

## Sikh Failure on the Partition of Punjab in 1947

**Akhtar Hussain Sandhu**  
*University of Gujrat, Pakistan*

---

The All-India Muslim League achieved Pakistan, the Indian National Congress secured India but the Shiromani Akali Dal got nothing on the eve of the British departure in 1947 although the Sikh community had collaborated closely with the colonial power. The demand of the Sikh community for a separate Sikh state and accession of more territories to this state came to naught as a consequence of partition of Indian subcontinent. The decision of joining India by the Akali leadership enslaved this community to a mammoth majority in which they were only one per cent. Different scholars took variety of directions in exploring the roots of the Sikh failure in the final breakdown. According to Sher Muhammad Grewal, Sikhs failed to achieve something beneficial in the political arena staged in 1940s because they were very simple people and could not apprehend the sensitive situation of Punjab politics.<sup>1</sup> Sangat Singh claims that the principal reason behind the Sikh failure was the incompetent Akali leadership<sup>2</sup> while Sardar Hukam Singh opines that situational politics left no positive options for the Akali leaders, therefore their decision to join India was the best choice.<sup>3</sup> These scholars tried to solve this tangle by pointing out some specific aspect of the question which still leaves many gaps. Actually, there were ample reasons which combined and resulted in the Sikh failure. This article traces the factors which compelled the Sikh political leadership to reject Pakistan and decide in favour of India in 1947.

### **Background**

The Muslims and Sikhs had both been ruling communities of the Punjab<sup>4</sup> therefore both were confident to claim their political inheritance when the British decided to depart from India. Punjab had great importance for the Muslims as they were the majority occupying this area, but sacrosanct for the Sikhs from the religious point of view because it was birthplace of their Gurus,<sup>5</sup> therefore their religious affiliation made it sacred for them. Islam came from Arabia and many Muslims from other countries had settled in the Punjab while Sikhism was an indigenous religion and its followers were purely local people which convinced them to claim the region as Sikh homeland. Hindus had also been a ruling community in the Punjab in certain periods. After 1849 the British emerged as a new ruling community in the region when they wrested power from Sikhs. A set of political reforms introduced by the new masters ensured majority rule over the minorities which caused unrest among the religious minorities. Thus, the British Punjab presented a very complex nature of communitarian position. Nevertheless, Sikhs were the most vulnerable community in the political domain due to their scattered strength

throughout the region.<sup>6</sup> They did not have a majority in any district of the British Punjab. Although the British had been favourable to the Sikhs, they tried to secure consensus among the major political parties working at the national level for constitutional settlement and this made the Sikh position very weak as they were concentrated mainly in the Punjab only. The Sikhs and Muslims had emerged as rival forces because of particular reasons which affected the politics especially in the British Punjab.

Retrospectively, the Muslim saints<sup>7</sup> had attracted the local masses irrespective of colour, race, caste and financial status and enabled them to understand the real Islamic message of humanity, fraternity and simplicity. To Trilochan Singh, the Muslim saints impressed upon the non-Muslims particularly the downtrodden, oppressed, humiliated and neglected Hindus and achieved huge conversions.<sup>8</sup> Later on, the extremist behaviour of Muslim liberalism and Muslim orthodoxy caused shocking blows to Muslim rule in India. A gap emerged in the religious sphere of Indian society particularly in the Punjab. Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) undoubtedly filled this gap by introducing the mixed religious tenets of Islam and Hinduism and got abundant conversion from Hindus and a little number from the Muslims as well.<sup>9</sup> Sikhism emerged in the Punjab during Muslim rule and Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, experienced dynasties of Ibrahim Lodhi (Indian ruler, died in 1526) and Zahir-ud-Din Mohammad Babur (first Mughal ruler of India, 1526-1530). The nature of the relationship between the Muslim rulers and Sikh Gurus should have been that of the ruler and the ruled but the Gurus opted to live an independent life without any fear of the authoritarian governments. This sense of personal liberty involved them in the activities of their own choice including politics which was dangerous for them at that time when they could be slain for political power as a royal tradition. For this reason, the political activities of the Gurus were never overlooked by the central authority. They were called for questioning, were pressurized, imprisoned, tortured and assassinated ruthlessly.<sup>10</sup> Though the political factors forced the Muslim rulers to take stern action against the Sikh Gurus, this was perceived as an action against the 'religious heroes' of Sikhs which could never be tolerated by their followers. Therefore, murder of the Gurus during Muslim rule was the root cause which never let the Muslim-Sikh relations prosper in the Punjab. Both the communities had been living side by side but the religious heritage kept them divided as religious rivals. The later rulers, both Muslims and Sikhs, manifested the same attitude towards each other till the arrival of the British in the Punjab.

