
Khalistan Movement in Colonial Punjab: A Critical Reappraisal

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The Sikhs were the integral part of Punjab politics especially after Montague- Chelmsford reforms. They although had joint political venture with the Unionist Party of Punjab but later on during the partition drive they missed the train. They were more relying on the Indian National Congress authorities and were betrayed by them. Despite of many offers of Jinnah, they rejected all the offers and joined hands with the Congress. After the Cabinet mission, they mad and re-made all of their policies which led towards of their illusion politics, damaging their cause. Congress leadership assured them many times about their full support to the Sikh leadership and all of their demands. This paper will deal with the political development of partition drive and betrayal of the Sikhs by the Congress that how they were betrayed and the Sikhs were confused in their politics and political tactics and the role of Colonial authorities as well Congressites to get the support of the Sikhs.

Introduction

After the drop-scene of the Cabinet Mission, the Congress Party again began wooing the Sikhs by making promises, giving allurements, assurances and sweet talks. On the 6th July 1946, PanditJawaharLal Nehru, while speaking at Calcutta said, “*The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set up in the North wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom*’¹.” By this time, Nehru had already made personal contact with Partap Singh Kairon and the latter had promised to co-operate him; after this Nehru sent a telegram to Partap Singh Kairon and Colonel Niranjan Singh Gill (not to Master Tara Singh) which said that the boycott of the Constituent Assembly could lead to serious repercussions hence this decision should be reviewed; Nehru had suggested that even after the elections, the Constituent Assembly could be boycotted². After this Kairon held separate talks with Baldev Singh and Niranjan Singh Gill; the latter consulted Master Tara Singh

and BabuLabh Singh (president of the Akali Dal) and after this he asked the Sikh candidates to file nominations for elections to the Constituent Assembly. For the four seats of the Constituent Assembly, Baldev Singh, Ujjal Singh, BawaHarkishan Singh and Narotan Singh filed papers as Akali candidates, and, Partap Singh Kairon, Kapur Singh (not I.C.S.), BabuBachan Singh and Shiv Singh filed papers as Congress nominees³. But, in the meeting of the PanthicPratinidhi Board held on the 14th July 1946, it was resolved that the nominations should be withdrawn and the boycott if the elections to the Constituent Assembly should be continued; at this all the eight Sikh candidates withdrew their nomination papers⁴. In the meanwhile the Congress leaders again began contacting the leaders of the PanthicPratinidhi Board; they were able to win over the pro-Congress members of the Board e.g. Kairon, Udham Singh Nagoke, Sarmukh Singh Chamak, Sampuran Singh etc. besides they (Congress leaders) had also contacted Niranjn Singh Gill, GianiKartar Singh, Master Mota Singh, Baldev Singh; and, through their cronies the Congress maneuvered to get the Board members to change its decision; as a result, on the 14th August the Board allowed the Sikhs to file nominations for the election to the Constituent Assembly (before taking this decision they did not consult Master Tara Singh or BabuLabh Singh who was the president of the Akali Dal)⁵.

This weakened the Sikh position and they launched an agitation instead of participating in elections, the English would have been compelled to consider their demand for a Sikh State; but, they behaved in a confused manner which gave impression that some of them could be impressed upon easily and it was not difficult to create division among their leadership by sweet-talks, flattery, allurements and other methods of lobbying and maneuvering⁶. Here, at this juncture, Partap Singh Kairon and Udham Singh Nagoke had played the major role, the former due to ulterior motives and the latter due to his naive mind and blind pro-Congress and pro-Gandhi devotion. Master Tara Singh was unhappy at this decision; he believed that the decision to contest elections would not be beneficial to the Sikhs and will affect their future besides trusting the Congress a blunder as it had been deceiving the Sikhs time and again; so, he announced that he would launch an agitation against the Congress and the British regime; at this Niranjn Singh Gill resigned from the PanthicPratinidhi Board. After this the Akali Dal took reins of the PanthicPratinidhi Board but soon the Congressites began withdrawing from its activities; even Baldev Singh had been allured by berth in the Central cabinet; hence soon the Board lost its united force and became just another unit of the Akali Dal.

