ground of adverse possession was received sympathetically by the Home member, who promised that the Central Government would consider a Bill having this object.¹²

The meetings of officials with two sides tell us the temperature and state of mind of both the communities. An Under Secretary of State for India wrote that he had a long talk with Master Tara Singh before he met the Muslims and the impression he got was that the Sikhs were even less inclined to make concessions than that they were two months ago. He also ascertained that the Sikhs would

¹¹ PBLCD, Vol. 27, 1935, 741, 849.

¹² Reception by the Viceroy of a deputation of six Muslim members of the Legislative Assembly, on 27th September 1935, F.5/21/35.

like to make the Shahidganj affair an opportunity for settlement of other outstanding problems such as statutory Muslim majority in the Punjab legislature, the cry of *Azan* and facilities for *jhatka*.¹³

The mistrust and heat between the two sides can be estimated by the fact that a resolution passed by SGPC December 15, 1935 at Sri Akal Takhat Sahib, Amritsar condemned government of Punjab's ban on *kirpan* wearing in Lahore. The SGPC viewed with alarm the fact that since the beginning of the Shahidganj agitation the conduct of the Muslim police at Lahore had been characterized by partiality, connivance, insubordination, and even incitement and urged upon the government to restore confidence of the public especially of the Hindus and Sikhs, by holding impartial inquiry into the conduct of Lahore police and by stopping further recruitment of Muslims in the service. It also demanded that the ratio of the Muslims in services should be brought to the level of 50 percent. The SGPC asserted that the Pro-Muslim policy of the Punjab government regarding Shahidganj affair was largely responsible for the worsening and continuance of the Muslim agitation. The Muslim ministers of the Punjab government initiated and organized relief organizations for the Muslims rioters who suffered in the unlawful riotous demonstrations. The government had failed to take any punitive measures against the offending community notwithstanding the murder of several innocent Sikhs and Hindus. The SGPC further recorded that the uncalled for reference to the possibility of the reversal of the final decision of competent civil courts and the verdict of government holding all the three communities responsible for the murder of innocent Sikhs and Hindus by Muslim hooligans as contained in his Excellency's latest utterance had justified the apprehensions of the Sikhs and Hindus that the government was not preferring to take effective measures for the protection of their life and property against Muslim aggression.¹⁴

Muhammad Ali Jinnah played a crucial role in the issue and his statesmanship saved the Muslims from embarrassment. But the Lahore High Court's decision on the Shahidganj mosque put the Muslims once again in hot waters. All the judges except Justice Din Muhammad dismissed the petition of the Muslims. They agreed that under the *Shariat* a mosque always remained a mosque. However they gave the ruling that the Punjab Laws Act had overruled Muslim

¹³ Under Secretary of State to His Majesty, October 14, 1935, No. 228/2049, IOR : F. 5/21/35.

¹⁴ From Sub-office of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee to Secretary of State for India, Reference no. 774 Dated 21st December, 1935.

personal law since 1872. The Muslims were naturally disappointed at this decision. At this stage Zafar Ali Khan requested Jinnah to help resolve the dispute. But Skindar Hayat Khan, Punjab's premier, was not ready to risk his alliance with Hindu and Sikh landlords.¹⁵

It made the work of Jinnah more difficult and he wisely chose to resolve the problem politically. The Shariat bill of 1937 seemed to have ensured cultural identity of the Muslims but the Shahidganj mosque dispute symbolized "the as-yet incomplete transition from discourse to politics". The Punjabi Muslims had internally differentiated interests, and until they reconciled, they could not hope to achieve their goal.¹⁶

There were two main bodies were the Majlis-i-Tahaffuz-i-Masjid, Shahid Ganj and Majlis-i- Ittihad -i-Millat the programme of the latter was perhaps more constructive than the former and attempts were being made to draft an Auqaf bill. A conference was held at Rawalpindi on the 31st of August, and the 1st September. The prime mover in summoning this conference appears to have been one Maulvi Muhammad Ishaq who belonged originally to Manshera in the Hazara district.¹⁷ Pir Jamat Ali Shah of Sialkot addressed a meeting after Juma prayers. He was made Amir-i-Shariat at the conference, and declared a dictator. The most important decision was in regard to civil disobedience. There was by no means unanimity about the desirability of embarking on this, but no one definitely rejected the idea, and ultimate decision appeared.¹⁸

In 1936, Mr. Jinnah had played a significant part in conciliation. But with the passage of time the strife between the Muslims and Sikhs of the Punjab intensified and soon erupted into riots and consequently, both parties' leaders were arrested. Jinnah went to Lahore to soothe the situation and cool both the parties. Jinnah stressed on legal arbitration and use of constitutional methods. He tried to prove that communal harmony was possible. The Governor of the Punjab recorded his official thanks to Jinnah. He wrote, I am greatly indebted to the efforts of Mr Jinnah for this improvement and I wish to pay an unqualified tribute to the work he has done and is doing. Mr Jinnah

¹⁵ Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1857*, London, 2000. 384.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 384-5.