The British defeated the Sikhs in the mid-19th century and annexed Punjab but soon after the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1846 and 1849) both the communities began to get along with each other. The Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus proved loyal citizens and became the strength of the British rule in the subcontinent. The newly introduced educational, political, economic, agricultural, publishing and other reforms created a new sense of communitarian empowerment and then nationalism in the communities. All this encouraged them in gaining more and more rights and concessions in the constitutional packages which

consequently resulted in communalism. The two world wars (1914-19 and 1939-45) weakened the British position in the colonies which accelerated and encouraged the nationalist struggle for political rights. The locals had sacrificed lives in the battlefields in favour of the British which convinced them to treat the locals in a friendlier manner. The Sikhs were the most favoured community in this regard but they had to face several setbacks in the political domain. Their demands were turned down while Hindus and Muslims appeared successful communities in securing maximum benefits. Several reasons can be attributed to this ruinous end.

### **Sikh Leadership**

The British introduced a system by which they could control the Punjab through local eminent families while the rural elite were already anxious to lead the society under the auspices of the new masters. The British granted vast lands and concessions to the landlords which boosted their stature among the locals. Voting right was not given to the common people, which prevented the masses from forming organizations to fight for their rights. At the initial stage, the Sikh leadership also came from the landed aristocracy which, despite all their endeavors, proved less productive for the Sikh community. The Khalsa National Party<sup>11</sup> was enjoying British support and political concessions as a part of the coalition government. On the other hand, the religio-political leadership<sup>12</sup> emerged mainly from the lower middle class with a bellicose inclination. It lacked political vision, therefore the Akalis were simultaneously anti-government, anti-Muslim League,<sup>13</sup> anti-Congress,<sup>14</sup> anti-Unionist,<sup>15</sup> anti-British, anti-Khalsa National Party and anti-Communist and other Sikhs who were not their allies. Contrarily, the Akalis seemed to be in coalition with the Muslim League in the NWFP (1943), Punjab Unionist Party (1942), British and the Congress.<sup>16</sup> Leadership from rich families proves beneficial for a community especially when it lacks a genuine leadership which comes up over time. On the other hand, leadership from lower classes takes time to free itself from the shackles of existing deprivation and natural psychological complexities. They usually cannot get rid of the submissiveness, economic and political inferiority infused in their nature. The emerging Sikh leadership of that time was under the same influencing factors. The Sikh leadership sometimes would adopt aggressive approach but lost the fervour whenever some British agents approached them. Major Short and Sir Penderel Moon's<sup>17</sup> activities prove this contention. While dealing with the Congress, the Sikh leadership many times demonstrated compromising behaviour on political issues.

The Sikh landed aristocracy dominated the socio-political domain and the Akalis considered them as their real rivals and started vilifying them in the eyes of the Sikh *panth*.<sup>18</sup> Ignoring the traditional political forces was not a sign of prowess because these Sikh leaders had personal and working relationship with the Muslim leaders and the British officials who could help build political bridges. The Akali popularity at the grassroots level had the prospect for

political mobilisation but it should not have sidelined the faction of the traditional politicians.