Master Tara Singh's fears against Sikh-Muslim Union

During this period, some British officials tried to convince Master Tara Singh to have union with the Muslims; they assured him some safeguards for the Sikhs in the constitution of Pakistan; Master Tara Singh was skeptical due to his experience of the past; referring to this, Mr. Henderson, who had a meeting with Master Tara Singh in Government House at Lahore, on the 19th January 1947,

recorded: "Master Tara Singh stated that the Sikhs had strong fears of Muslim domination. They desired some safeguards in Section B such as had been provided at the Centre in respect of major communal differences. Sikhs would then willingly co-operate in the work of the section. I asked him whether if no such safeguard was given whether they would refuse to enter into the Section. He said that it was doubtful that they would, although they might take a decision to enter the Section in order to state their case reserving their freedom to leave subsequently. He (Master) stated that if British bayonets were not here, the Sikhs would revolt and seek to prevent Muslim domination by seeking control of the Province themselves. They might as an alternative by the use of force agree to the division of the Province, but only as a last solution. Provided there was no risk of Muslim domination they preferred to keep the Province as at present constituted, but this (was) dependent, as he had already stated, upon the provision of adequate safeguards, and required inter-communal co-operation. If the safeguard for which they asked were given, they would willingly co-operate with the other communities in running the Provincial administration".⁷ But, the British had nothing to offer to the Sikhs except verbal assurances.

Violence in the Punjab

In January 1947, Punjab also became a scene of riots between the Muslims and the non-Muslims; the Muslim rioting was being monitored by the Muslim National Guards and the non-Muslims riots had been carried out by the *Rashtariya Swayam Sewak Sangh*⁸ (R.S.S.); on 24th January 1947, the Government banned the Muslim National Guards and the R.S.S.; the police raided several places belonging to the activists of these two organizations and captured a large number of pistols, swords and daggers⁹. Nawab of Mamdot, Firoz Noon Khan, Mumtaz Multani, Shaukat Hayat Khan and some others condemned the Government for raids and arrests; all those who had sympathized with the Muslim National Guards too were arrested¹⁰. On 26th January, 16 M.L.As of the Muslim League courted arrests demanding the restoration of civil rights; and with this rioting erupted in various parts of the Punjab; in fact it was mainly Muslim groups who had been creating disturbances; in Gujranwala and Ludhiana even the railway trains were derailed. Reacting to this, Master Tara Singh said in a statement that "the Sikhs are in grave danger and must revive their "Army immediately."¹¹ On 26th January 1947, the orders banning the Muslim National Guards and the R.S.S. was revoked and about fifteen hundred Muslim youth and others were released; the League stopped its agitation but also announced holding on 2nd March as 'Victory day'; on this day rallies were held all over the Punjab; it was presented as 'the first victory towards the creation of Pakistan'. On the same day, Khizar Hayat Khan, chief minister of the Unionist-Akali-Congress coalition, under pressures from the Muslim League, resigned from the Chief minister ship and declared that only Muslim League could form a stable government in the Punjab; he also declared his Party's help to the Muslim League; now, as League and the Unionist combine had absolute majority, they had full legal right to form ministry in the Punjab¹².

On the 3rd March, the Governor of the Punjab invited the Muslim League to form government in the Punjab and the Nawab of Mamdot accepted the invitation. To stop this, a meeting of the M.L.As belonging to the Akali Dal and the Congress met in the noon of the 3rd of March in the Chamber of the Lahore Assembly building with Master Tara Singh in the chair; when the meeting was discussing the future course, a very large crowd of the Muslims gathered outside the Assembly building and began chanting 'Pakistan Zindabad' slogans. Due to the loud voice of slogans nothing could be properly heard or communicated hence the proceedings of the meeting had to be suspended and with this all the M.L.As led by Master Tara Singh, came out of the meeting room; seeing the Sikh leaders there, the crowd increased the speed and the sound of slogans '*Pakistan Zindabad*' (literally: Long Live Pakistan) and '*Lay kayrahengay Pakistan*' (literally: we shall definitely have Pakistan); at this an enraged Master Tara Singh took his sword out of its sheath and roared '*Kaatkaydayngayapnijaan, magarnadayngay Pakistan*' (literal: we will choose to give our lives but won't concede Pakistan); and with this the Akali and the Congress M.L.As too raised 'Pakistan Murdabad' slogans¹³.

On the 4th March 1947, the Sikh and the Hindu students of Lahore took out a procession to protest against the formation of the Muslim League ministry in the Punjab; the Muslims threw stones at the processionists and the police fired at them killing thirteen persons and wounding one hundred and three; it was the beginning of killings in the province¹⁴. In some areas, it was noted that authorities played with the parties and they fully collaborated with the killer gangs¹⁵. Among the casualties was BabuLabh Singh, the president of the Akali Dal, who had been murdered on the 9th March 1947, at Jalandhar while having a tour of the city to request people to observe peace¹⁶. To protest against the murder of BabuLabh Singh Master Tara Singh declared that the Sikhs will observe the 11th March as 'Anti Pakistan Day'¹⁷.

