
Sardar Swaran Singh (1907-1994); A Role Model Politician in South Asia

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'Leaders are born not made'. This is the most common notion about leadership. Those who support this opinion maintain that there are certain inborn qualities which enable a man to be a leader.¹ Another belief views leadership as a function of a group. According to this view a leader occupies a special status in the group. He is considered to be the 'central figure' by all group members who find in him the qualities which can help the members of the group to achieve desired goals.² The leader as a planner decides the ways and means by which the group shall achieve its ends. As a policy maker he formulates the goals and policies. It is not possible for all members of a large group to deal directly with other groups and other people outside the group. A leader assumes the role of the representative of the group.³ As a mediator the leader calls for identification of the areas of agreement among the groups and brings togetherness through agreement.⁴

The approaches and functions for these studies are often discussed related mainly with the top leadership. Major studies available have been of those leaders who have been at national or international level such as *Lenin, Martin Luther King, Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah*. There are very few studies at other levels of leadership, such as at party level and intermediate levels in government and in political parties. Study of leadership at these levels has remained more or less ignored by scholars. Sardar Swaran Singh who remained a minister in India's Union Cabinet for a quarter of a century was one such leader. He was a greatest son of India and played an important role in shaping its destiny during the twentieth century.

Sardar Swaran Singh was born on 19 August, 1907 in *Shankar* Village at distance of 6 km. from Nakodar in Jalandhar district. He belonged to agricultural family. He was a prodigious child. His father *Sardar Pratap Singh* was a prominent figure amongst the Sikhs and remained Vice-President and President of Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar for a number of years. After topping the matriculation examination in Jalandhar District he joined Randhir College, Kapurthala and passed Intermediate with credit. Thereafter, he joined Government College, Lahore and secured the degree of B. Sc. (Honors') and two years later in 1930 he earned, the degree of Master of Science (Physics) with distinction. Later on, he worked as a lecturer in Physics at Khalsa College, Lyallpur. But soon after leaving the job he joined the Government Law College, Lahore and passed the degree of L.L.B in 1932. He started his practice from Jalandhar and established himself as a successful advocate specializing in criminal suits. He made a mark in the profession by his unique insight into the judicial process and power of argument.⁵

The Sikhs were divided into three groups during that period. In the first category were those who were pro-British. Their representative body was the *Chief Khalsa Diwan* which was chiefly dominated by the Sikh aristocracy with also having small number of educated Sikhs from the middle class in its fold. This organization did not join the Congress, nor did it support any anti-imperialist activity in Punjab. Their main object was to protect the interests of the Sikhs by aligning with the British. The second organization of the Sikhs was *Central Sikh League*.⁶ It had a social base mainly among the educated middle class Sikhs of urban areas. They understood the real exploitative character of British imperialism and they were influenced by the growing wave of Indian nationalism. Therefore, from the very beginning, they associated themselves with the Congress against anti-imperialism struggle in Punjab.⁷

The Shiromani Akali Dal, another organization of the Sikhs, was constituted with a view to reform Gurudwaras by putting moral pressure. It was mainly composed of Jat Sikh peasantry, artisans, skilled and unskilled labour, soldiers etc.⁸ From the very beginning this organization was deeply involved in a series of struggles against British imperialism. In the course of these

struggles they worked sometimes alone but often in collaboration with the Congress.⁹

After 1933, Sardar Swaran Singh associated himself with socio-religious and political activities in the Punjab. He developed affinity with Akali Dal and became its prominent leader by the mid forties. Under the Government of India Act 1935 the elections in the Punjab were held in the beginning of 1937. *The Akalis*, Unionists and the Congress were the major political parties contesting the elections. The Akali Dal and Congress reached on an accord for fighting the elections in alliance on 14 November 1936.¹⁰ As a result of this Congress-Sikh unity, to a certain extent the Sikh's communal adamancy started melting, a national outlook began to emerge in him and he began to feel that service to the country was not possible in the narrow confines of the Akali Dal. The Congress was the right forum for such activity. In the election of 1937 Sikhs won 24 seats, 14 were contested by Akali Dal and 10 by the Congress. Important names among the 14 members of the Akali Dal were, *Sardar Swaran Singh, S. Baldev Singh, S. Partap Singh Kairon, Giani Kartar Singh, Narotam Singh, Kapoor Singh* etc., most of them later on joined the Congress.¹¹

