

## **The Shiromani Akali Dal and Emerging Ideological Cleavages in Contemporary Sikh Politics in Punjab: Integrative Regionalism versus Exclusivist Ethnonationalism**

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This article describes the emerging ideological cleavages in contemporary Sikh politics, and attempts to answer why the Shiromani Akali Dal has taken a moderate stance on Sikh ethnic issues and in its public discourse in the post-militancy era? I put forward a *descriptive* argument that rhetorical/ideological cleavages in contemporary Sikh politics in Punjab can be differentiated into two largely contrasting poles. The first is the dominant Akali Dal (Badal) which claims to be the main leadership of the Sikh community, based on its majority in the SGPC and its ability to form coalition majorities in the state assembly in Punjab. The second pole is an array of other, often internally fractionalized, Sikh political and religious organizations, whose claim for community leadership is based on the espousal of aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism and purist religious identity. The “unity” of this second pole within Sikh politics is not organizational, but rather, is an ideological commitment to Sikh ethnonationalism and political opposition to the moderate Shiromani Akali Dal. The result of these two contrasting “poles” is an interesting ethno-political dilemma in which the Akali Dal has pragmatic electoral success in democratic elections but is unable to aggressively pursue Sikh ethnonationalism; whereas the dissident groups are able to pursue aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism but cannot win majorities in democratic political institutions. In this article, I also present the related *explanatory* argument that the Akali Dal’s rhetorical moderation in the post-militancy period can be explained by its pragmatic need to widen its support base and maintain coalitional allies for electoral politics, whereas organizations of the second pole in Sikh politics do not have such a political compulsion. As a result, the Akali Dal’s rhetoric leans more toward integrative Puniabi regionalism, whereas groups in the second pole emphasize exclusivist Sikh ethnonationalism and identity. These descriptive and explanatory arguments are illustrated through a detailed analysis of the Dera Sacha Sauda and Guru Granth Sahib desecration issues of late-2015, and the political rhetoric subsequently disseminated at the competing Sarbat Khalsa and *Sadbhavana* rallies.

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### **Introduction and the Argument**

The state of Punjab was wracked by a Sikh ethnonationalist (e.g., separatist) insurgency during the 1980s and early-1990s, in which an estimated 25,000 people died as a result of political violence.<sup>1</sup> This violence and separatist movement were sparked largely by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s decision to send army troops into the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar to root out Sikh militants who, along with Sikh moderates belonging to the Akali Dal political

party, were demanding numerous economic and political concessions for the Sikhs and Punjab. The insurgency and counterinsurgency-related violence that occurred in the aftermath of Operation Bluestar was a mix of politically-oriented violence committed by separatist militants, brutal counterinsurgency operations by security forces including blatant violations of human rights, and “social violence” committed by criminal elements (including some militants) for personal loot and benefit.<sup>2</sup>

During the decade of insurgency, traditional forms of politics and institutionalized structures of authority within both Sikh and Punjab politics became “deinstitutionalized” after armed militants effectively challenged the Akali Dal political party for community leadership.<sup>3</sup> The Akali Dal, in fact, also temporarily exited from Punjab’s electoral scene under pressure from separatist militants. The insurgency eventually declined by the early/mid-1990s due to the culmination of several factors including fractionalization between the militants, increasing levels of criminalization within their ranks, more effective counterinsurgency measures, and fatigue among the rural Sikh masses after a decade of violence and near anarchy.<sup>4</sup> With the decline of violence, more traditional modes and patterns of politics eventually “reinstitutionalized” themselves within the Sikh community and Punjab. Nonetheless, the reciprocal effects of militancy, human rights violations, and the decade of political “deinstitutionalization” continue to the present day.

In this article, I present a *descriptive* argument that rhetorical/ideological cleavages in contemporary Sikh politics in Punjab can be differentiated into two largely contrasting poles.<sup>5</sup> The first pole is the dominant Akali Dal (Badal) which claims to be the main leadership of the Sikh community, based on its majority in the SGPC and its ability to form coalition state governments in Punjab. The second pole is an array of other, often internally fractionalized, Sikh political and religious organizations, whose claim to community leadership is based on their commitment to aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism and identity. The “unity” of this second pole within Sikh politics is not organizational, but rather is an ideological commitment to Sikh ethnonationalism and political opposition to the moderate Shiromani Akali Dal.<sup>6</sup> The result of these two contrasting “poles” is an interesting ethno-political dilemma in which the Akali Dal has pragmatic electoral success in democratic elections but is unable to aggressively pursue Sikh ethnonationalism; whereas the dissident groups are able to pursue aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism but cannot win majorities in democratic political institutions. I also put forward a related *explanatory* argument that the Akali Dal’s rhetorical moderation in the post-militancy era can be explained by its pragmatic need to widen its support base and maintain coalitional allies for electoral politics; whereas organizations in the second pole in Sikh politics do not have such a political compulsion. As a result, the Akali Dal leans more toward integrative Punjabi regionalism in its rhetoric and ideology, whereas the groups of the second pole emphasize exclusivist Sikh ethnonationalism and identity. These descriptive and explanatory arguments are illustrated through a detailed analysis of the Dera Sacha Sauda and Guru Granth Sahib desecration issues of late-2015, and the political rhetoric

subsequently disseminated at the competing Sarbat Khalsa and Sadbhavana rallies.

This article proceeds in the following manner. In the next section, I delineate the theoretical concerns and importance of this study. I then provide a brief overview of the institutional structure of post-Independence Sikh politics, and a history of the Akali Dal political party and its changing political compulsions after the decline of militancy. Subsequently, I illustrate the main arguments of this article through a detailed examination of the contrasting political behavior surrounding the Dera Sacha Sauda and Guru Granth Sahib desecration issues of late-2015, and a qualitative content analysis of the political rhetoric disseminated at of both the November 2015 “Sarbat Khalsa” convention and subsequent *Sadbhavana* (unity) rallies by the Sikh dissidents and Akali Dal (Badal), respectively.

### **Theoretical Concerns and Importance of the Study**

The importance of this study lies in both the nature of ethnic politics in India, and also the future relationship between the Sikh “community” and the central Indian state. Regarding the former, there are usually multiple competing factions within the various ethnic communities in India, and the dominance of one faction over others is usually determined by each faction’s political support base and the institutional structures of governance through which political outcomes are determined. Regarding the latter, the “construction” of an ethnic group’s identity and its relationship with both other groups and the central state within a country is determined by which political faction within the ethnic group becomes dominant and its corresponding rhetoric/ideology. Thus, the streams of theoretical literature which are relevant to this study include those on the nature of Indian democracy, ethnic identity, and political parties.

Indian democracy offers a series of paradoxes and complexities. At its inception, India was one of the most impoverished states of the world, with socioeconomic conditions that were far from favorable. While it has remarkably sustained itself for more than six decades with regular fair-and-free elections, the government continues to be comparatively corrupt, inefficient and repressive by Western standards (Biswas, 2014, p.12). The central government’s state and nation-building processes have succeeded in creating a rather strong sense of identification and loyalty to the central state, but ethnic rebellions have also consistently occurred in its peripheral regions.<sup>7</sup> The fact that these rebellions have occurred along its non-Hindu majority and non-Hindu speaking border areas has led some scholars to characterize India as being an “ethnic democracy” which exercises “hegemonic control” over its minority populations (G. Singh, 2010). In contrast, other scholars have pointed to the fact that rebellions tend to be short-lived and usually transform back into more normal “transactional” (as opposed to “transcendental”) modes of politics as evidenced by the fact that there are no clearly-defined and permanently dominant “ethnic groups” in democratic India (Manor, 1996). In fact, they argue that India’s multi-dimension diversity is its strength in terms of sustaining democracy, however “messy.”

These debates aside, there are several aspects about India which are fairly clear. First, India can be characterized as a “patronage-democracy” in which voters tend to make electoral choices based on the prospects of a particular (ethnic) party winning office, rather than strictly on policy platforms or ideology (Chandra, 2004). This is partially the case because access to public goods (and even private benefits) from the state is usually determined in large part by association with the party in power. Secondly, political parties in India are exceptionally important in linking state and society in comparison to other democracies, most of which have more dense and complex webs of civil society associations (Chhibber, 1999). As a result, political parties not only “represent” various societal groups to the government in India, but they also play an important part in defining the boundaries between groups based on their changing ideology/rhetoric in competition with each other. Finally, the boundaries between various “ethnic groups” in India, and the cultural content of their respective identities, are subject to fluctuation based on both intragroup and intergroup politics, in addition to wider social and political trends.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that there are no “ethnic groups” in India and that strong emotive feelings of ethnic identification do not exist, but rather that how ethnic identity is expressed in politics and who mobilizes on the basis of which specific cultural appeals/symbols can differ based on time and the changing political context.

This theoretical discussion is of particular relevance to the empirical argument presented in this study, according to which the Akali Dal (Badal) has pursued a strategy of political moderation and an inclusive Punjabi regional identity, as opposed to strident Sikh ethnonationalism, in order to more effectively compete in post-militancy electoral politics in Punjab. The Akali Dal, I argue by using Kanchan Chandra’s theoretical terminology, has shifted from being an “ethnic party” to becoming more of a “multiethnic party” in the post-militancy era.<sup>9</sup> That is, the Akali Dal still appeals to an “ethnic audience,” but the boundaries of their “core target group” has expanded from previously being mainly Sikhs in Punjab, to more recently including all Punjabis irrespective of religion. Thus, the “ethnic nature” of the political party has itself changed in terms of the expanded construction of the “group” or “ethnicity” it claims to represent. In fact, as Chandra argues, “multiethnic” political parties try to expand their support base, as long as the extended notion of “community” or “ethnicity” does not result in an adverse loss of its previous core of supporters - hence, a constant game of recalibration (Chandra 2004). The Akali Dal’s transformation from being an “ethnic party” to a “multiethnic party,” as argued in this paper, is evident through its political behavior and rhetorical/electoral appeals in the post-militancy period.