The other weak aspect of Akali politics was the greed to control the Gurdwara funds.<sup>19</sup> The rapacity of finances or the land and property of the Gurdwaras dented the strength of the Akalis. They had been accepting funds from the Hindu leaders and could sacrifice anything to gain control over the Gurdwara funds. Such proclivities damaged the very spirit of their movement. Gurmit Singh confirms that one cause of Akali failure may be the Gurdwara funds. He writes that all the Sikh leaders were selfish and were asking for patronage. None of them were there to work selflessly for the Sikhs.<sup>20</sup> In the bye-election campaign in Batala in September 1941, the Akalis and the rival followers of Mohindar Singh used *dangs* (bamboo sticks) and *kirpans* in the fight which injured Majhail and forced him to flee. The police reports expose that the Akalis and Nihangs were engaged in the fight for the possession of a few plots of land at Nankana Sahib.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the Akalis opposed the Nihang Sikhs due to the fear that they would gain an overwhelming influence in the Gurdwara administration which would deprive the former of the funds. However they supported the same faction when they found them useful for themselves. Such contradictory and selfish strategies could not be beneficial for the Sikh future. Sincerity of purpose was badly missing in the political creed of the Akalis.

The Sikh leaders tried to purport themselves as nationalists which aggravated their confusion because their agenda in essence was communal. They were not clear what to do with the provincial and national politics. Sardar Ujjal Singh in 1973 declared it a reality that the Sikhs had always been 'having a national outlook along with their anxiety to protect the legitimate rights of the Sikhs'.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, they incessantly denied the political reality of the communal status of Sikh politics. Time was needed for them to play a communal role and which could help them to find better solutions to their problems but they never accepted this reality. Nationalism did not suit the Sikhs and their political demands. Their struggle was purely of a communal nature while they kept on posing as nationalists. H. V. Hodson presents the same picture when he writes that the Sikhs and Muslims had been at war with each other for two and a half centuries 'first for communal survival and then for the mastery of the Punjab'.<sup>23</sup> They could well project their demands as a communal party as Gandhi had suggested to Master Tara Singh in his letter that the Sikhs were playing communal politics and their violent strategy did not match with that of the Congress.<sup>24</sup> Sikhs resented this advice, considering it a taunt, rather than mending their way in light of this valuable suggestion.

### **Congress' Influence**

Sikhism attracted the main bulk of the followers from Hinduism. The impact of this link remained intact and affected the political idealism of the Sikhs. The Congress repeatedly betrayed them on many issues but the Sikh leadership never thought to get rid of the undue influence of the Hindus. The Congress

gave word in the Ravi Pledge of 1929<sup>25</sup> that no constitutional package would be conceded by the Congress until the Sikhs approved it but practically they never honoured this pledge. They always went to the All-India Muslim League<sup>26</sup> and the British for negotiations without consulting the Sikhs. Despite this, the Akalis and Central Akali Dal had been motivating their followers to join the Congress in maximum numbers<sup>27</sup> so that their lobby within the Congress became influential and strong. At every crucial moment, the Congress ignored the Sikhs but the Akali leadership did not dare to adopt an independent direction in their politics. The acceptance of the Congress' influence proved pernicious for the Sikh future.

### **Violence in Politics**

The Akalis made the fullest use of religion and immersed violence in politics. Emotionalism was adopted by the Akali leadership to impress upon the masses<sup>28</sup> which forced them towards the violent mode of politics. Master Tara Singh, in the flow of emotionalism did not even spare Guru Gobind Singh<sup>29</sup> and is alleged to have voiced during the days of the Communal Award agitation that if the Guru did not help them to achieve the victory then he was not their saviour.<sup>30</sup> He could not discard Sikhism as promised in public so the rhetoric was just to provoke sentiments of the audience which does not suit a genuine leader especially who enjoys the religious trust of the community as well. The Sikh leaders frequently quoted Khalsa and the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh who, to them, had dented Muslim rule in India. They supported and secured support of the Hindu Mahasabha in the Punjab in the name of enmity with the Muslims. Although they detested the Muslims this did not seem a proper time to let such issues come up. They should have overcome such sentiments for the time being and tried to hold maximum discussions to reach a better solution for the Sikhs. They, however, projected before British representatives, particularly the Punjab Governor Evan Jenkins<sup>31</sup> that the League wanted to eliminate the Sikhs and Sikhism from the earth.<sup>32</sup> Although Master Tara Singh repudiated the incident of brandishing kirpan on the stairs of the Punjab Assembly in a talk with Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal but he admits that his own lieutenants had misquoted it just to highlight the Akali courage and unremitting enthusiasm against the Pakistan scheme:

The story had been made up by politicians with vested interests with the goal of inciting the populace, and picked up and carried thereafter by overzealous news reporters. The story was even promoted by some of Master Ji's own Akali followers who erroneously felt that it would promote their cause of opposing the creation of Pakistan.<sup>33</sup>

So violence seemed a clarion call of the day in the politics which undermined the true nature of the righteousness of the Sikh demands.