Sardar Swaran Singh played an important role in the Akali Dal– Congress compromise. As an active member of Akali Dal he opposed the Pakistan scheme and condemned the Cripps Mission Plan of 22 March, 1942.¹² Meanwhile, the Sikhs who were not in the Congress felt the need to organize a political party distinct from the Akali Dal but having religious orientation. Therefore, the '*Panthic party*' was formed just before the 1946 elections.¹³ Sardar Baldev Singh was elected its leader, S. Ujjal Singh and S. Swaran Singh, deputy leaders and S. Ajit Singh became secretary of Panthic Party. Sardar Swaran Singh played an important role in the party. He participated in all the Conferences organized by the party and worked day and night for the success of his party in the elections.¹⁴

In 1946 Sardar Swaran Singh was elected in the Punjab Legislative Assembly on the Panthic Party's ticket. In the very year of his election, he became Parliamentary Secretary to the Punjab Coalition Government headed by *Malik Sir Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana*.¹⁵ The Cabinet Mission plan announced its decision on 16 May 1946. It commenced an era of new

controversies. Sikhs of all shades of opinion immediately rejected the Cabinet Mission's proposal in an anti-British vein, on the ground that these would leave them at the mercy of the Muslim majority and thus deprive them of the political advantage, they now enjoyed and took from them their lands in the Punjab, living in which was their birth right.¹⁶ Swaran Singh dismissed the possibility of deciding the issue on the basis of an election in these troubled times and said there can be no settlement on the basis of a united Punjab.¹⁷ While talking of a divided Punjab, he continued to advise the Sikh peasantry not to migrate from their villages in West Punjab.¹⁸

When Sardar Baldev Singh was included in the interim Government headed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Swaran Singh succeeded the former as Minister for Development and Supplies. However, in the rapidly changing political scene of 1946-47, Khizar Hayat Khan submitted his resignation on 1st March, 1947. A day after Khizar made the statement of his support to the Muslim League and to any effort it might make in the formation of a government in Punjab, Swaran Singh, the upcoming leader expressed his surprise and disappointment at Khizar's change of heart.¹⁹ A few days later, the Congress party's senior leaders in Punjab, *Bhim Sen Sachar* and *Swaran Singh*, went on record saying, "We hope to see a united India again drawn together by geographical and fundamental ties of common interest". He was also a front member of *Anti-Partition Committee* and President of the '*Punjab Riot's Relief Committee*'.²⁰

The Government of the Punjab established the '*Punjab Partition Committee*' in order to implement the decision of the partition of Punjab. The Punjab Partition Committee consisted of four members-two from the East Punjab, viz. *Dr. Gopichand Bhargava* and *Sardar Swaran Singh* and two members from the West Punjab, viz. *Mr. Mumtaz Daultana* and *Mr. Zahid Hussain*. The Governor was the President.²¹ The main function of the organization was to work out the machinery for implementing the partition.²² Sardar Swaran Singh played an important role in the Punjab Partition Committee. Regarding the posting of offices and the location of East Punjab and West Punjab Secretariats, he raised the following points in the Punjab Partition Committee meeting held on 7 July, 1947.²³ 'First some

sort of agreement was necessary for the posting of offices in the districts until the declaration of the award of the Punjab Boundary Commission. Second, it was necessary to reach an agreement on the continuance of the two seats of offices of the Government of the West Punjab and the East Punjab at Lahore'.²⁴

During these days the political situation in Punjab rapidly turned chaotic. The Governor of Punjab at that time was *Sir Evan Jenkins*, who had spent 17 years of his career in Punjab.²⁵ Sir Evan Jenkins, formed a 'Security Council' in order to maintain law and order in the province. It comprised three party leaders in the Legislative Assembly, viz. *Khan Iftikhar Hussain of Mamdot*, the leader of the Muslim League Assembly Party, *Bhim Sen Sacher*, leader of the Congress party, and *Sardar Swaran Singh*, leader of the Akali party. It met daily to review the law-and-order situation in Punjab and more particularly in Lahore.²⁶ But this Security Council could not work, as the Muslim League withdrew its representative from the Council.²⁷ During these days Sardar Swaran Singh became very close to Sir Even Jenkins. He did his best for the functioning of the Security Council.