¹⁷ From Chief Secretary Government of the Punjab to all Deputy Commissioners, No. C-6 (6) 21-6B, 11th September 1935.

¹⁸ Telegram: Appreciation of the situation arising out of the Shahidganj affair. R. No. 2427 dated 11 September 1935, L/PJ/4/886, IOR.

succeeded in his first task, namely, bringing the Muslim agitation to strictly constitutional and legal lines, and has thus made it possible for Government to take action for which they had been awaiting an opportunity.¹⁹

Since December 1937 the Ahrars, with the object of embarrassing the government had been sending 5 volunteers daily to the Shahidganj site to court imprisonment. At first other Muslims took it as a political trick of the Ahrars but after the court judgment (26th January 1938) on appeal large crowds began to accompany the volunteers, and there had been indications that other Muslim bodies might join in the civil disobedience campaign. The position was complicated by the fact that Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, the leader of the Unionist Party and the premier of the Punjab, attended the meeting of the Muslim League at Lucknow in October 1937 and came to an agreement with Mr. Jinnah, the leader of the League the terms of which had been differently interpreted by the parties concerned but which involved, at any rate, Sir Sikandar's joining the League and encouraging his Muslim followers to do the same. The Muslim League had expressed itself strongly in favour of the return of the Shahidganj site to the Muslims, and passed a strongly worded resolution on the subject in Lucknow, though after Sir Sikandar had left. The premier, however, had declared that his adherence to the Muslim League did not affect in any way the policy of the Unionists, and that he would continue to support the line hitherto taken by government with regard to the Shahidganj dispute.²⁰

So far as Shahidgang directly was concerned, Muslim organizations and individual agitators were committing themselves more and more deeply to these two demands. First, the mosque should be restored to Muslims. Second, wherever in such cases the law of the country conflicts with the Shariat the latter should prevail.²¹

Unionist leaders like Sir Fazl-i-Husain and Sir Firoz Khan Noon had condemned the agitational style of the movement's largely urban leadership. But they knew it well that Islamic symbols were very vital in the shaping and strengthening of Islamic culture. Indeed, Noon had indicated that if the Unionists were to organize outside the Council

¹⁹ Hector Bolitho, *Jinnah the Creator of Pakistan*, London, 1954. 110-11.

²⁰ The Shahidganj dispute, Governor General to Secretary of State for India 7th March 1938.

²¹ Telegram: Appreciation of the situation arising out of the Shahid ganj affair. R. No. 2427 dated 11 September 1935, IOR: L/PJ/4/886.

they would need to define their authority in terms that would “catch the imagination of the Muslim masses”. In the new political system, he recognized, Islamic symbols would undoubtedly have an important role. Nevertheless, playing to the religious sentiments of the “masses” could, as Sir Fazl-i- Husain realized, be extremely dangerous. ‘Whatever the appeal of such symbols in the cities, Unionist ideology had to be consistent with the structure of imperial hierarchy and with the language of authority on which the party’s local power was based’.²²

Sir Muhammad Iqbal who was watching the policies and strategies of Ahrars closely for quite some time felt that these policies might help Congress to win the hearts of the Muslims in the Punjab. So he wrote to Mr. Jinnah and asked him to play his role in organising the Muslims of the Punjab. Iqbal had the well considered opinion that the ‘Indian Nationalist’ of the Congress mould was ‘intolerant of the birth of a desire for self-determination in the heart of north-west Indian Islam’. He advised Jinnah to take up bread and butter issues and ignore the Muslims of the minority provinces. However, to the utter disappointment of Iqbal, Jinnah in October 1937, struck a deal with the Unionist premier which came to be known as the Sikandar-Jinnah pact. Jinnah had in fact rejected the politics of prejudice and bigotry. He had preferred the ‘progressives’ over the ‘reactionaries’. It was not a matter of personal liking or disliking only. Rather it revealed a pragmatic approach on the part of Jinnah. League lacked resources and organisation and hoped to benefit from the resources and organisation of the Unionists. However, Sikandar Hayat Khan could see that this pact would in fact help them keep away the League. This pact in fact distanced the Urban Punjabi Muslims from Jinnah and League. How disappointed they were could be judged by their comment that the all-India high command had failed to give a clear lead as to whether Muslims should co-operate with Hindus, play the role of ‘the proverbial dog in the manger’ or ‘strive for the establishment of a separate state of their own’.²³