### **The Structure of Sikh Politics, and Post-Independence Electoral Politics in Punjab**

The Akali Dal political party was created in 1920. It emerged during the so-called Gurdwara Reform Movement in which orthodox Sikhs regained control of historical shrines, which were being managed by *mahants* (hereditary custodians) who had begun introducing Hindu rituals into the practice of Sikhism.<sup>10</sup> Created

shortly after the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) as a representative Sikh institution founded to manage the newly regained Sikh shrines, the Akali Dal became the SGPC's "political arm" during the colonial period. After Independence, the Akali Dal began competing in India's secular democratic political system, particularly in the state of Punjab, which contained the vast majority of the Sikh population in India.<sup>11</sup>

At the center of Sikh politics is what one scholar has termed the institutionalized "Sikh political system" including the SGPC, the Akali Dal political party and, more marginally, the Akal Takht.<sup>12</sup> As stated earlier, the SGPC is a representative, democratically-elected institution created to administer historical Sikh shrines in Punjab and other parts of northern India. Its corporate body consists of 191 members, of which 170 are directly elected from an exclusively Sikh electorate every five years.<sup>13</sup> Whichever Sikh party or faction wins the majority of seats in the SGPC general house is considered to be the primary leadership of the Sikh community in Punjab because of the democratically-representative nature of the institution.<sup>14</sup> Another scholar has characterized the SGPC as being the "mini-parliament of the Sikhs" (Puri, 1988, p.301). No party other than some faction of the Akali Dal has ever won control of the SGPC. The third part of the institutionalized "Sikh political system" - the Akal Takht - is a shrine in the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar, which was originally built in 1608 by the sixth Sikh guru Hargobind to symbolize the importance of both *miri* (spiritual authority) and *piri* (temporal authority or power) to the Sikh community. The authority of the Akal Takht is exercised by the Akal Takht Jathedar (head of the shrine) and four other *Singh Sahiban* (Head Priests), all of whom are currently appointed by the SGPC.<sup>15</sup>

The institutionalized "Sikh political system" is contained within Punjab's secular democratic political system, in which various political parties compete to gain a majority in the 117-seat state assembly. Punjab's state political system is further contained within India's national democratic political system, in which dozens of national and regional political parties compete to gain a majority in the 543-seat lower house of Parliament. The Akali Dal (Badal) and its allies currently control the SGPC after winning 157 out of the 170 elected seats in the 2011 elections; it is part of the BJP-coalition government that governs the state of Punjab after winning 72 out of the 117 seats in the state assembly in 2012; and it is a coalition member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP-majority government voted into power at the center in 2014 and contributes four party MPs.

Outside of the so-called institutionalized "Sikh political system" are numerous civic, political, and religious Sikh institutions and organizations that exist throughout Punjab and India. This includes numerous Sikh institutions and religious orders which pre-date the creation of the SGPC, and also influential Sikh preachers and religious figures often with large followings in their respective locales in the state. Some of these other Sikh civic, political, and religious organizations and personalities may politically back the dominant Akali Dal faction and thus be aligned with the institutionalized "Sikh political system" while not a formal part of it, whereas others may be opposed to the dominant Akali Dal outright. Also, outside the so-called institutionalized "Sikh political system" are

Akali factions that, unlike the dominant Akali Dal, do not control the SGPC but may have elected representation within its general house. These other Akali factions may act as pressure groups within the SGPC or, alternatively, may oppose the dominant Akali Dal faction outright. This produces a complex web of often shifting alliances and pacts within Sikh politics, extending down to the local district and village levels in Punjab.

I term the conglomeration of those Sikh institutions, organizations, and personalities outside of the so-called institutionalized “Sikh political system” and opposed to the dominant Akali Dal as constituting the “second pole of ideological and ethnonationalist cleavage” in contemporary Sikh politics. This informal “second pole of ideological and ethnonationalist cleavage” competes with the dominant Akali Dal (and its Sikh allies) for community leadership. It is often internally fractionalized, with organizations and individuals moving in and out of alliances with each other (and sometimes even with the dominant Akali Dal). Thus, this “second pole of cleavage” within Sikh politics is hardly ever internally unified or cohesive, but rather its sense of ideological “unity” revolves around an espousal of more aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism and opposition to the dominant (usually more ethnically-moderate) Akali Dal.

In contemporary Sikh politics, this “second pole” includes political organizations explicitly committed to the creation of Khalistan such as the Akali Dal (Amritsar) led by Simranjeet Singh Mann, and those committed to the more amorphous concept of “Sikh sovereignty” such as the Dal Khalsa, Akali Dal (Panch Pardani), Akali Dal (United) led by Bhai Mookam Singh, and the All-India Sikh Students Federation (Peermohammed). Most of these contemporary political organizations trace their immediate origins or lineage to the decade of violent separatism during the early-1980s to early-1990s, and are unwilling to dilute their strong Sikh ethnonationalist political ideology, irrespective of electoral political outcomes. This “second pole of cleavage” within Sikh politics also includes prominent Sikh religious organizations such as the Akhand Kirtani Jatha and various factions of the Damdami Taksal (except the main Damdami Taksal-Mehta led by Baba Harnam Singh Dhumma which remains aligned with the Akali Dal-Badal), and also prominent religious personalities such as Ranjit Singh Dhandrianwale, Panthpreet Singh and Baljeet Singh Daduwal all of whom are committed to a strong sense of Sikh religious purity and ethnic identity.

*The Akali Dal, and Dynamics of Post-Independence Electoral Politics in Punjab*

At the time of Indian independence, Sikhs constituted about 35% of Punjab’s population whereas Hindus were about 61% of the population (Kapur 1988: 232). As a result, the Akali Dal - which had an almost exclusively Sikh electoral support base - could not form the state government in Punjab. In addition to the Sikhs being a minority in the province, many Sikhs also supported the Congress Party, which had led the movement for Indian independence.<sup>16</sup>

The Akali Dal had two main political goals after Independence - one proximate and the other more long term. The proximate goal was to extract maximum benefits and concessions from the central government for the Sikhs and Punjab.

In pursuit of these goals, the Akali Dal often adopted an “infiltrational strategy” by which it would merge with the Congress Party and hold the balance-of-power between different factions within the Congress, thus giving it maximum leverage (Nayar 1966, 212-14). As a result of this strategy, the Akali Dal won many concessions related to Sikh representation in the state assembly and civil service, and to promotion of the Punjabi-language from the Congress Party governments at both the state and the center in the first few years of Indian independence.

The more long-term political goal consisted of creating a Punjabi-speaking (and, thus, *de facto* Sikh-majority) state in which the Akali Dal could win electoral majorities in the state legislative assembly. The Akali Dal considered this demand to be consistent with the central government’s linguistic reorganization of states during the 1950s. This method of state reorganization was to appease non-Hindi speaking minorities primarily in south India and to foster effective national integration.<sup>17</sup> For the Akali Dal, the Punjabi Suba (Punjabi-speaking state) required an “agitational strategy” to demonstrate popular support for the demand within the Sikh community. Thus, the Akali Dal launched an on-again-off-again non-violent movement starting in the early-1950s.<sup>18</sup> This demand was finally conceded over a decade later in 1966, when the greater state of Punjab was trifurcated into Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh. The population of the truncated Punjab became about 60% Sikh and 38% Hindu, and the Akalis appeared to have finally achieved their political goal of the Sikh-majority state where the slogan of “*Khalsa da bol bala*” (the voice and power of the Sikh community) could be realized.

Yet, the Akali Dal quickly realized that the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* did not ensure their domination over the state’s electoral politics, and nor did the trifurcation of Punjab eliminate contentious political issues with the central government. To explain, the Akali Dal could still not win enough seats in the state assembly to form the state government, without coalitional support. In fact, the Congress Party and Akali Dal (along with its BJP allies) have traditionally gone back-and-forth in forming the state government of Punjab since the creation of the trifurcated *Punjabi Suba* in 1966.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the trifurcation of Punjab left several inter-state disputes unsettled including the inclusion of certain Punjabi-speaking areas into the state, the sharing of river waters and hydroelectric resources, and the status of joint capital city of Chandigarh.

In 1982, the Akali Dal again reverted to agitational politics by launching the *Dharam Yudh* (battle for righteousness) agitation. The Akalis’ demands were contained in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) and included a series of political, economic, and cultural demands for the Sikhs and Punjab.<sup>20</sup> A more militant wing of this otherwise non-violent movement emerged under the revivalist Sikh preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who also headed the prestigious Sikh seminary - Damdami Taksal. As militancy-related violence escalated, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army to storm the Golden Temple complex, where both Akali leaders and Bhindranwale were based. Hundreds were killed in the assault and large portion of the Golden Temple complex, including the Akal Takht, sustained major damage. In retaliation for Operation Blue Star, Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards on

October 31, 1984. Subsequently, Hindu mobs massacred thousands of Sikhs in northern India, causing further Sikh alienation.

The period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s - which is often called the “the decade of militancy” – saw an armed insurrection in Punjab for the creation of an independent Sikh state to be called Khalistan. During this period, the traditional Akali Dal was marginalized, and more radical/militant groups temporarily took over leadership of the Sikh community. An estimated 25,000 people died as a result of political violence during this period. With the crushing of the separatist movement by the early/mid-1990s, politics in Punjab eventually returned to “normalcy” but the Akali Dal faced unique political challenges in the post-militancy period, which necessitated a significantly altered political image than in the past.

