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Failure of Sikh politics after the Partition of Punjab in 1947

Punjab Demography

Punjab was one of the two biggest and most significant provinces in India (the other being Bengal). Punjab played a significant role in the history of the Indian freedom Movement and served as an example of the conflicting currents in national politics. British Punjab, which spanned from Delhi to the Indus River, stood out for its geographic and religious diversity. A little over 56% of people in the province were Muslims, mostly in the western portion, according to the 1931 census. Both the predominantly Muslim Lahore division and the predominantly Hindu Jullundur division in the province's centre were home to a sizeable minority of Sikhs. Muslims made up more than 80% of the population in the far western Punjab districts bordering the Jhelum and Indus rivers, while Hindus tended to live in the East and predominated there.¹ West Punjab had been a pastoral region, with people moving their herds of animals between the river valleys and the flat upland tracts between the rivers known as barrages, which are vast expanses of land between the rivers. However, a significant portion of the southwest Punjab had been covered by canal irrigation by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, which prompted the emigration of settlers from central Punjab as well as the settlement of pastoralists. Due to this, a sizeable rural Sikh minority began to settle in some areas, and market towns with a Hindu majority began to expand. However, the vast majority of

¹ David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1988), p.6.

the populace remained Muslim and rural in the canal colonies as well as elsewhere in western Punjab. Regarding the urban population, the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan had strong feelings for this town and the Mughals had erected a number of notable structures in Lahore.

For expeditions and governmental purposes, the Mughal administration frequently traveled there and stayed for extended periods of time; some of the officials and others who migrated to Lahore and other areas of Punjab settled there permanently. When the British arrived in these regions, they set up an irrigation canal system that altered the local ecology and caused people who had previously only farmed animals on Punjab's vast land to start settling down. As a result, Punjab had two groups: the urban group and the rural group. The British then forged a rift between the two by imposing various taxes on these groups. Rural residents believed that urban residents were exempt from paying taxes while they were the ones who were burdened. The only population in rural areas at the time was the pastoralists.

According to demographics, the urban social milieu was composed of converts and pastoral migrants who had recently settled there and had ties to the Mughal dynasty. Islam as a religion had historically represented a greater sense of unity in the face of this diversity. Even after the establishment of British rule, Islam remained the unifying force, despite the fact that the colonial state, most likely through British constitutional reforms, made India's major communities more aware of their distinct identities.²

British rule in Punjab demonstrated how they made a direct appeal to the political pre-eminence of local Punjabi identities in an effort to create an indigenous hierarchical ideology

² Ibid., p.8.

of state authority. Due to the unique cultural bond the British established between the state and Punjabi society, various religions played a political role in British Punjab.

After 1936, there was political conflict because Sikander Hayat Khan, the leader of the unionist party in Punjab, was harshly treated by Congress leaders despite the fact that his party enjoyed a comfortable majority there. Out of the eleven provinces, the Congress controls eight of them. The Muslims felt its wrath, and as a result, Pakistan was founded. Punjabi politics were dominated by the interests of rural Muslims, who belonged to a particular segment of society and were represented by the Unionist party. Muslim leaders sought a new symbolic Islamic foundation for the political order in the concept of Pakistan in response to the growing conflict within the imperial power structure. The demand for Pakistan was a reaction to long-standing tensions in Muslim politics as well as an ideology of Muslim "national" solidarity rooted in the new institutions of urban, public life.

Sikhs politics started to gain power up when Ranjit Singh (1790–1839), who transformed Punjab into a powerful and independent Sikh kingdom. After Ranjit Singh's passing, the state descended into chaos. Due to internal unrest and ultimately as a result of two wars fought between the Sikhs and the British, the Sikhs became weak. In 1849, Punjab was incorporated into the British suzerainty and added to their sphere of influence.³

As stated on the pedestal of a statue in the Lahore Museum, John Lawrence (Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab on January 1, 1859) asked the Punjabi people, "How should they be governed by sword or by pen?"⁴. The Lieutenant Governor's statement paints a picture of the authoritarian system in Punjab. His lieutenant John Nicholson rode a horse from Attock to

³ Sachchidananda and Bhattacharya, *A Dictionary of Indian History* (New York, George Braziller, 1967).

⁴ Dushka Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p.x.

Peshawar, so he may have had first-hand knowledge of the people he was ruling over. He was undoubtedly an authoritarian administrator of Punjab, but at the same time, he and his teams of men were charitable and concerned about the welfare of his subjects. On top of a hill at Margalla Pass, a blue-gray limestone obelisk measuring 230 feet high was built as a tribute to John Nicholson's contributions⁵.