Emerson reported that the situation in relation to Shahidganj was developing in directions most embarrassing for Sikandar. Two private bills had been introduced in the (assembly) one by Gauba providing for the taking over by the government of the Shahidganj

²² David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*, London, 1988. 109.

²³ Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 382-3.

(site), for its recognition as mosque, and for its maintenance as an open site: the second, by Barkat Ali, providing in effect for application of Muslim law to all buildings which had at any time been a mosque, with complete retrospective effect; and strongest possible communal pressure was brought on Muslim members of the assembly to support Barkat Ali's bill. On the Sikh side there had been strong statements and speeches by Tara Singh and other Akali leaders which demanded that the governor should refuse sanction to the bills. Twenty-four Muslim members had so far put in motions for leave to introduce a bill in the same terms as that sponsored by Malik Barkat Ali, and while several of these were apparently prepared to withdraw if asked to do so by the party, there were some who would not be willing to withdraw in any case.²⁴

Sikandar informed Emerson that he was as firmly convinced as ever that the bills could not be allowed to become law and that it would not be even in the interests of Muslim community to allow this; that he had, however, found himself unable to convince the Muslim members of the assembly to this effect and that he was apprehensive that he might ultimately, failing any agreement, had to resign on ground that, since he could not carry his Muslim supporters, he and the ministry had better made way for someone else. He would, at the same time in that event, make it clear that he was definitely opposed to bills and would continue to oppose them. His non-Muslim colleagues had throughout held the view that ministers should advise the governor to withhold the sanction and thereafter face the assembly on a motion of adjournment or a vote of no confidence. Emerson had urged that the line proposed by Sikandar did not appear to be a right way for the popular ministry to meet their responsibility. He said that it did not pay sufficient regard to interests of the province; and was (unfair) to the non Muslim supporters of the government and he felt with the non Muslim ministers who took the view, which Emerson shared, that if the ministry took a bold course most of Muslim members would support premier, that this way of escape was a wrong one and lacking in courage.²⁵

However, Sikandar indicated that his position would be much stronger in dealing with Muslims if there was any sign of a gesture from Sikhs that, if sanction was refused to introduction of bills, they

²⁴ Telegram: Governor General to Secretary of State for India 7th March 1938. No.371-G.1019

²⁵ Telegram: Governor General to Secretary of State for India dated New Delhi, 7th March 1938.

would be prepared to consider an amicable settlement. There were however, personal difficulties over this, owing to hostility of Tara Singh to Sundar Singh. The only settlement which appeared possible was one by which the site would be walled- in and accepted by both communities as absolutely neutral territory, accessible to no one. Sikandar had given a practical guarantee to Sunder Singh that, if Sikhs agreed to this, the solution would be accepted by the Muslims except a minority of extremists. Emerson warned him, however, that it was necessary to recognize that a very grave crisis might develop. If the sitting minister resigned in connection with Shahidganj issue, he saw no alternative ministry able to carry on. He proposed to stress Sikandar in private discussion that the line suggested by him was not only fraught with great danger to his province but was likely to damage his political reputation, and that most probable result would be the suspension of the constitution. It would produce a crisis of great magnitude in the Punjab and would subject the Sikandar fibre to a very severe test.²⁶ The governor wrote to viceroy that "he had just heard through Sikandar that a letter had been sent by a Muslim advocate in Lahore, who was in charge of the appellants' case, to their solicitors in London asking the solicitors to apply to their lordships for a postponement of the hearing of the appeal on the ground that owing to the situation created by the war it had become impossible for local counsel to secure a passage to England."²⁷

Consequently, on 3rd May 1940 Judicial Committee of Privy Council dismissed the Muslims appeal of 1938 under Law of Limitation relating to Shahidganj issue started since July 1935 and declared it the Sikh property on 3rd May, 1940.²⁸ The PC's decision was on the whole received calmly by the Muslim press, although it undoubtedly pressed Mr. Jinnah and Sir Sikandar Hayat to find measures of restoring the mosque as promised in the course of various statements and urged at party's conferences. The Sikh press received the news with great satisfaction but not provocative in its comments.²⁹ The resentment was increased by a sense of failure among Muslims and then feeling that their prestige had suffered. There was also a growing recognition of the fact that the community had been left without a sound and sane leadership at a very critical time. There had been an

²⁶ Governor General to Secretary of State for India 7th March 1938.