A Sikh gathering was held on 3rd April 1947; it was attended by Master Tara Singh, BawaHarkishan Singh, Amar Singh, as well as several Sikh M.L.As and other leaders; this Conference passed a resolution demanding the division of the Punjab into Muslim and non-Muslim zones; it is noteworthy that master Tara Singh and his supporters had been demanding this indirectly since 1931 and openly since 1943 (in the demand for Azad Punjab)¹⁸. On the 2nd May a meeting of all the Sikh and Hindu M.L.As of the Punjab and the members of the Constituent Assembly held a meeting chaired by ChowdhryLehri Singh and demanded division of the Punjab; they demanded that Jhanan (Chenab) River should be accepted as boundary line and the divisions of Ambala, Jalandhar, Lahore as well as Lyallpur and Montgomery districts should be separated from the Muslim Punjab.¹⁹

Mountbatten Plan (Division of the Punjab)

In the meanwhile, the British Government had decided to replace Lord Wavell with Lord Mountbatten as the Viceroy of the British India; on the 24th March 1947 the new incumbent took reigns of the regime. Though Mountbatten was new to the Indian situation and especially the Sikhs' position,

still, due to precarious situation in this zone, he paid more attention to the Punjab. By this time Master Tara Singh had sent a message to the British regime that if it wanted to avoid further killings in the Punjab, it should be bifurcated into Muslim and non-Muslim zones. Having analyzed the gravity of the situation and the future of the zone, on the 10th April 1947, he decided in favor of the partition of the Punjab and Bengal into Muslim and non-Muslim zones. Mountbatten held talks with Muslim, Hind and Sikh leaders to decide the boundaries of the new zones. Though Mountbatten had decided in favor of the partition of the Punjab and Bengal, he had not yet made any announcement; to further stress the necessity of division.

Declaration of Partition of Punjab and Bengal

Having considered the whole situation, the Viceroy finally called a confidential meeting of the leaders of all the communities at the residence of the Viceroy at Delhi at 10 a.m. on the 2nd June 1947; it was attended by Rear-Admiral Viscount Mountbatten of Burma, Pandit Nehru, VallabhBhai Patel, Mr. Kriplani, Mr. Jinnah, Mr. Liaqat Ali Khan, Mr. Nishtar, Sardar Baldev Singh, Lord Ismay, Sir E. Melville; Lieutenant-Colonel Erskine Crum²⁰ (Secretariat). In this meeting it was decided that Punjab and Bengal should be divided into Muslim and non-Muslim zones; the census of 1941 was to be taken as basis of demarcation of zones; for this purpose meetings of the legislatures of Punjab and Bengal will be called; the Muslim and the non-Muslim legislatures will hold separate meetings and vote for or against the partition; and, if the majority favored the idea of partition a Boundary Commission will be appointed by the Governor General to demarcate the territory for the Muslim and non-Muslim zones; in the evening, this decision was announced to the media and the public. After this meeting, Baldev Singh wrote a letter to Mountbatten, the Viceroy, expressing dissatisfaction of the Sikhs for having population as basis of partition of the Punjab; the letter said: "I should like to bring to your notice that though assurances have been given to us that we shall have equal rights with the two other major communities for the safeguard of our communal rights and privileges, nothing tangible has so far been done to give effect to these assurances. Our community is now in danger of being riven in two. We have so far not been assured equal rights with others in either the existing or the proposed new Constituent Assembly. We request you to see that this is done²¹." The decision for partition of Punjab and Bengal was approved by the Muslim League in its meeting of the 9th June 1947; the Congress Party too accepted it in its meeting of the 14th and the 15th June 1947. Akali Dal and the Panthic Pratinidhi Board held a joint meeting on the 14th June 1947 and passed a resolution which said: 'unless steps are taken for transfer of population and properties, there is no meaning of partition of the Punjab.' On the 10th July 1947, Giani Kartar Singh held a meeting with E. Jenkins, the Punjab Governor, and opposed population as criteria to demarcate boundaries; he also demanded protection of minorities in the Muslim areas; as per Jenkins:

“I (Jenkins) replied that I realized that the Sikhs were dissatisfied, but when independence came to any country some classes, who had formerly regarded themselves as protected, inevitably suffered. At the same time, I thought that the Sikhs had only themselves to blame for their present position. The Gianni himself had insisted on partition and Baldev Singh had accepted the Plan. Gianni then said neither had viewed partition as being based on population alone. The Sikhs were entitled to their own land just as much as the Hindus or the Muslims. They must have their shrine at Nanakana Sahib, at least one canal system, and finally arrangements must be made so as to bring at least three-quarters of the Sikh population from West to East Punjab. Property must be taken into account as well as population in the exchange, as the Sikhs on the whole were better off than the Muslims. Gianni said that unless it was recognized by His Majesty’s Government, the Viceroy and the Party leaders that the fate of the Sikhs was a vital issue, there would be trouble they would be obliged to fight that the Sikhs realized that they would be in a bad position, but would have to fight on revolutionary lines by murdering officials, cutting railway lines, destroying canal headwork’s and so on”²².

On the 16th July 1947, Giani Kartar Singh said that the Sikhs shall not be satisfied unless they get area covering 85% of their population and for the rest 15% arrangements are made for the transfer of population. Though the Sikhs were not satisfied with the criteria of partition still they felt a bit relieved because, at that time, they realized that instead of falling prey to Muslim subjugation, it was better to have union with India; but still there was a major problem of repatriation of about two million Sikhs who were residents of the Muslim majority area of the west Punjab. In spite of official announcement for partition, efforts were still being made by some Sikh and Muslim leaders for keeping the Punjab united, especially Sant Singh M.L.A. (Central) and Mushtaq Ahmed Gurmani etc. had been trying for a Khalistan within Pakistan but the Muslim League was not ready for carving out a Sikh State; the League offered just promise of good treatment with the Sikhs without right to cessation in case of failure of union between the Sikhs and Muslims²³. In fact Jinnah did not know about the state of the Punjab or the Sikhs and about the relationship between the two; according to Penderal Moon, ‘*Jinnah knew as much about Punjab as Chamberlain knew about Czechoslovakia*’²⁴. It was this reason that a Sikh-Muslim union could not materialize.

Finally the legislatures of the Punjab and Bengal Assemblies held meetings; the non-Muslim M.L.As of the Punjab voted 50 for and 22 against partition and in the Muslim majority area²⁵. 69 votes were for and 27 against partition; a joint session of the 168 M.L.As also voted for a separate Constituent Assembly for drafting of constitution for Pakistan with all the 91 Muslim and other non-Hindu-Sikh votes for it and all the 77 Sikh and Hindus votes against it. After

this, the British Government formed a Commission to make final decision about the boundary between India and Pakistan; this Boundary Commission was headed by Cyril Radcliffe; on the 30th of June, Justice Teja Singh, Justice Mohammed Munir, Mehar Chand Mahajan etc. had been appointed as members of this Commission. Cyril Radcliffe reached Delhi on the 8th of July 1947; its first meeting was held on the 14th of July and on this day it asked all the parties to submit their memorandums; then from the 21st to the 31st of July it held several meetings and heard the views of different lawyers and leaders of different Parties; prominent among them were Seetalwad (on behalf of the Hindus), Harnam Singh (on behalf of the Sikhs), Mohammed ZafarUllah (on behalf of the Muslims); Dr. O.H.K. Spat appeared on behalf of the Ahmedia community. Radcliffe had prepared the Award before the 14th August but released it on the 16th August 1947; it divided the Punjab as it had been suggested by Cabinet Mission; the only changes were Gurdaspur district was placed in the East Punjab. After the 'Award' was announced millions of people repatriated from east to west and vice versa; about two million Sikhs became homeless.