*The Akali Dal's Post-Militancy Electoral Challenges: Moving from a Parochial Sikh “Ethnic Party” and toward a “Multiethnic” Punjabi Political Party*

As discussed earlier, the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* in 1966 did not result in the Akali Dal dominating electoral politics in the state as they had hoped. Even though Sikhs formed the majority of the state’s population, their vote was split between numerous political parties. Furthermore, the Akali Dal received very little Hindu support. The political party system in Punjab included several parties such as the catch-all, secular Congress Party; the rural, Sikh-based Akali Dal; the urban, Hindu-based BJP; the scheduled-caste based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP); and two communist parties. The Aam Adami Party (AAP), with its anti-corruption and anti-incumbency agenda, is the latest newcomer to Punjab’s electoral scene.

In all of the state assembly elections since the creation of the *Punjabi Suba*, i.e. from 1966 to 2002, the Akali Dal received an average of 30.23% of the votes, whereas the Congress Party received an average of 38.13%<sup>21</sup> (Kumar, 2004, p.1517). Several generalizations about the societal support bases of the various political parties in Punjab can be made, even though voting patterns differ from election to election and often include sudden vote swings. The Akali Dal’s support base is largely rural and Sikh. Approximately 67% of its votes come from rural localities (Kumar and Kumar 2002, p.1388) and it consistently gets the majority of rural Jat Sikh and urban merchant class Sikh votes (Kumar, 2004, p.1519). In contrast, the Congress Party has a wider and more diverse support base consisting of rural Jat Sikhs, urban Hindus, Dalits, and Other Backward Castes (OBC’s). The BJP’s support base is largely concentrated in the urban, upper-caste Hindu population. As a result of these voting patterns or societal support bases, the Akali Dal has traditionally had to rely on the BJP as alliance/coalition partners to effectively compete with the Congress Party for both votes and sufficient seats to form the majority in the Punjab state assembly.

The Akali Dal faced several challenges in forming future alliances/coalitions with the BJP and effectively reentering the electoral scene after the decline of militancy in the mid-1990s. In particular, many of the Akali Dal’s leaders had supported or, at least, appeased the militants during the insurgency with their vocal criticism of the Indian state, boycotting of democratic elections, and

attending the last rites ceremonies of slain separatists. Some had even flirted with the prospects of openly supporting the militants' demand for Khalistan. The BJP leadership and lower-level cadres, who had accused the Akali Dal of supporting "terrorism" and separatism during this period, found it difficult to agree to form pre-election alliances or post-election coalitions with this party (Kumar 2004, p.1,520). Without the BJP, the Akalis had little chance of attracting any Hindu support or of winning (coalition) majorities in the state assembly. The Akali Dal also needed to adapt to the changing ground realities in Punjab with a renewed focus on economic and developmental issues, instead of *Panthic* and ethnonationalist ones (Kumar, 2004, p.1519). This required the Akali Dal to distinguish itself from more radical Sikh factions, which still clung to militancy-related goals and issues. Moderation, not strident Sikh ethnonationalism, appeared to be the winning electoral strategy for the Akali Dal after the decline of militancy.

For this reason, the Akali Dal made a major change in its ideology and nomenclature during a massive conference held in early-1996 in Moga to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the party's founding. First, the Akali Dal (Badal) backtracked from the demands enshrined in the ASR, but instead indicated that its goal was the creation of *halemi raj* (governance based on compassion and equality) (Chima, 2010, p.252). Second, the party announced its support for the concept of *Punjabiya* (a composite Punjabi culture or regional nationalism irrespective of religion). Third, it officially opened its membership to Hindus for the first time, and pledged to field about a dozen Hindu candidates from the party in the state assembly elections (Kumar, 2012, p. 261). Thus, the Akali Dal attempted to show a more moderate political ideology and inclusive party identity, hence shifting from being a parochial Sikh "ethnic party" to becoming more of a "multiethnic" Punjabi one.

This shift worked in terms of rebuilding the party's alliance with the BJP. In fact, the Akali Dal has won three out of four state assembly elections in Punjab after the decline of militancy. The Congress Party formed the state government in 2002; whereas the Akali Dal-BJP coalition formed the state government in 1997, 2007, and 2012 under the moderate leadership of Parkash Singh Badal. The formation of two back-to-back governments by any political party (or coalition) was unprecedented since the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* in 1966. In fact, the Akali Dal won (or eventually attained) state assembly majorities by itself without coalitional support from the BJP in 1997 and 2012, but nonetheless chose to continue its alliance with the BJP. Yet, the Akali Dal political moderation and shift to becoming more of a "multiethnic" Punjabi political party emphasizing an inclusive regional nationalism has come at the price of abandoning a more parochial Sikh ethnonationalism to organizations and individuals in "the second pole" of Sikh politics. The Akali Dal's abandonment of aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism and its espousal by other Sikh groups is made evident in the next section of the paper, which examines contrasting behavioral responses of the two poles in Sikh politics to the important Dera Sacha Sauda pardon and Guru Granth Sahib desecration issues of late-2015.

### **The Dera Sacha Sauda and Guru Granth Sahib Desecration Issues of Late 2015: An Analysis of Contrasting Political Behavior of Two Competing Poles in Contemporary Sikh Politics**

The Akali Dal (Badal) faced several major challenges in the summer and fall of 2015. These included criticism from the Sikh community both within Punjab and in the diaspora for its inability (or unwillingness) to accede to the demands of Sikh political activist, Bapu Surat Singh Khalsa, who was on a hunger strike for the release of Sikh “political prisoners” incarcerated in Indian jails for insurgency related offenses since the early-1990s.<sup>22</sup> The Akali Dal (Badal) was also under pressure from agitating farmers, who demanded a large relief package for crop losses due to incremental weather and poor quality pesticides provided by government agencies. Their protests and blockage of railway tracks had repeatedly paralyzed Punjab (for example, see *The Tribune*, 12 October 2015). The newcomer to Punjab’s electoral scene, the AAP, also appeared to be gaining strength in Punjab with its anti-corruption and anti-nepotism message. The AAP had, in fact, surprised political observers a year earlier by winning four out of Punjab’s 13 parliamentary seats in mid-2014, and the party is likely to do well in Punjab state assembly elections scheduled for spring 2017.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the most difficult challenge that the Akali Dal-BJP government faced in summer 2015 was how to deal with the agitation of followers of Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh. The *dera* (religious shrine or institution) chief preached that the common humanity of all people should transcend their religious identities, and that people should live a pure life without intoxicants and other social ills. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh had come into the political limelight in 2007, when Sikhs accused him of mimicking the late-17<sup>th</sup> century tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, by wearing clothing resembling his attire and supposedly mimicking the Sikh baptism ceremony. The fact that the *dera* chief’s followers considered him to be a “living guru” also irked many Sikhs for whom the notion of a “living guru” was religious anathema. According to Sikh belief, the string of living gurus had ended with the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, who had bestowed the *gurgaddhi* (institution of guru) to the holy text, the Guru Granth Sahib. The *dera* chief’s supposed transgressions had led to religious tensions and violence in 2007, compelling the Akal Takht to issue a *hukamnama* (religious edict) ordering all Sikhs to sever social ties with the Dera Sacha Sauda followers (known as *premis*) and peacefully prevent their public gatherings in Punjab.

In September 2015, the *dera* chief’s movie sequel, *MSG-2* (Messenger of God-Part 2), was released in north India. It was banned by the Government of Punjab fearing a backlash from the Sikh community. In response, *dera premis* in Punjab began protests, especially in the Malwa region of the state, including blocking roads and railway tracks. The government was reluctant to use force against the *premis*, for the fear of alienating them further. After all, according to political observers, the Dera Sacha Sauda had over 10,000 followers in each of the 62 state assembly constituencies in the Malwa region and were thus an important vote bank for the upcoming state assembly elections, which were expected to be very close (*The Tribune*, 28 September 2015). These 10,000 votes per constituency

could swing the results, given the usually close margins of victory (or defeat) in state assembly constituencies.

On September 21, Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal assured the Dera followers that the movie would be allowed to be screened, after proper security measures were implemented (*The Tribune*, 22 September 2015). This appeased the *dera premis* but caused resentment within the Sikh community. The Akali Dal (Badal) calculated that it could win back rural Sikhs who were its traditional support base, but that the votes of the *premis* hung in the balance. This exemplified the Akali Dal's attempt to widen its electoral support base, and reputation as an all-inclusive (that is, "multiethnic") Punjabi political party in the post-militancy era.

*The Akal Takht's "Pardon" of Dera Sacha Sauda Chief: Religious Institutions, Temporal Concerns, and the Attempt to Diversify the Akalis' Electoral Base*

On 24 September 2015, the five *Singh Sahiban* headed by Akal Takht *jathedar* Gurbachan Singh "pardoned" Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh for his alleged "blasphemous act" committed in 2007. This pardon apparently came after a secret, closed door meeting between representatives of the Dera and select Akali Dal leaders (*The Tribune*, 26 September 2015). In the "apology," Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh denied imitating Guru Gobind Singh and the *amrit pahul* (baptism) ceremony, and simply expressed regret for "any unfortunate misunderstandings". In fact, the *dera* chief had earlier explained that the dress he wore in 2007 imitated the "historical Mughal emperors" not Guru Gobind Singh, and that he could never even imagine imitating the Sikh *guru* for whom he held great respect. (see YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECT6g5wGzR4>)

*Jathedar* Gurbachan Singh explained the rationale behind the "pardon" by saying that it had been accepted in accordance with the "sentiments of the people," and in order to maintain "communal harmony" in Punjab's villages. Akali Dal (Badal) leaders and representatives of the SGPC subsequently flocked to television and radio shows to express their support for the *Singh Sahibans'* "pardon." They justified this support in the name of "communal harmony" and, most importantly, in deference to the authority and supremacy of the Akal Takht in community affairs (for example, see YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qu2jlu0MJHo>). After all, the spiritual and "temporal" authority vested in the Akal Takht was necessary to justify this act designed to improve the Akalis' electoral prospects.