The Mountbatten plan of 3rd June 1947 suggested the division of Punjab, which had been included in the Indian Independence Act, 1947. Before 15 August, 1947 the communal riots in the Punjab took the worst turn in some of the districts where there were British Deputy Commissioners. These districts were *Rawalpindi*, *Multan*, *Lahore*, and *Amritsar*.²⁸ Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, therefore stated, "In Punjab there was cent per cent British rule, despite the efforts of certain senior officers murder and arson continued". The trouble was prevalent most where there were British officers in charge and the divisions under the control of either Hindu or Muslim officers were comparatively quiet.²⁹ On 26 June Lahore saw unprecedented scenes in the Town Hall. *Mayor Main Amiruddin* presided over a meeting which included not only every councilor of the city but also leaders from all the political Parties. While Congress leader Bhim Sen Sachar appealed to everyone to take up the peace initiative, Swaran Singh said the need was to change people's mentality which had been poisoned by the long drawn strife'. The following day, '*Dawn*' commented in its editorial on the

proceedings of this important meeting and said that it was good that leaders like Sardar Swaran Singh had joined the appeal.³⁰

The composition of the Punjab Boundary Commission had been announced on 30 June 1947. The joint Memorandum of the Sikhs to the Punjab Boundary Commission was argued by Harnam Singh and ran into 75 pages.³¹ In the memorandum major emphasis was laid on ignoring religious sentiments, land ownership, banking and factories as far as the question of partition was concerned. It was also argued that the plan would deprive East Punjab not only of the major food growing areas but also of most of the water for irrigation.³² Sardar Swaran was closely associated with the preparation of the Memorandum and the East Punjab's case before the Radcliff Boundary Commission.

The partition of Punjab enforced movements of the people on a scale absolutely unparalleled in the history of the world.³³ Unlike the transfer of population in the European Countries, the mass migration in the East Punjab and the West Punjab did not result from any settled Government policy. The cross migration of the population created a number of problems for both the newly born states. The refugees were concentrated in a very large number on both sides of the border.³⁴ Both the Central Governments of India and Pakistan and provincial Governments of the East Punjab and West Punjab had to open Rehabilitation Departments for reception, care and rehabilitation of refugees. The Sikhs and the Hindus had left extensive areas of agricultural land which they had owned or tilled as tenants in West Punjab. All of that agricultural land was not available for rehabilitation of refugees as many of the evacuee land-lords had rented their land to Muslim tenants.³⁵ The Government on both sides could do little but admit, as an official statement that there were dastardly attacks on the trains.

The communal riots of March, 1947 unnerved the Sikhs and Hindus because the Sikh and the Hindu population of several villages had been wiped out.³⁶ This convinced the Sikhs that it would be impossible for them to live safely in the Muslim majority areas likely to be included in Pakistan. It was on this account that a joint meeting of the 'Panthic Assembly Party', the working committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal and the 'Panthic Pratinidi Board' Passed a resolution on the 11th June, 1947 at

New Delhi³⁷ to effect that, The Boundary Commission should be given express directions to make recommendations for the transfer of the Hindu and Sikh population and property from the Western part of Punjab to the Eastern part after the partition had been effected on an equitable basis.³⁸ This conference apprehended that in the absence of provision of transfer of population and property the very purpose of partition would be defeated. Sardar Swaran Singh also attended the conference as the elected president of the 'Punjab Riot's Relief Committee'.³⁹ He left Lahore on the morning of 14th August. 1947

15 August 1947, the fateful day arrived. In obedience to the order for illuminations, flag hoisting and feasting while Punjab was profusely bleeding.....but no sooner was the order given that it was countermanded. The East Punjab government....realized the enormity of the crime they would be committing against their own people by adhering to this programme.⁴⁰ On the same day Swaran Singh was sworn as Home Minister in the Cabinet of Indian Punjab led by Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava. In the beginning the Cabinet had only two member's viz. Gopichand Bhargava and S. Swaran. At that time the main objective was to make East Punjab stand on its own legs. The Capital was shifted to Shimla and created temporary Secretariat at Jalandhar.