Punjab after British 1849-1947

From 1849 to 1892, the British Punjab's borders extended from the Afghan border to Delhi. The British attempted to subdue the tribal belt of the border region connected to Afghanistan but were unsuccessful. The five frontier districts (Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, and Hazara) that now make up the North West Frontier Province were formerly parts of Punjab. They were later divided into their own province in 1901. Ten years after the Government of British India moved its capital from Calcutta to Delhi (1911), Delhi district split off from Punjab. The people of Punjab were robust and hardy; their ancestry was a mix of numerous warring races⁶.

Although most of Rajputs were predominantly Muslims, they were strength for the military. The British realized that since owners on the eastern side of the province owned the majority of the province, poor peasants had no land of their own to cultivate. They also knew that the Punjab was a long-established, distinctive society with a turbulent past that had been greatly influenced by its location. As a result, they intended to make the province a showcase for economic success and agricultural security. Based on a network of canals that spread across mostly uncultivated plains in western Punjab, the canal colonization started in 1885. This led to an increase in

⁵ Maud Diver, *The Unsung: A Record of British Services in India* (London: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1945), p.68.

⁶ Maud Diver, *The Unsung: A Record of British Services in India*, William Blackwood & Sons Ltd, London , 1945, p.210.

Punjab's canal-irrigated land from three to fourteen million acres between 1885 and 1947.⁷ The British capitalized on the communal harmony between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs as well as the rural setting of the province to maintain peace and prevent agitation. Through the building of canals and the use of better irrigation techniques, they improved irrigation. By assisting those who had aided them in the annexation of Punjab during British East India Company expeditions, the Second Sikh War, and the "War of Independence" of 1857, they thereby established new ruling elite. For their betrayal of their relative, the British gave them money, land grants, and titles.

The British gained the crucial support of the self-made "Punjab Chiefs," who went on to protect the British Raj, by assisting the new elite in assuming positions of authority in the new system. Sikh Jats, Muslim Rajputs, and Hindu Dogras were among the army recruits. In the First World War, they served the British in Flanders, the Arabian deserts, and the East African bush.⁸ On most fronts, the Muslim soldiers fought alongside the British and even came face to face with Turks.⁹ They received more than 2000 medals and honors, including three Victoria Crosses.¹⁰ The First World War brought about a significant change in the province's governmental structure. The province had to endure the worst of raising the necessary labor force because the number of soldiers from the peacetime were insufficient during the war.

The entire government apparatus in Punjab was militarized, and its operations were focused on supplying personnel and supplies to the front lines of battle. A militarized bureaucracy with

⁷ Saiyid, *the Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, p.4.

⁸ Farooq Ahmad Dar, *Communal Riots in the Punjab 1947*, pp.1-2.

⁹ Ian Bryant Wells, *Ambassador of Hindu Muslim Unity* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), p.112.

¹⁰ Dar, *Communal Riots in the Punjab 1947*, p.3.

administrative and military tentacles that could penetrate all strata of society and the economy was established in Punjab as a result of this process.¹¹

From 1849 to 1947, Punjab was a province of British India. One of the last regions of the Indian subcontinent to come under British control was this one. Punjab had a total area of 136,330 square miles and a population of 28,418,819 in 1947.¹²

It included the modern-day Pakistani Punjab and the region from Islamabad to Delhi. The province was divided between India and Pakistan after British rule ended in 1947. The communities that made up the population of Punjab include Hindus (6,301,737), Schedule Caste(1,592,320), Muslims(16,217,742), Sikhs(3,757,401). In Punjab, the three communities were thoroughly mixed throughout the entire province, despite the fact that Muslims were primarily concentrated in the West and North and Hindus and Sikhs in the East and South¹³.

In the religious sphere of Indian society, particularly in the Punjab, a gap developed. By introducing the combined religious principles of Islam and Hinduism, Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539) undoubtedly filled that gap. He attracted a large number of Hindu converts and a small number of Muslims as well.¹⁴ Sikhism developed in the Punjab during the Muslim era, and its founder, Guru Nanak Dev, lived through the dynasties of Indian ruler Ibrahim Lodhi (who perished in 1526) and the first Mughal ruler of India, Zahir-ud-Din Mohammad Babur (1526–1530). The Gurus chose to live an independent life without any fear of the authoritarian

¹¹ Tan Tai Young, Punjab: The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947 pp.305-06

¹² Nripendra Nath Mitra, "The Indian Annual Register", The Annual Register Office (Calcutta), Vol.I, (Jan.-June 1947), p.3.

¹³ H. M. Close, Atlee, Wavell, Mountbatten and the Transfer of Power, p.32.

¹⁴ Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988, 290-291.