Yet, the Sikh community's response was not unanimous in support of the "pardon." In fact, gapping fractures immediately emerged with numerous respected Sikh religious figures and intellectuals expressing anguish over both the "pardon" and also the manner by which it was offered and accepted. They argued that Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's "letter of apology" was not an actual apology or an admission of guilt. Furthermore, he did not appear before the Akal Takht to offer it in person. Critics also pointed out that the decision to offer and accept this "pardon" was not taken in dialogue and consultation with other constituents within the Sikh community, but that it was rather a unilateral "political decision" imposed

on the Akal Takht by the Akali Dal (Badal) for electoral reasons. After all, the Akali Dal (Badal) controlled SGPC general house which, in turn, had the authority to select the Akal Takht *jathedar*.

The sentiments against the “pardon” were best expressed by influential Sikh preacher Bhai Ranjit Singh Dhandrianwale who exclaimed:

As you know, many people like to use religion and religious institutions to keep themselves in political power...This has also happened quite recently...You have heard the Akal Takht’s recent decision to pardon the Sirsa preacher (referring to the *dera* chief)...But, as you know, this decision did not come from within the community, but rather either from Chandigarh (a reference to the Badal government) or from Delhi (referring to the BJP central government)...The *Jathedar* was only used as a mouthpiece for this decision...This is the truth.

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZFC4GndfhI>)

He went further by saying:

Keep in mind, the order to oppose the Dera Sacha Sauda was given through a *hukamnama* (edict) issued by the Akal Takht Sahib [in 2007]. Based on this *hukamnama* and our respect for the Akal Takht Sahib, we considered it our duty to aggressively preach against the Sirsa preacher...We did so boldly and with a sense of conviction...We stopped him from coming to Punjab. We stopped his movies from being released...We turned tens of thousands of people who would have supported him toward us and toward Sikhism...And now this?...We respect the Akal Takht, but I say ‘no’; we can never support this so-called ‘pardon’ even if someone places a sword on our necks...Why has this been done? They (in reference to the Akali Dal-Badal) know that they will get the votes of the rural Sikh masses, but they were not sure about the *premis*. Now they can claim these votes as well. My head bows in shame and my heart cries at how Sikh preachers and the Akal Takht have been used in this political game to retain the *kursi* (political power).

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZFC4GndfhI>)

Others both within India and the diaspora expressed similar reservations and sentiments. The chorus of criticism quickly became so loud and widespread, that even the Akali Dal (Badal) and SGPC appeared to be splitting over the decision, with prominent members of both openly challenging its wisdom and threatening to resign. Instead of caving in to the criticism, the SGPC initially retrenched behind the Akal Takht’s decision. For example, the SGPC general house, with only about half of its elected members present, passed a resolution on September 29 supporting the “pardon.” SGPC president Avtar Singh Makkar appealed to the

entire Sikh community by saying, “The Akal Takht is supreme and obeying its orders is the duty of every Sikh...with calmness and do not get misled by anybody (referring to the critics)” (*The Tribune*, 30 September 2015). Ads were subsequently taken out in major newspapers and media outlets, asking Sikhs to support the decision.

The SGPC’s vote in support of the Akal Takht’s “pardon” did not have its desired effect. To the contrary, it caused further frustration and fissures within the Sikh community, and also growing protests. The Akali Dal (Badal)-led Government of Punjab responded to these protests by ordering the Punjab Police to round up activists of dissident Sikh organizations. Before the *dera* chief “pardon” issue could play out further, another incident happened in Punjab which placed the Akali Dal (Badal) and SGPC on the defensive even further.

*Desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib, Killing of Sikh Protestors, and the Akal Takht’s Withdrawal of the Dera Chief’s “Pardon”: The Akali Dal’s “Ethnic” versus “Multiethnic” Dilemma*

On October 12, several pages of the Guru Granth Sahib were found torn and scattered in the village of Bargari in the Faridkot District of Punjab. It was suspected that they were from the *saroop* (copy of the holy text) that had been stolen from a *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) in a neighboring village a few days earlier. What made matters worse was that the culprits who had stolen the *saroop* had left leaflets at the scene declaring that they had taken the Guru Granth Sahib in retaliation for how their *guru*, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, had been effectively banned from coming to Punjab. The culprits furthermore challenged and mocked Sikhs by challenging them to find “their *guru*” if they could.

The desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib, the living *guru* of the Sikhs, allegedly by *premis* enflamed Sikh sentiments in all of Punjab. Sikh anger was directed not only at the *premis*, but also against the governing Akali Dal (Badal) which claimed to be the main leadership of the Sikhs. The Akali Dal (Badal) had apparently failed in its self-proclaimed role as the defender of the Sikh community, and its government had also failed in its administrative duties. Protest rallies and sit-ins began in villages and towns surrounding Bargari, with demonstrators refusing to leave public squares and roads until those responsible for the desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib were identified and arrested. On the night of October 14, the Punjab Police used force to remove the thousands of Sikh demonstrators and dismantle their encampment at Kotkapura. In the ensuing melee, dozens of police and protestors were injured, and the square resembled a battle scene with the injured lying littered throughout the public square waiting for medical attention (*The Tribune*, 15 October 2015). In the nearby Behbal Kalan village, peaceful protestors were fired upon by the Punjab Police, killing two and wounding several others. The two killed in Behbal Kalan were instantly hailed as *shaheed* (martyrs), and Punjab exploded the following day with huge spontaneous protests throughout the entire state. Trees were felled onto highways, vital bridges and link roads were blocked, train traffic stopped, and local Akali leaders were beaten for allegedly failing the Sikh Panth. Several prominent SGPC members

also resigned in protest. The Akali Dal was quickly losing its Sikh support base, in the highly-surcharged political and ethnic atmosphere.

In an unexpected turn of events, the five *Singh Sahiban* met at the Akal Takht on October 16, and withdrew the “pardon” given to Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh just three weeks earlier (*The Tribune*, 17 October 2015). In fact, they ordered the Sikh *quom* (community or nation) to follow the instructions of the original 2007 *hukammama*, asking all Sikhs to avoid social interaction with *dera* followers and peacefully prevent the spread of their activities in Punjab. Explaining the rationale for this reversal, Jathedar Gurbachan Singh stated, “the September 24 resolution absolving the *dera* chief was not accepted by the Panth. Hence, in the larger interests of the Sikh community, the ‘hukammama’ has been withdrawn” (*The Tribune*, 17 October 2015). He also explained that the decision to withdraw the pardon had been made in order to “keep the sentiments of the Sikh Panth and various (dissident) Panthic organizations in mind” (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siAXkFIytE0>). Nonetheless, the *Jathedar* denied having been under any political pressure from the Akali Dal (Badal) to have “pardoned” the *Dera* chief in the first place, and comically reassured the Sikh community that the decisions taken by the *Singh Sahibans* are “independent of all partisan political forces” (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siAXkFIytE0>). In reality, the *Jathedar* had little option. Not withdrawing the “pardon” would have meant irreparable fissures within the Sikh community, and almost guaranteed an Akali Dal loss in the upcoming state assembly elections due to resultant erosion of its core Sikh support base. Gaining the votes of *dera premis*, while important at the margins in certain electoral constituencies, would not come even close to compensating for the loss of Sikh votes.

Many dissident Sikh organizations demanded that the five *Singh Sahiban* resign or be replaced for their allegedly “partisan role” in the affair, but Jathedar Gurbachan Singh offered to do so only if ordered by the SGPC which was described as being “the popularly elected custodians of the Sikh Panth and Sikh shrines” (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siAXkFIytE0>). This course of events demonstrates the Akali Dal’s delicate balancing act between being an “ethnic” Sikh party versus a “multiethnic” Punjabi party.

*Planning and Fissures around Sikh Dissidents’ November 2015 “Sarbat Khalsa”:  
The “Second Pole’s” Challenge to the Akali Dal (Badal) through Reasserted Sikh  
Ethnonationalism*

Against the backdrop of these events, opponents and critics of the Akali Dal (Badal) had been planning to hold a *Sarbat Khalsa* - an open convention during which representatives of the entire Sikh Panth meet to discuss and decide on various community issues. As predicted, the Akali Dal (Badal), the SGPC, and the Akal Takht *jathedar* refused to entertain the idea of a “Sarbat Khalsa,” especially one held in the Golden Temple complex. SGPC president Avtar Singh Makkar summed up the opposition by saying, “except the Akal Takht *Jathedar*, nobody has the right to call a ‘Sarbat Khalsa’” (*The Tribune*, 28 October 2015). Furthermore, he stated, “a handful of persons (referring to Badal’s critics) want to

gain political mileage in the name of religion, which should be discouraged [by the Sikh Panth]”. In response, Mokkam Singh of the Akali Dal (United) stated that the other Sikh factions too were “part and parcel of the Panth” (*The Tribune*, 14 October 2015) and thus should have a voice in Panthic affairs, in addition to the dominant Akali Dal (Badal) (*The Tribune*, 5 November 2015).