On 18 August 1947, with the efforts of Sardar Swaran Singh a joint statement by ministers of the East and West Punjab signed by *Sardar Swaran Singh, Dr. Gopichand Bhargava, Karmat Ali and Khan Iftikhar Hussain Nawab of Mamdot* was also carried prominently by most newspapers on 19-20 August, "We have set up machinery for the closest operation.....we appeal to all to let old wounds heal.....help in the establishment of Peace and Security. Peace in one part of the province is linked with peace in the other."⁴¹

About the end of November an unofficial policy of discouraging as far as possible the entry of Sikhs into West Punjab was pursued that the Pakistan authorities had turned down the request of the government of India to permit Sikhs to visit the holy shrine of Nankana Sahib on Guru Nanak's birthday, 26 November.⁴² The Sikhs had been advised by the government of India not to visit Nanakana Sahib.⁴³ Sardar Swaran Singh the East Punjab Home Minister, however had been allowed to visit Nankana Sahib. He visited the shrine of Guru Nanak Dev along

with Ahsanuddin, the Commissioner, and Refugee Minister in the West Punjab. Swaran Singh later said he was satisfied with the upkeep of the shrine.⁴⁴ During those chaotic days of utter desolation and confusion when an orgy of bloodshed and destruction had overtaken the Punjab and millions of uprooted and destitute refugees had poured in from across the border, the task of restoring peace, ensuring security and providing shelter and was indeed a challenging one. This assignment was tackled with great success by Singh.⁴⁵

Swaran Singh was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly during the General elections of 1952 as a nominee of the Congress with which he had become associated in the latter half of 1946, and became Minister for Capital Projects and Electricity in *Bhim Sen Sachar's* Cabinet. 13th May 1952 he resigned Ministry of Punjab when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru included him the Central Cabinet 1952-1957. He was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1957, 1962, 1967, 1972.

Generally, Swaran Singh is remembered as former External Affairs Minister, but he held charge of many other important departments like Works, Housing and Supplies (1952-57), Steel Mines and Fuel (1957-62), Agriculture (1962), Railways (1962), 1963, External Affairs (1964-66), Defense (1966-70) and again External Affairs (1970-74) and Defense (1974-76). He represented India at a number of international conferences. Often described as the roving ambassador of India, Sardar Swaran Singh had been part of many a historic decisions and events. He led the Indian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council more than ten times. He represented India at the Indo-Pakistan Conference on Border problems in 1959-60. He was among the advisers of Jawaharlal Nehru on the India-China border dispute and represented the country at talks preceding the signing of the Inter-Dominion Agreement between the Government of India and Pakistan on the canal water dispute between East Punjab and West Punjab on 4th May 1948. Again he signed a treaty with Pakistan on behalf of India on 8th May 1954 after the conference of India-Pakistan on the recovery of abducted persons, held in New Delhi.⁴⁶

Swaran Singh also led the Indian delegation for talks on Kashmir and border problems with Pakistan in 1960. These talks were noted for the degree of cordiality in which they took place

largely with the help of S. Swaran Singh.⁴⁷ On Nehru's death in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri moved him to the Ministry of External Affairs; he became the first Indian other than a Prime Minister, to hold independent charge of the Foreign Affairs portfolio. He quickly established his reputation as a skilled and tough international negotiator.⁴⁸

Diligence, modesty and simplicity were the hallmarks of Swaran Singh's personality. He never allowed malice or anger to rule him but always maintained a calm and courteous demeanor. Unflappability was one of Swaran Singh's principal assets in negotiation.⁴⁹