Conclusion

The Sikhs (and even Hindus and Muslims) became victims of callousness of the Hindu Congress, the fanatic Muslim leaders and cruel British rulers who did neither foresee the repercussions of migration of billions of people nor did they try to protect innocent people, and, nor did they feel any sympathy for the people. After the 15th August when the Hindus became rulers of India, the Sikhs had to face another calamity; they were homeless, poor and jobless, and, they had to face not only indifference but also hatred, discrimination and callousness at the hands of the fanatic Hindu Congress. They had been deceived by the Congress with false assurances (never to be fulfilled); the British had abandoned them at the mercy of the Muslims and the Hindus; the Sikh leadership too was responsible for this calamity because some traitors created obstacles in launching struggle for an independent country; they had been wooed by the Hindu Congress with sweet words, allurements, personal benefits; and some of them behaved as foolish, emotional and stupid people with ignorance, wavering minds and hasty decisions; some played treason too and that even for their petty benefits and other ulterior motives; 'clash of Titans' too was responsible for the crisis of the Sikh nation. Master Tara Singh had realized the future of the Sikhs right in 1942 and had put forth the demand for Azad Punjab but some leaders opposed him just out of jealousy; many of these leaders, when they were in death-beds, confessed having harmed the Sikh Panth due to one or another reason but their repentance came too late when the nation had been thrown in a century long night of subjugation, decimation and hatred; and, when the Sikhs raised their heads to get justice they faced prisons, atrocities, bullets and executions.

Notes and References

¹Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, (New Delhi: Oxford University, Press, 1999), 291.

²Harcharn Singh Bajwa, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, (Chandigarh: Modern Publishers, 1978), 69. *The Tribune*, Dated 11.7.1946.

³Harcharn Singh Bajwa, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, 69. See also, Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 287. *The Tribune*, dated 12.7.1946.

⁴Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 263. See also, *The Tribune*, 15.7.1946; *Daily Akali*, dated 16.7.1946.

⁵Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 257, 263. *Daily Akali*, dated 16.7.1946.

⁶Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 263..

⁷J. S. Grewal, *The History of the Sikhs*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 178-179. For details see, L/PO/12, Henderson papers.

⁸Ram Narayan Kumar & Georg Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle: Origin, Evolution and Present Phase*, (New Delhi: Chankya Publishers, 1991), 156.

⁹Richard D. Lambert, *Hindu Muslim Riots*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181.

¹⁰Richard D. Lambert, *Hindu Muslim Riots*, 209-210. *Daily Akali*, dated 26.1.1947.

¹¹Note by Sir E. Jenkins (Punjab) to Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, dated 12.2.1947.

¹²Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 271. *The Tribune*, dated 3.3.1947.

¹³Sarfraz H. Mirza, Syed FarooqHasnat&SohailMahmood, *The Sikh Question: From Constitutional Demands to Armed Conflict*, (Lahore: Center for South Asian Studies, Punjab University, 1985), 196. See also, *Daily Akali*, 4.3.1947.

¹⁴Richard D. Lambert, *Hindu Muslim Riots*, 172-73. See also, *Daily Akali*, 5.3.1947.

¹⁵Gurharpal Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case Study of the Punjab*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 107.

¹⁶On the 19th March 1947, Mr. McDonald, the Home Secretary of the Punjab, stated that within fifteen days 2049 Sikhs and Hindus had been killed or seriously wounded; according to non-official sources the figure was many times more than that.

¹⁷Dr. Ganda Singh, *A Diary Of The Partition Days 1947*, *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. XXXVTH. Part I, No. 112, April, 1960, 249.

¹⁸Harcharn Singh Bajwa, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics: 1920-1970*, 69-70. *Daily Akali*, dated 5.4.1947.

¹⁹ A.N. Bali, *Now It Can be Told*, (Jalandhar: AkasvaniPrakashan Ltd., 1980), 54-55. See also, *Daily Akali*, dated 4.5.1947;

²⁰MB1/D Papers of Earl Mountbatten of Burma: official papers as last Viceroy and first Governor General of India, 1947-8, Accessed on 6/5/2019 via <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/archives/cataloguedatabases/mb/index> Minutes of the Meeting of the Viceroy with the Indian Leaders, First Day L/P&J/10/81, 401-9 Telegrams to H.M.G. by Lord Mount-Batten.

²¹RekhaSood*Punjab Politics 1937-47: Role of Joginder Singh, Ujjal Singh and BaldevSingh*, An unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Punjabi University Patiala for the partial fulfillment of PhD, 2009, 363. See L/P+J/10/81, dated 3 June 1947.

²²IOR/R/3/1/177, Papers of Sir Evan Jenkins, Governor of the Punjab, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/73e3d5c5-cbd1-477a-90c9-81ee8e5bd93d>. Minutes of the Meeting of the Viceroy with the Indian Leaders, First Day L/P&J/10/81, 401-9 Telegrams to H.M.G. by Lord Mount-Batten.

²³ Ian Stephen, *Pakistan*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger publications, 1963), 40.

²⁴Penderal Moon, *Divide and Quit*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 37.

²⁵Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 277.