After the SGPC’s refusal to grant its approval or facilities, the Sikh dissidents decided to hold the convention at the village of Chhabba near Amritsar. Yet, the various anti-Badal groups with not fully united amongst each other, and several issues caused friction between them. These contentious issues included where to hold the gathering, whether it to call it a “Sarbat Khalsa” or only a preparatory convention for an eventual Sarbat Khalsa, and the meeting’s exact agenda. Regarding the first issue, some of the likely organizers argued that a Sarbat Khalsa could only be held at the Akal Takht, whereas others like Simranjeet Singh Mann of the Akali Dal (Amritsar) and Mokkam Singh of the Akali Dal (United), argued that in times of crisis it could be held elsewhere as well (*The Tribune*, 9 November 2015). Second, some of the likely organizers such as the Akali Dal (Panch Pardani), Dal Khalsa, and AISSF (Peermohammed) pleaded for more time to determine the exact input and decision-making protocols for the convention, including for the Sikh diaspora (*The Tribune*, 6 November 2015). They argued it should be billed as a “preparatory convention” for an eventual Sarbat Khalsa, and not as an actual “Sarbat Khalsa” (*The Tribune*, 8 November 2015). In contrast, both Mann and Mokkam Singh disagreed. Third, Mann wanted the agenda to include a referendum on the issue of Khalistan, whereas all other factions and leaders wanted to limit the proceedings to the issues of the *dera* chief’s pardon, the “politicization” of the SGPC and Akal Takht, and the future of the Sikh *qoum* broadly defined (*The Tribune*, 1 November 2015). Even a hardliner like Mokkam Singh was opposed to bringing up the divisive and potentially seditious issue of Khalistan - a sovereign Sikh state - at the gathering.

The Akali Dal (Amritsar) led by Simranjeet Singh Mann and the Akali Dal (United) led by Mokkam Singh, along with nearly 70 other Sikh organizations, eventually became the official sponsors of the convention. Over 100 Sikh *gurdwaras* and organizations from overseas sent their representatives, whereas others sent messages of support to the convention (*The Tribune*, 11 November 2015). The Dal Khalsa, the Akali Dal (Panch Pardani), and the AISSF (Peermohammed) announced that they would attend the “Sarbat Khalsa” as members of the *sangat* (congregation), but not as formal sponsors. They did, however, declare that they sympathized with the event’s organizers and the issues to be raised, and that they disagreed with the Akali Dal (Badal) and SGPC’s labeling of the convention as being “anti-Panthic” (*The Tribune*, 9 November 2015). Prominent Sikh preachers such as Ranjit Singh Dhandrianwale and Panthpreet Singh did not attend the “Sarbat Khalsa” convention, for fear of being labeled supporters of specific partisan political organizations and not others, but nor did they criticize the event or prevent their followers from attending it (for example, see YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb\\_P2fYNRXg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb_P2fYNRXg)). Thus, the constituent members of this informal “second pole of ideological cleavage” in Sikh politics remained internally divided both organizationally and

institutionally as usual. Their “unity” was based ideological support for aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism and political opposition to the Akali Dal (Badal).

The “Sarbat Khalsa” was held on November 10 at Chhabba. The Punjab Police and civil administration, under the directions of the Akali Dal (Badal)-led state government, tried to prevent Sikhs from attending the event. This included preventative arrests, confiscating buses transporting attendees, and erecting roadblocks along various routes to the venue. These obstructions aside, media sources put the gathering at between 100,000 and 200,000 (*The Tribune*, 11 November 2015), whereas the organizers estimated nearly 700,000 people attended. Irrespective of the exact numbers, the gathering was mammoth-sized and far exceeded what either the organizers or government had expected.

The political rhetoric disseminated at this “Sarbat Khalsa” convention and subsequent *Sadhbhavana* (unity) rallies organized by the Akali Dal (Badal) provide a window into the ideological and ethnonationalist cleavages between the two different poles in Sikh politics. In particular, it shows how the Akali Dal (Badal) tries to expand its support base by stressing inclusive regional identity and its “multiethnic” character, as opposed to a more parochial focus on Sikh ethnic identity. This is examined next in the article.

### **The “Sarbat Khalsa” Convention and Sadhbhavana Rallies of Late 2015: An Analysis of Contrasting Political Rhetoric from the Two Competing Poles in Contemporary Sikh Politics**

#### *Political Rhetoric of Sikh Dissidents at the “Sarbat Khalsa” Convention: Leaning Toward Exclusivist Sikh Ethnonationalism*

The tone and tenor of the November 10 “Sarbat Khalsa” convention was conveyed by its physical layout. The entrance to the convention was marked by a gate with pictures of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the militant leader killed in the 1984 Operation Bluestar, on either side (*The Tribune*, 11 November 2015). Many attendees arrived armed with traditional Sikh weapons such as swords and staffs, and others carried flags with the words “*Khalistan Zindabad*” (Long Live Khalistan) emblazoned - on them. In addition to the traditional Sikh symbol the *khandi*, the decorative cloth in front of the Guru Granth Sahib had a pictures of AK-47 assault rifles the preferred weapons of the 1980s and 1990s Sikh militants - stitched on either side.<sup>24</sup>

The mood at the convention was set by *dhadhis* (ballad singers) who narrated tales of historical Sikh “martyrs,” including some of a more contemporary nature. One such ballad graphically narrated an armed encounter between separatist militants and the Indian security forces which had occurred in a field near the convention’s venue twenty-five years earlier. The *dhadis* narrated how “the Singhs” (referring to the militants) with “memories of Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Sikh guru) in their minds” wrecked “havoc” on the Indian security forces before attaining “martyrdom”. The *dhadis* ended their performance by reminding the congregation that “rights are never simply given, the must be attained through struggle”.

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>).

This ethnically-charged symbolism and rhetoric aside, there was no violence during the convention, and the speeches steered clear of an open call to arms against the Indian state or anti-Hindu rhetoric even though some speakers did advocate violence against those who desecrated the Guru Granth Sahib. Thus, the gathering was not secessionist or overtly communal. The speeches did, however, contain sharp criticism of the Akali Dal (Badal) and its handling of both the desecration issue and the Akal Takht's pardon of the *dera* chief. Most speakers also pointed toward the partisan role and alleged lack of community leadership offered by the Akali Dal (Badal), SGPC, and Akal Takht. This resulted in repeated calls to replace the existing *Singh Sahiban*, and wrestle control of the SGPC from the Akali Dal and the Badal family. It was also clear from the symbolism and rhetoric that the speakers focused on a strong sense of Sikh ethnonationalism and identity during the convention.

Jaskaran Singh Kahansinghwal, a senior leader of the Akali Dal (Amritsar), explained the sentiments and rationale behind the "Sarbat Khalsa" convention by saying, "Why have we gathered here? Most people bow and put their heads down meekly, when faced with challenging the government and those in power. But, we are talking loudly here today because we are hurt and our dignity has been challenged. Let those in power understand this clearly...we are Sikhs of the Tenth Guru (Gobind Singh)".

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>).

Akali Dal (United) activist, Satnam Singh Manawa, added by explaining:

The Akali Dal (Badal) is party which got votes on the name of the Sikh Panth...but now it has come under the control of one family (referring to the Badals)...If the *Jathedars* take a wrong decision by using the institution of the Akal Takht (referring to the *dera* chief's pardon), the *qoum* is prepared to stand against them...That is why we have gathered here in a Sarbat Khalsa in the land of the martyrs. This is not only our right but our duty as Sikhs of the Tenth Guru.

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>)

In fact, criticism of the Akali Dal (Badal), SGPC, and the Akal Takht *Jathedar* were constant themes during the "Sarbat Khalsa." For example, Rachhpal Singh Muchhal of the Guru Granth Sahib Satkar Committee explained the need to call the "Sarbat Khalsa" by saying,

This Sarbat Khalsa had to be called because the conscience of the current *Jathedars* and the conscience of the Shiromani Committee have died. Those who have sold out to the Punjab government..., their conscience has also died. Yet, these people cannot stop the

Khalsa Panth from gathering for this Sarbat Khalsa and deciding our future.  
(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>).

Similar sentiments were expressed by Baba Bakhshish Singh of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha who stated, “We need to reform the SGPC...If the Akali government does not replace the *Jathedars*, we will have to make sacrifices...Instead of letting Sikhism flourish, the government of Parkash (Singh Badal) has smothered it unlike any state government in the past”. (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>). Sikh activist Bhai Resham Singh added by declaring:

We are here today, to liberate the Akal Takht which has been hijacked and misled by those forces which are antithetical to the Sikh *qoum*...We must show proof of unity and, with a united fist, we should demonstrate the will of the *sangat* by dislodging those anti-Panthic forces who have captured the SGPC and the Akal Takht...This is a task and spirit which we have inherited from our forefathers.  
(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>)

Thus, many of the speakers characterized important Sikh institutions like the Akali Dal, SGPC and the Akal Takht as having been “captured” by the Badal family. This exemplified the sentiment that non-Akali groups had been shut out of the decision making process for the Sikh community. The speakers also questioned the Akali Dal (Badal)’s commitment to the Sikh *qoum*, considering the events that occurred and the decisions made by the SGPC, the Akal Takht, and even the Government of Punjab.