¹⁴ Sarhadi, Ajit Singh Punjabi Suba, 445-450

governments, despite the fact that the relationship between the Muslim rulers and Sikh Gurus should have been one of the ruler and the ruled. They were engaged in activities of their own choosing, including politics, which was risky for them at the time because it was a royal tradition to kill people for political power. Because of this, the central government never ignored the Gurus' political activities.

They were summoned for interrogation, subjected to pressure, imprisoned, subjected to torture, and mercilessly murdered.¹⁵ Though political considerations compelled the Muslim rulers to act harshly against the Sikh Gurus, their followers could never accept this because it was seen as an attack on the 'religious heroes' of the Sikhs. Therefore, the murder of the Gurus during the Muslim era was the primary factor preventing Muslim-Sikh relations in the Punjab from developing. Although both communities had been coexisting, their shared religious history had kept them apart as rival religious groups. Until the British arrived in the Punjab, the later rulers—both Muslims and Sikhs—exuded the same attitude toward one another¹⁶.

Midway through the 19th century, the British overthrew the Sikhs and annexed Punjab, but soon after the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1846 and 1849), the two communities started getting along. Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus established themselves as obedient subjects and became the backbone of British rule in the subcontinent.

Newly enacted educational, political, economic, agricultural, publishing, and other reforms gave rise to a sense of communal empowerment in the communities, which was followed by nationalism. They were thereby inspired to seek out more and more rights and concessions in the constitutional packages that ultimately led to communalism. The British position in the colonies

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Deol, Harnik (2000). *Religion and Nationalism in India: The Case of the Punjab* (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia) (1st ed.). New York City, U.S.A.: Routledge. pp. 92–101.

was weakened by the two world wars (1914–19 and 1939–45), which sped up and fuelled the nationalist movement's fight for political rights. The British were persuaded to treat the locals more kindly because they had paid with their lives on the battlefields to support the British. The Sikhs were the most favoured group in this regard, but they encountered numerous obstacles on the political front.¹⁷ While Hindus and Muslims appeared to be successful communities in securing maximum benefits, their demands were denied. This disastrous conclusion can be explained by a number of factors.

Sikh Leadership

The rural elite were already eager to lead the society under the auspices of the new masters when the British introduced a system by which they could control the Punjab through prominent local families. The landlords received generous lands and privileges from the British, which raised their standing among the populace. Because the general populace was denied the right to vote, they were unable to organize to defend their rights. The Sikh leadership initially also came from the landed aristocracy, but despite their best efforts, this group was less successful for the Sikh community. As a member of the coalition government, the Khalsa National Party was benefiting from British support and political concessions. The religio-political leadership, on the other hand, came primarily from the lower middle class and had a belligerent bent. The Akalis were anti-government, anti-Muslim League, anti-Congress, anti-Unionist, anti-British, anti-Khalsa National Party, anti-Communist, and anti-other Sikhs who were not their allies because they lacked political vision.¹⁸ However, the Akalis appeared to be allied with the British, the Congress, the Muslim League in the NWFP (1943), the Punjab Unionist Party (1942), and the

¹⁷ Sarhadi, Ajit Singh Punjabi Suba, 200-240

¹⁸ Ajmer Singh pp.88-100

Muslim League in the NWFP (1942). Rich family leadership is advantageous for a community, especially when there is a lack of genuine leadership that develops over time. On the other hand, it takes time for leadership from the lower classes to break free from the constraints of current deprivation and inherent psychological complexities. The submissiveness, economic inferiority, and political inferiority ingrained in their nature is typically something they cannot overcome. The same influencing factors also applied to the then-emerging Sikh leadership. The Sikh leadership would occasionally take an aggressive stance, but they would lose their passion whenever some British agents approached them. The actions of Major Short and Sir Penderel Moon support this claim. The Sikh leadership frequently displayed compromising behavior on political issues when interacting with the Congress.¹⁹

The Akalis saw the Sikh panth as their real rivals and began demonizing them because the Sikh landed aristocracy dominated the socio-political sphere.¹⁸ Because these Sikh leaders had personal and professional ties to Muslim leaders and British officials, who could assist in bridging political gaps, ignoring the traditional political forces was not a sign of strength. Although the popularity of the Akalis among the general public offered the possibility of political mobilization, the traditional political faction should not have been ignored. The desire to have control over the funds for the Gurdwaras was another flaw in Akali politics. The rapaciousness of the financial system or the land and possessions of the Gurdwaras weakened the Akalis. He claims that every Sikh leader was egotistical and sought favors. None of them were there to serve the Sikhs sacrificially.²⁰ In the The Akalis and the rival candidates in the September 1941 Batala byelection campaign Mohindar Singh's supporters fought with kirpans and bamboo sticks called "dangs" during the Majhail was hurt in the altercation, which made him run away. Police reports