²⁷ Governor to Viceroy, PFNR, the 1st Half of May 1940.

²⁸ PFNR(Punjab Fortnightly Reports), 1st Half of May 1940.

²⁹ PFNR, the First half of December, 1940. L/PJ/5/243.

absence of effective leadership, and the masses also looked to the Maulvis in vein.

From the beginning the Sikhs had taken the view that the Shahidganj Gurdwara was not the real issue. They had regarded it as trial of strength in view of the new constitution and the communal award. They along with the Hindus were now making little secret of views which were at first expressed more or less in private. In fact, there had been a spate of speeches all over the province, worse than any made since 1919. It was not easy at that time to say whether the effects would persist. There had also been signs of the creation of a terrorist party among young Muslims, and action was taken against several of the organizers. This again was a danger that had to be watched. The only thing that was likely to save this was a spontaneous and generous offer on the part of the Sikhs, regarding the site of the demolished building. This was improbable, but not impossible. Failing this, the communal danger, must grow and might quickly reach serious proportions. The fact that the Hindus were supporting the Sikhs did not improve the prospects. The chief complaints of the Hindus at that time in Lahore were first, that government wrongly placed the moral responsibility on the Sikhs and second, it was a mistaken kindness towards Muslims to restore the Shah Chirag mosque. With regards to the latter complaint, which was also made by the Sikhs it might be mentioned that the Punjab government had previously decided to restore this mosque if the discussions between Sikhs and Muslims had resulted in an honourable settlement of the Shahidganj gurdwara dispute.³⁰

On the whole, the Muslim religious parties made their best efforts to stop the demolition of the mosque. But this movement only caused heavy losses to the Muslims who remained helpless for the restoration of the mosque. The role of the Unionist Party remained so indifferent to this issue that it did not offer any support to this movement either in the public or in the parliament. The only reason was that the Unionists confined to the party manifesto and could not afford to harm their rural interests. So, it had no interest in an urban dispute like Shahidganj mosque, obviously considered a religious matter.

The Shahidganj mosque brought Sikh and the Muslim communities against each other. The radical groups in and outside the

³⁰ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore, 26th July 1935.

legislature politicized the whole matter for their vested interests. Emotions and fervour ruled over logic and law for the time being which really damaged the friendly atmosphere of both communities of the Punjab. Eventually, the future of secular politics became bleak in the Punjab legislature in the following years.

Besides flaring up riots and agitation among communities, the Shahidganj mosque issue had telling effects on the political mindset. Religious ideology emerged as the strongest ideology in the following years, in reality strengthening the discourse generated by two-nation theory. Like Urdu-Hindi conflict, the Shahidganj mosque issue had vouchsafed this belief that religious gulfs between major communities would never allow them to always live peacefully with each other. Moreover, a shift from secular to religious politics occurred in the wake of this issue and the culturally-motivated sentiments of peaceful co-existence receded into the background. The coming years were going to witness a radicalized and religiously charged political scene in the subcontinent.

Conclusion

The Shahidganj Masjid issue left a cleavage between the Sikh-Muslim relations. The Muslim legislators of the assembly did not aloof themselves from the situation, so their support obviously with Muslim side and the Sikhs took up it against their rivalry. The Unionist premier of the Punjab Sir Sikander Hayat Khan did not want to damage Unionist non-communal image so he remained calm and acted on wait and see policy in order to defuse the crisis. The Muslim agitators did not appreciate the Unionist party's role in whole issue. In the course of time, Sir Sikander Hayat did sign a pact which was called "Sikander-Beldev Pact" to rectify Sikhs rights as an entity. In spite of all confidence building measures between two communities dint could not fix rather widen. It obviously saw that after Pakistan Resolution 1940, the Sikhs demanded for unity of India or "Azad Punjab". The Hindus took advantage to exploit the opportunity and got successful to earn the Sikhs sympathies and moulded their sentiments against Muslims. Our study shows that if Shahidganj incident did not occur and the gulf between the Muslim-Sikh terms could settle. Moreover, with the support of Sikh community whole Punjab came with Pakistan, large scale bloodshed might avert and Kashmir issue never appeared on political scene as well.