Ramanjeet Singh Sikki, a highly-respected Congress Party legislator who had resigned from his seat in the state assembly, declared:

I want to make one thing clear, no political office is worth keeping when the Guru Granth Sahib is desecrated...Brothers, please do not think I have made any sacrifice...Those who took bullets in their chests (at Bargari) are the real heroes...It is a real shame that the glorious institutions of the Sikh Panth have been hijacked by the Badal family...This is a unique *qoum*, which cannot be stopped...Even if we have to give our heads, we will not give up until we have liberated the Akal Takht and the SGPC.  
(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>)

This speech added a partisan flavor to the Sarbat Khalsa, which the Akali Dal (Badal) would later exploit during its own *Sadbhavana* rallies. Nonetheless, the Congress was not the only political party represented at the convention. The BSP and AAP also sent representatives. Dissidents from within the Akali Dal (Badal) also attended, as did current and former employees of the SGPC in acts of defiance

and protest. While members of numerous parties attended the convention, Jaskaran Singh Kahansinghwal reminded the congregation of the range of “enemies of the Panth” and asked the congregant to vigilant of party partisanship by saying:

Let me say, where we want to uproot Parkash Singh Badal, the BJP and RSS, the Sikh *qoum* has also not forgotten the slogan ‘Never Forget 1984’. Every Sikh child also knows this. But, we have also not forgotten the brutal and oppressive Congress Party which demolished our beloved Akal Takht, dishonored our sisters and daughters, and burned hundreds of our *gurdwaras* and the Guru Granth Sahib [in 1984]. In addition to Badal, the BJP and RSS, let us also never forgot the Congress Party. (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>)

Perhaps the most eloquent speech explaining the rationale behind and objective of the “Sarbat Khalsa” was given by Akali Dal (Amritsar) leader Bhai Mohinderpal Singh when he declared:

While outside opposing forces have attacked our Guru and traditions, certain forces from within our community also seem to be determined to follow the path of eroding our traditions, institutions, and history...The sacrifices that the Sikh Panth made against the Mughal rulers and against the British rulers remain imprints for us to follow...the decades after Independence have also been filled with anguish and pain for the Sikh *qoum* including numerous *morchas* (agitations) and martyrdoms...in June 1984 the Harmandir Sahib was attacked and in November 1984 thousand of Sikhs were massacred. The martyrdom of thousands of Sikh youth in faked police encounters remains a stain on this country’s forehead...To those who sacrificed their lives for the Panth including Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale,...we offer flowers to their supreme sacrifice...Today’s Sarbat Khalsa vows that the dreams of these martyrs to create a ‘Sikh Raj’ will be pursued with determination, strength, and unity. (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>)

Speeches such as this one demonstrate the focus on Sikh ethnonationalism at the convention and the adherence to “Sikh values” irrespective of electoral outcomes. Other speakers also reminded the congregation about the “plight of the Sikhs” in India after Independence, including the denial of “Sikh sovereignty” and human rights violations at the hands of Indian security forces. References to the “great Sikh martyr” Sant Bhindranwale were also consistent throughout the convention.

The “Sarbat Khalsa” ended with thirteen *gurmata*s (resolutions presented before the Guru Granth Sahib) offered to the *sangat* for passage and confirmation with voice vote. Most of the *gurmata*s dealt with the community’s religious and doctrinal affairs, but others were of a direct political nature. For example, one

declared Parkash Singh Badal, Sukhbir Singh Badal and Avtar Singh Makkar “guilty of undermining and misusing Sikh institutions,” and nullified various community awards given to them (*The Tribune*, 11 November 2015). Another *gurmatta* called for the “restoration” of the “independent nature” of the Akal Takht, and authorized the formation of a committee of intellectuals and representatives to write a report on how this goal could be achieved. Similarly, another resolution called for the creation of a “World Sikh Parliament” under the aegis of the Akal Takht to represent the interests and views of Sikhs worldwide, including in the diaspora (*The Tribune*, 11 November 2015).

The most important resolution, however, was one which dismissed the *Jathedars* of the three Takhts within Punjab from their duties, including Akal Takht Jathedar Gurbachan Singh. These three *jathedars* were replaced by Bhai Jagtar Singh Hawara (the convicted assassin of a former Congress Party chief minister of Punjab) as Akal Takht Jathedar, and Bhai Amrik Singh Ajnala and Bhai Baljeet Singh Daduwal as the *jathedars* of the two other Punjab-based *Takhts*. Since Hawara was imprisoned serving a life sentence, Bhai Dyan Singh Mand (the senior vice-president of the Akali Dal-Amritsar) was appointed to the “acting” Jathedar of the Akal Takht until Hawara’s demanded release. These resolutions were seen as direct and clear challenges to the authority of the SGPC and the Akali Dal (Badal) as the community’s main leadership. The Sikh dissidents, while internally fractionalized, were trying to capture Sikh political institutions under the control of the Akali Dal (Badal) for their own ethnic goals.

The final speech of the “Sarbat Khalsa” given by Mookkam Singh of the Akali Dal (United) summed up the convention by saying:

The Khalsa Panth is facing a historical and difficult battle today. In this battle, the Congressites, the Badalites, the BJPites, and their friends will be blocking our path. Keep in mind, in this fight we must remain sensible, peaceful and not break communal harmony. If we do not do this, we will likely fail much like the losses we have suffered in the recent past (referring to the violent separatist movement). We must remain conscious and aware...Under no conditions should we give up the path of non-violence. Patience and non-violence will defeat the tyranny...I assure you, we can give up our lives, but we will never stop supporting you and this cause for freedom and honor...keep the historical Sikh martyrs in mind when you act...Never do anything that makes us hold our heads down in shame before the people.  
(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaHPFFDPzhI>)

As the symbolism and rhetoric delivered at the November 2015 “Sarbat Khalsa” demonstrate, the Sikh dissidents emphasized a strong sense of Sikh ethnonationalism. They also argued that the goals of establishing “Sikh Raj” and protecting the Guru Granth Sahib could only be achieved by regaining control of important Sikh institutions, like the SGPC and the Akal Takht, and by making them more “representative” of the entire Panth. Furthermore, the Sikh dissidents

characterized the Akali Dal (Badal) as lacking commitment to Sikh identity and ethnonationalism, and being generally “anti-Panthic” for its coalition with the Hindu-chauvinist BJP and its seemingly exclusive focus of retaining *kursi* (political power). For the Sikh dissidents, electoral outcomes were less important than issues of the Sikh community’s “honor” and “dignity” which, according to them, had been violated consistently since Independence by the Indian state and, more recently, in the fall of 2015 by the electorally-driven and unprincipled Akali Dal (Badal). While internally divided, the organizations within this “second pole” of Sikh politics were ideologically committed to strong Sikh ethnonationalism and political opposition to the moderate Akali Dal (Badal).

*Political Rhetoric of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) at the Sadbhavana Rallies: Leaning Toward Integrative Punjabi Regional Identity*

The Akali Dal (Badal), along with its BJP coalition allies, held a series of five *Sadbhavana* (unity) rallies in different parts of Punjab in late-November and early-December 2015 in response to Sikh dissidents’ “Sarbat Khalsa.” Public transportation and official state machinery were allegedly used to bring attendees to these gatherings, which were generally much smaller than the dissidents’ “Sarbat Khalsa”. The content of the speeches given at these rallies offers a window into the Akalis’ ideology, construction of identity and ethnonationalism, and political motivations. The political rhetoric at these rallies particularly stressed an inclusive Punjabi identity irrespective of religion, as opposed to more exclusivist Sikh ethnonationalism. Thus, the rhetoric was a part of the Akali Dal’s post-militancy transformation into becoming more of a “multiethnic,” rather than purely “ethnic,” political party.

A series of themes reverberated in the speeches at all of these *Sadbhavana* rallies. For example, the Akali Dal (Badal), while acknowledging the severity of the Guru Granth Sahib desecration, characterized the desecration and the dissents’ “Sarbat Khalsa” as being interlinked conspiratorial “attacks” on the Sikh community by “mischievous” and “anti-Panthic” forces. The Akali and BJP speakers wove a totally unsubstantiated, but internally logical, conspiracy theory blaming the supposed triad of Sikh dissidents, the Congress Party, and Pakistan for these incidents. In later rallies, even the upcoming AAP party was identified as a part of this conspiracy aimed at weakening Sikhs and Punjab. For example, Sukhbir Singh Badal rallied:

Last month, there was an attack on the Sikh religion...These forces first attacked our Guru Sahib...They also attacked the Sikh *quom's* supreme authority, the Shri Akal Takht Sahib...These “forces” then tried to destroy the Sikh *quom's* parliament, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee...They did not stop there but also deteriorated Sikh institutions and rituals like the Sarbat Khalsa. Our neighboring country’s (referring to Pakistan) intelligence agency is behind these “forces”...When the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) investigation is complete within

the next few months, you will be surprised who is behind these attacks including the Congress Party...This is the same party which caused an inferno in Punjab several decades ago, and it trying to do it again along with these other “forces”.

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uER3a7sOL1g>)

Yet, ironically the CBI investigation has not yet been complete and nor has any such conspiratorial link been established. This rhetoric was also designed to deflect attention away from the failure of the state government and police, and toward other forces.

In fact, the Akali Dal tried to link these “forces” to the days of militancy, in addition to recent events. For example, Parkash Singh Badal chimed in with his son in another *Sadbhavana* rally by declaring:

Who was responsible for this “era” (referring to the days of militancy)? They need to be identified...In fact, both of the two responsible forces have joined hands once again. They began their most recent designs by holding the recent “gathering” at Chhabba Village...Those people (referring to the Sikh dissidents) who tried to arouse religious sentiments for their own profit and gain were joined by the Congress Party...These two forces are two sides of the same coin...Let me warn those who stoke these embers that they will themselves be consumed by the fire they create.

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RyoSDQMe-E>)

Thus, the outrage of the Sikh community against the pardon of the *dera* chief was not properly acknowledged by Parkash Singh Badal. Furthermore, the role of the Akali Dal in starting the *Dharam Yudh morcha* in 1982, which eventually culminated in Operation Bluestar, was not mentioned in the speech. The Akali Dal’s periodic association with radical Sikh elements during the height of the insurgency was also conveniently avoided. After all, the past had to be interpreted in a manner beneficial to current political realities.