19 Dhillon, G.S.; Researches in Sikh Religion and History (Chandigarh, 1989). pp. 52-59.

20 https://www.academia.edu/15801400/Singh_Sabha(By Larry Murk PP 54-67)

reveal that a conflict between the Akalis and Nihangs over control of a few land parcels at Nankana Sahib. The Akalis, on the other hand, were against the Nihang Sikhs out of concern that they would become overwhelmingly powerful sway over the Gurdwara administration, depriving the former of the money. Because the Sikh leaders' agenda was essentially communal, their attempts to present themselves as nationalists only added to their confusion.²¹

They were unsure of how to handle the local and federal politics. The Sikhs had always had a "national outlook along with their anxiety to protect the legitimate rights of the Sikhs," according to Sardar Ujjal Singh, who made this declaration in 1973. On the other hand, they steadfastly refuted the political reality of the Sikh politics' communal status. They needed more time to play a more active role in their community, which could aid them in coming up with better solutions to their problems, but they refused to acknowledge this fact. The Sikhs' demands in terms of politics and nationalism did not mesh.²²

While they continued to present themselves as nationalists, their struggle was only of a communal nature. When he claims that the Sikhs and Muslims had been at war for two and a half centuries, "first for communal survival and then for the mastery of the Punjab," H. V. Hodson paints the same picture. Given that Gandhi had written to Master Tara Singh suggesting that the Sikhs were engaging in communal politics and that their violent approach did not align with the Congress's, they may very well portray their demands as those of a communal party. Instead of making amends in light of this wise counsel, Sikhs rejected it, viewing it as a taunt.²³

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ajmer Singh *Vivihin sadi di sikh rajniti* pp.20-60

²³ Constitutional Reforms and the Sikhs. Khushwant Singh

Congress' Influence

The vast majority of Sikhs are converts from Hinduism. This connection's influence persisted and had an impact on the Sikhs' political idealism. The Sikh leadership was repeatedly betrayed by the Congress on a number of issues, but they never considered removing the Hindus' excessive influence. The Ravi Pledge of 1929 stated that the Congress would not concede any constitutional package until the Sikhs had approved it, but in practice, they never kept their word. Without consulting the Sikhs, they always went to the All-India Muslim League²⁶ and the British for negotiations. Nevertheless, the Akalis and Central Akali Dal had been encouraging their supporters to join the Congress in the greatest number possible so that their lobby within the Congress could continue. The Congress ignored the Sikhs at every pivotal time, but the leadership of the Akali did not have the guts to steer their politics in a different direction. Accepting the influence of the Congress turned out to be harmful for the future of the Sikhs.²⁴

Violence in Politics

The Akalis embraced violence in politics and made the most of religion. The Akali leadership used emotionalism to persuade the populace, which pushed them toward a violent style of politics. In the throes of emotionalism, Master Tara Singh allegedly did not even spare Guru Gobind Singh and said, during the Communal Award agitation, that if the Guru did not aid them in winning, he was not their savior. He was unable to abandon Sikhism as he had publicly

²⁴ Sarhadi, Ajit Singh, Punjabi Suba. Delhi, 1970

promised, so his rhetoric served only to arouse the audience's emotions. This is not appropriate for a genuine leader, let alone one who also enjoys the community's religious confidence. The teachings of Guru Gobind Singh and Khalsa, which, in their view, had undermined Muslim rule in India, were frequently cited by Sikh leaders.²⁵ In the name of animosity toward Muslims, they provided support for and helped secure support for the Hindu Mahasabha in the Punjab. Even though they hated Muslims, now didn't seem like the right time to bring up such things. They ought to have put aside such feelings for the time being and made an effort to engage in as many discussions as possible in order to find a better solution for the Sikhs. However, they implied in front of British officials—particularly Punjab Governor Evan Jenkins—that the League wanted to wipe out Sikhs and Sikhism altogether. Even though Master Tara Singh denied brandishing a kirpan on the stairs of the Punjab Assembly during a conversation with Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal, he acknowledges that his own lieutenants had misrepresented it in order to highlight the Akali bravery and unwavering zeal in opposition to the Pakistani scheme.²⁶

Politicians with personal agendas had made up the story in order to incite the public, and overzealous news reporters then picked it up and ran with it. Even some of Master Ji's own Akali adherents who mistakenly believed it would advance their cause of opposing the founding of Pakistan spread the story. Violence therefore seemed to be the day's political rallying cry, undermining the true nature of the righteousness of the Sikh demands.

²⁵ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839-1988*, 290-291.

²⁶ Ajmer Singh pp.28-43