Lee Kuon Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore complemented him for his performance at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference in Singapore in 1971 where Swaran Singh represented Indira Gandhi.⁵⁰

A few days after the end of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, Lee Kuon Yew remarked that Mr. Singh carried a slab of ice under his traditional headgear.⁵¹ It was a compliment to Swaran Singh's cool and ruffled temper. On 12 December 1971, while the Bangladesh War went on, he addressed the United Nations Security Council for an hour and a half. He called on the world to recognize 'the reality of Bangladesh'.⁵² His speech was a masterly performance which only a person fully confident of his capacity to make a telling retort could have delivered without notice.

Distinguished by his white turban, achkan, and knee length Nehru jacket, Swaran Singh as Foreign Minister was one of the architects of the historic Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship and Co-operation in 1971 and of the Shimla agreement. The former treaty was a masterstroke of diplomacy intended to neutralize the United States.⁵³

During the Cold War Years, India was firmly in the Soviet Camp, refusing even to condemn Moscow for its occupation of Afghanistan. In exchange India was provided with arms and diplomatic succor, both of which Singh negotiated at Moscow.⁵⁴ He also played an important role in bringing Shimla summit to a successful conclusion.

Swaran Singh worked in the Cabinets of *Jawaharlal Nehru*, *Lal Bahadur Shastri* and *Indira Gandhi* from 1952-1975. Following the promulgation of internal emergency in June 1975,

Swaran Singh was entrusted with the task of suggesting constitutional reforms incorporating the socio-economic philosophy of Mrs. Gandhi's 20 point programme. The Swaran Singh Committee, in its report submitted in May 1976, suggested that the declaration of Emergency by the President need not to be countrywide. It could be made applicable to a particular part of the country also. The Committee also recommended eight-point code statutory duties for citizens. Some of its recommendations were later incorporated in the 42nd Constitutional Amendment.⁵⁵ In 1975 he resigned following differences with Mrs. Gandhi. He remained a member of the Parliament until 1977. He was elected president of Indian National Congress twice, in 1969 and 1978.⁵⁶

Swaran Singh was a brilliant debater never dropping a point in polemics. He was a cool-headed and adroit negotiator and familiar with several languages, viz. English, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu etc.⁵⁷ He was also India's most traveled Minister. He traveled to U.S.A., England, Canada, France, Germany, Portugal, South Africa, Iran, Iraq, Senegal, Sweden, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. He was sent to hold talks with the Pakistani President, General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq following the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. In 1982, much to the surprise of the then Foreign Ministry of India, Mrs. Gandhi requested Swaran Singh's presence at Non-Aligned Summit in New Delhi. "He is a useful man to have around", she said, "He never gets into a flap."⁵⁸

Over a decade after he retired from public life he was India's nominee to 'Eminent Persons Group' from Commonwealth Countries which visited South Africa in 1986; he was the first Indian to visit Nelson Mandela in the prison. The other three members of eminent persons group were former Australian Prime Minister *Malcolm Fraser*, Former British Chancellor of Exchequer *Lord Barber* and Former Canadian Prime Minister *Pierre Trudeau*. His services were also utilized to solve the Punjab crisis and he met Akali leaders several times to explain the Government's point of view and impress upon the desirability of a negotiated settlement.⁶⁰ He died on 30 October 1994 following a cardiac arrest at the age of 87. He was one of the eminent figures in Indian politics who distinguished himself in every position he occupied by his exceptional competence and high integrity, particularly in the conduct of India's foreign

policy.⁶¹ It is to Swaran Singh's credit that after assuming high distinction as a External Affairs Minister he had taken several steps to improve India's relations with neighboring countries. He was one of the distinguished leaders of post-Independence India. He was a man of great wisdom and dignity and his services to the nation in several important capacities over a half a century will be long remembered.⁶²

Swaran Singh was a leader of the international caliber.⁶³ Different kind of leadership role he appeared significant not only in the politics of South Asian countries but also at the international level. He was a thorough gentleman-too much, no doubt, to succeed as a politician. He was the last of his kind.⁶⁴

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