For this purpose, the Akali Dal (Badal) also strategically tried to project itself as the only nationalistic political party able and willing to maintain communal harmony in Punjab, along with its BJP allies. In fact, it repeatedly characterized the years of militancy as the “dark days,” instead of acknowledging the period in a more balanced manner as a period when thousands of young Sikh men, rightly or wrongly, took up arms against the Indian state fighting for their perceived sense of community honor and dignity after Operation Bluestar. The Akali Dal (Badal) also carefully avoided mentioning the systematic police excesses and human rights violations committed by the state during that period, but rather only focused on the excesses committed by the militants and their economic consequences on the state. Sukbhir Singh Badal railed at the rally in Bhatinda:

O Khalsa, those of you who are young did not see those “dark days”...People were even afraid to go out at night...For fifteen or

twenty years, all innovation and development in Punjab was stalled, but the brave Punjabis fought those “mischievous elements” and prevailed...There has been peace and development in Punjab for the past twenty or twenty-five years, but those “mischievous forces” have now begun to reappear and, once again, supported by the Congress Party (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RyoSDQMe-E>).

The choice of wording of this statement is important. Sukhbir Badal began by referring to the congregation as “O Khalsa” (that is, the Sikh Panth or community) but then emphasized the role by the inclusive category (that is, “Punjabis”) in ending the “dark days” of militancy. The Akalis, as this utterance shows, appeared to have placed themselves squarely on the winning side of the conflict whereas, in reality, they had actually wavered between the two sides (the militants and the Indian government) during the late 1980s and earlier 1990s, waiting to see which side would prevail. Thus, Sukhbir Badal’s statement demonstrates a rhetorical balancing act between Sikh identity and more inclusive regional nationalism, but certainly an avoidance of any sort of exclusivist Sikh ethnonationalism in contemporary times.

The Akali Dal (Badal) also used the opportunity of the *Sadbhavana* rallies to repeatedly characterize the Congress Party as being “anti-Sikh” in preparation for its campaign for the upcoming 2017 state assembly elections. The Congress Party was consistently blamed for Operation Bluestar, the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi’s assassination, and for the years of militancy in general. As Sukhbir Badal declared:

The Congress wants to bring back those “mischievous forces” [who ruined Punjab] once again, only for votes. Let me tell you, the animosity that the Gandhi family has for Punjab has not yet left its heart...Indira Gandhi attacked our religious shrines with tanks and bombs, then Rajiv Gandhi had thousands of our brothers and sisters killed in Delhi, and now it is Rahul Gandhi’s turn along with Amarinder Singh and Pratap Singh Bajwa (two prominent Congress leaders) to set fire to Punjab. Why won’t these people quit [harming Punjab]? (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DtFaYbdpAk>)

He repeated this theme in another *Sadbhavana* rally by exclaiming:

Many Congress leaders today claim to be good Sikhs. Let me ask them, when Indira Gandhi attacked the Durbar Sahib with tanks, did you forget about Sikhism then? When thousands of our brothers and sisters were massacred throughout the county, did you not remember Sikhism then?...Now is it Rahul Gandhi’s turn to try to light a match to Punjab?...I ask you, don’t ever forget who are your enemies?...We finally got Punjab through the “dark days” caused by these “forces”...The Akali Dal and

BJP fought [these forces] to the fullest, and even lost many of our leaders to their (referring to the militants) bullets. (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uER3a7s0L1g>)

The irony of this statement was that the Akali Dal (Badal) never aggressively pursued issues like an apology for Operation Bluestar, prosecuting those guilty of the anti-Sikh riots, and justice and reparations for the victims of human rights violations in Punjab with extreme vigor when they were in power. Instead, these were issues with which to bash the Congress party, and attract both Sikh and non-Sikh Punjabi votes during election time. Thus, it was a part of the Akali Dal's "multiethnic" political party transformation, where "ethnic" issues might be periodically brought up but with a clear electoral calculation in mind.

Senior BJP leaders also addressed the *Sadbhavana* rallies, along with their Akali Dal (Badal) allies. In one of these rallies, BJP leader Tarun Chugh chimed in with his perspective by saying:

Captain Amarinder Singh, you had resigned in protest from the *Lok Sabha* (parliament) when the Harmandir Sahib was attacked in 1984, saying that the Congress Party is oppressive and murderous. But, I ask you: 'What has changed now?' In 1984, over 4,000 Punjabi people were massacred in Delhi and our *gurdwaras* were destroyed. But, I ask: 'Is your thinking the same as Congress leaders like Jagdish Tytler and H.K.L. Bhagat who committed these atrocities, or has something changed?' (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWMDpxEwXXg>)

The problem with these types of statements is, in part, due to the fact that the BJP had supported Indira Gandhi's decision to raid the Golden Temple in 1984 to flush out Sikh militants, and many BJP cadres may also have also been involved in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. In fact, it was not 4,000 "Punjabis", but rather specifically Sikhs, who had been massacred in Delhi in 1984! Historical and factual accuracy, as to be expected, became victims of more contemporary political compulsions in the rhetoric at these rallies, which tried to reinforce Akali Dal-BJP unity in the state on the basis of *Punjabiyaat*.

As alluded to earlier, the Akali Dal (Badal) tried to project itself as the only political party, along with its BJP allies, committed to communal harmony and economic development in Punjab. In fact, these themes - communal harmony and economic development - formed the centerpiece of its upcoming electoral campaign and alliance. As Parkash Singh Badal defined this sense of unified regional identity by emphasizing:

We have done many rallies over the past several years, but this is the most important one I have done. This gathering goes beyond mere political or electoral reasons. It goes beyond that by trying to strengthen communal harmony and foster love

between different religious communities...This rally was necessary because the events of the past few days have raised fears in the minds of people that we were returning to those “dark days” of thirty years ago...This rally has sealed the feeling that, irrespective of any sacrifices both parties (referring to the Akali Dal and BJP) have to make, we will never let communal harmony in Punjab be broken. A state without communal harmony cannot develop economically and the people cannot prosper... The only Panthic organization is one that goes by the ideals given by our Gurus. The Akali Dal is the only Panthic organization that has the democratic mandate of the people.” (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RyoSDQMe-E>)

In the quote above, Parkash Singh Badal not only emphasized the Akali Dal’s commitment to communal harmony and economic development, but he also pointed out that the Akali Dal’s primary basis for community leadership - its control over the SGPC and formation of the Punjab state government both through democratic means. The concerns of Sikh dissidents in the “second pole” of Sikh politics were rarely acknowledged and, in fact, linked to a conspiracy against the Sikh Panth and Punjab. In a particularly colorful and emotional statement, Parkash Singh Badal described the supposed difference between his party and the Sikh dissidents by saying:

On one side are those people who follow the teaching of Guru Tegh Bahadar (the ninth Sikh guru) who gave his life for the protection of the Hindu religion and, on the other side, are those who used to say, ‘First we will cut the heads of *monas* (reference to clean shaven Sikh or Hindus), before cutting the *chona* (rice paddy crop)’...Look at the difference in thinking...Can those with such parochial thinking be true Sikhs or Panthic? (YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RyoSDQMe-E>)

Armed militant organizations had certainly massacred Hindus during the decade of militancy, but none of the organizers of the November 10 “Sarbat Khalsa” had ever advocated doing so, neither during the insurgency nor during the “Sarbat Khalsa” held only a couple of weeks earlier. Nonetheless, this statement was clearly designed to retain support of “moderate Sikhs” and reassure the BJP’s urban Hindu base of the Akali Dal’s continued commitment to an integrative Punjabi regional identity. In contrast, the Sikh dissidents and the Congress Party supposedly threatened this unity and continued communal harmony in Punjab.

Senior BJP leader Tarun Chugh added to this characterization of the Akali Dal (Badal)-BJP alliance and, in fact, linked even the AAP to the forces that supposedly were trying to destabilize Punjab by stating:

We (referring to the Akali Dal-BJP coalition) will always have to protect Punjab from the “dark days” through which the state passed and the harmful designs of the Congress Party...There is also another new party which is trying to hurt Punjab called the Am Adami Party...Both of these two parties - the Congress Party and AAP - sat together with pro-Khalistan leaders like Simranjeet Singh Mann to organize the Sarbat Khalsa at Chhabba. The people of Punjab need to recognize the nefarious designs of these people...The Akali Dal and BJP have always protected Punjab.

(YouTube,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWMDpxEwXXg>)

Statements like the one above were repeatedly uttered at these rallies, and were clearly designed to prepare the groundwork for the upcoming early-2017 state assembly elections. In fact, the content of these rallies eventually moved away from the Guru Granth Sahib desecration issue, and toward partisan criticism of Sikh dissidents, the Congress Party, and the AAP. Interestingly, the Dera Sacha Sauda and Akal Takht “pardon” row was never mentioned at these rallies.

Sukhbir Singh Badal summed up his views, and demonstrated the Akali Dal (Badal)’s attempt to maintain its core Sikh support base, while concurrently reassuring urban Hindus who tended to vote for the BJP by extolling,

The Akali Dal is not just some other party. It is a party of martyrs and bravehearts...No one can challenge the Akali Dal...To my party workers, ‘The 2017 election has started now’...There is only one goal for Parkash Singh Badal—progress in Punjab through peace, communal harmony, and development..He has shown that he is the only leader in Punjab who can make these things happen.

(YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DtFaYbdpAk>)

In short, the rhetoric contained in the speeches at the Akali Dal (Badal)’s *Sadbhavana* rallies points to several elements about its ideology, strategy, and goals. The Akali Dal (Badal) tried to portray itself and the BJP as the only political parties interested in and able to maintain communal peace and economic development in Punjab. It characterized all other parties - including the dissent Sikh groups, Congress Party, and even the AAP - as acting in conjunction to undermine Punjab. It also labeled the dissident Sikh groups as being “anti-Panthic,” despite the sacrifices their leaders and followers may have made during the years of militancy for the Sikh *qoum* including repeated arrest and torture at the hands of state security forces. Thus, the rhetoric at the rallies (and the rallies themselves) was designed to improve the electoral prospects of the Akali Dal (Badal) and the BJP in the upcoming 2017 state assembly elections. An aggressive Sikh ethnonationalist agenda was not presented; instead an agenda of peace and supposed prosperity was emphasized to resonate with a diverse Punjabi electorate

and to expand its transformation into a “multiethnic” political party. The workers of the Akali Dal were projected as “bravehearts” and “martyrs,” not so much for a parochial Sikh ethnonationalist cause, but rather for the cause of integrative regional Punjabi nationalism and continued economic development in the state.

### Conclusion

In this article I presented the *descriptive* argument that rhetorical/ideological cleavages in contemporary Sikh politics in Punjab can be differentiated into two largely contrasting poles. The first is the dominant Akali Dal (Badal) which claims to be the main leadership of the Sikh community, based on its majority in the SGPC and its ability to form coalition state governments in Punjab. The second pole is an array of other, often internally fractionalized, Sikh political and religious organizations, whose claim to community leadership is based on their commitment to aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism and identity. The “unity” of this second pole within Sikh politics is not organizational, but rather the ideological commitment to Sikh ethnonationalism and political opposition to the moderate Shiromani Akali Dal. The result of these two contrasting “poles” is an interesting ethno-political dilemma in which the Akali Dal has pragmatic electoral success in democratic elections but is unable to aggressively pursue Sikh ethnonationalism; whereas the dissident groups are able to pursue aggressive Sikh ethnonationalism but cannot win majorities in democratic political institutions.

I also present the related *explanatory* argument that the Akali Dal’s rhetorical moderation in the post-militancy era can be explained by its pragmatic need to widen its support base and maintain coalitional allies for electoral politics; whereas organizations in the second pole in Sikh politics do not have such a political compulsion. As a result, the Akali Dal leans more toward integrative Punjabi regionalism in its rhetoric and ideology, whereas the groups in the second pole emphasize exclusivist Sikh ethnonationalism and identity. These descriptive and explanatory arguments were illustrated through a detailed analysis of the Dera Sacha Sauda and Guru Granth Sahib desecration issues of late-2015, and the political rhetoric subsequently disseminated at the competing Sarbat Khalsa and Sadbhavana rallies.

The importance of this study lies in that the relationship between the Sikh community and the central Indian state is often determined by the nature of their respective leaderships, and their preferred political strategies and rhetoric. It remains to be seen if the Shiromani Akali Dal continues its transformation toward becoming more of a “multiethnic” party, emphasizing inclusive Punjabi regional identity or if it reverts back to becoming more of an “ethnic” party focusing on parochial Sikh ethnonationalism. The answer to this wider question will be based on a number of more specific political questions such as the following: will the Indian state continue to be fairly decentralized like at present or will it become highly-centralized as previously with Indira Gandhi? Will state-based regional political parties continue to play an important role in the building of ruling coalitions in the center or will BJP dominance in the center become institutionalized? Will Sukhbir Singh Badal be challenged by more ethnically-

oriented leaders within the Akali Dal after his father's (Parkash Singh Badal, who is over ninety years old) inevitable demise or will his leadership remain secure? Will the "second pole" in Sikh politics be able to define the Sikh political agenda in Punjab in a way that forces the Shiromani Akali Dal to become more ethnically-oriented or will they continue to play a peripheral role? Finally, what effect will the new-comer to Punjabi politics (the AAP) and the state's long term demographic changes have on the structure of competition in Punjab? Answers to these specific questions will inevitably impact whether Sikh identity and ethnonationalism remain commensurate with the wider Indian state/nation-building processes, or whether they become incompatible and conflictual as in 1984 and the subsequent decade of violent insurgency in Punjab.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A detailed history of the Sikh separatist insurgency, including the political dynamics which contributed to its emergence and demise, is found in Chima (2010).

<sup>2</sup> A detailed empirical analysis of the grassroots dynamics of insurgency emphasizing the high degrees of "non-political" violence and criminality is found in Puri et. al. (1999). In contrast, Pettigrew (1995) offers a more sympathetic view of the insurgency based on self-perceptions of Sikh militants.

<sup>3</sup> The political science term political "institutionalization" is defined as the condition or "process by which organizations and procedures acquire [established] value and stability" (Huntington, 1968, 12). It is argued that "institutionalization" is necessary for political stability. In contrast, "deinstitutionalization" refers to the process by which these "stable, valued, and recurring patterns of behavior" are reversed, leading to increased instability.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of various explanations for the decline of the Sikh separatist movement, see G. Singh (1996).

<sup>5</sup> In the social sciences, accurate description is just as important as good causal explanation. In fact, it is argued that accurate description is intimately intertwined with valid causal explanation in the sense that a phenomenon which is not accurately described cannot be properly explained (Gerring, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> The term "Shiromani" can be translated into "premier" or "respected." In this case, it refers to whichever faction of the Akali Dal gains control of the democratically-elected SGPC, hence its legitimate status as the main leadership of the Sikhs in Punjab.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis and evaluation of the Indian state's state-nation building strategies which have arguably led to the creation of strong "dual, mutually-complementary" regional and national identities, see Stepan et. al. (2011).

<sup>8</sup> There is a debate between two theoretical schools of thought on the nature of ethnic identity. The instrumentalists (or social constructivists) view ethnic identity as being a malleable and fluid phenomenon, subject to change (for example, see Brass 1991). In contrast, the primordialists view it as being more stable and emotive in nature (for example, see Conner, 1993). In this article, I take a middle-

of-the-road approach by acknowledging that ethnic boundaries can change over time, but that the phenomenon usually carries significant emotive salience for many people.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the difference between an “ethnic” and “multiethnic” political party, see Chandra (2004, pp.3-5).

<sup>10</sup> The best study on Sikh politics from the 1920s to Independence remains Kapur (1988).

<sup>11</sup> The composition of religious communities in the colonial province of Punjab was about 61% Muslim, 26% Hindu, and 13% Sikh (Kapur, 1988, p.208). After Independence and partition of India, the population of Indian Punjab became approximately 61% Hindu and 35% Sikh (Kapur, 1988, p.232). According to the most recent Government of India 2011 census figures, the population of contemporary Punjab is 57.7% Sikh and 38.5% Hindu (*The Tribune*, 27 August 2015). This has changed slightly since the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* (Punjab-speaking state) in 1966 when it was 60.22% Sikh compared to 37.54% Hindu, with decades of Sikh outmigration likely reducing the percentage of Sikhs in the population.

<sup>12</sup> The term “Sikh political system” was coined by Wallace (1981).

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the 170 elected members, 15 others are co-opted and 6 are ex-officio members including the five *Singh Sahiban* and the head priest of the Golden Temple (K. Singh, 2014, p.332).

<sup>14</sup> Constituency-wise data on SGPC elections is not readily available. It is, however, generally assumed that the margin of victory in each specific constituency is often quite small, and that the combined vote count of second and third place finishers in some constituencies may total more than the first place winner. Thus, the total number of seats won by the victorious Akali faction may not be an accurate numerical indication of the level of Sikh support for that particular grouping because of the “plurality wins, first-past-the-post” electoral system used in SGPC elections.

<sup>15</sup> For a history of the Akal Takht’s role in the spiritual and political affairs of the Sikhs, see Dilgeer (1980). It should be noted that the five *Singh Sahiban* include the *jathedars* (heads) of five main Sikh shrines—the Akal Takht, Takht Keshgarh Sahib, Takht Damdama Sahib, Takht Patna Sahib, and Takht Hazoor Sahib. Since the last two shrines are in states far from Punjab, the head *granthis* (preachers) of the Golden Temple and Akal Takht are allowed to substitute for two of the *Singh Sahiban* if the latter are not readily available for deliberation and decision making.

<sup>16</sup> A detailed analysis of Sikh politics and the Akali Dal from Independence to the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* is found in Nayar (1966).

<sup>17</sup> A rigorous academic analysis of internal reorganization of states in India, including the linguistic reorganization of the 1950s, is found in Chadda (2002).

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of Sikh political leadership and organizational dynamics during the *Punjabi Suba* movement, see Brass (1974).

<sup>19</sup> A comprehensive table showing the formation and termination of every state government of Punjab from the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* in 1966 to the present is found in Van Dyke (2015, pp.64-65).

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, and how its content was utilized by the Akali Dal to mobilize various sections of the Sikh society in Punjab, see Chima (2015).

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the main Akali Dal boycotted the 1992 state assembly elections, thus depressing its overall average vote percentage and increasing that of the Congress Party in this figure.

<sup>22</sup> Bapu Surat Singh began his fast in January 2015. Instead of acceding to his demands, the Punjab Police under order from the Akali Dal-BJP government has repeatedly “arrested” him for hospitalization and force feeding. He is still continuing his fast as of the writing of this article.

<sup>23</sup> For an analysis of the results of the 2014 parliamentary elections in Punjab, see Kumar (2014).

<sup>24</sup> The *khanda* symbol consists of a war-quoit behind a double-edged sword and two curved swords on either side.

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