### **Ignoring Direct Stakeholders**

The Sikhs erroneously depended on the British Governor of Punjab and the Viceroy, particularly in the last decade of the British raj, who advised them again and again to negotiate with either party to bargain on their strength in the Punjab. No party, whether the League or the Congress, could neglect them in the political sphere but they kept on approaching the Governor and Viceroy with requests to 'do something for the Sikhs.' The clear picture of the political developments could be dealt with frequent discussions with the League and the Congress which were the direct stakeholders but the Sikh dependence on the goodwill of the British was surprising at this critical juncture. They kept on moving such requests to Lord Mountbatten who conveyed the same to Jawaharlal Nehru who turned them down on some specific reasons.<sup>34</sup> Ignoring the real stakeholders and continual pursuance of the British could not produce any useful solution for the Sikhs and ultimately they had to endure the catastrophe.

### **Disunity among Sikhs**

The Akali policy to sideline and humiliate the Sikh aristocracy, Communists, Mazhabi Sikhs, Congress-supporting Sikhs, and other groups proved detrimental in the long run. Every Sikh organization or group was an integral part of the tiny community. Being a religious and political representative body, it was the moral duty of the Shiromani Akali Dal to adopt a reconciliatory and absorbing attitude towards all the factions working on different platforms. But disunity was so pervasive among them that the Akali Dal itself could not avoid factionalism within the party. It was divided into Giani Kartar Singh and the Nagoke groups and the top Akali leadership had to back a specific group in the Gurdwara elections. The dual membership of many Sikhs was another problem as many were enjoying affiliation with more than one party. The party system at the time was not exclusive and a person was allowed to have dual membership which created a problem of discipline and mobilisation. It loosened the followers to submit to other leadership and discipline. A Sikh was a Congressite and the Akali member at the same time or a Communist and Congressite simultaneously. It went against the political spirit in terms of the ideologies. This facility sowed the seeds for disunity. Responsibility went to the leadership to maintain party discipline but no attention was paid to this problem. The Unionist Muslims also became victim of the same problem when once they joined Muslim League under the Jinnah-Sikandar Pact in October 1937 and then had to surrender before the League in the 1940s.<sup>35</sup> The League secured an opportunity to dominate in the ranks of the Unionist Muslims.

Some writers are of the view that the Sikh masses never backed the Akali Dal fully and as such the masses were responsible for its failure. To Gurmit Singh, the excuse of Master Tara Singh was justifiable, that the Sikh voters never cooperated with the leadership and gave them just 23 seats in the Punjab Assembly in 1946 while 10 were gifted to the Congress.<sup>36</sup> As a matter of fact,

sacrifices of the Sikh masses, from the Gurdwara Reform Movement till the elections of 1946, nullify the stance taken by Master Tara Singh and Gurmit Singh. The responsibility of losing 10 seats lies on the shoulders of the leaders who had constantly been advising the Sikhs to join the Congress. The Sikh masses did a lot for the Akali leadership and responded zealously whenever they called for *morcha* politics and on other occasions. They paid money and sacrificed lives on the call of the Sikh leadership. Moreover, if all the Sikh parties were not in a position to oppose the Congress, how could the Sikh masses take a stand against it? The political culture popularized by the Akalis convinced them that the sagacious policy for them was to support the Congress. In various conferences, the Akali and anti-Akali Sikh leaders had been offering their unconditional services to the Congress and exhorting their respective members to join the Congress in more and more numbers so that their influence within the Congress circles against the other Sikh parties could be increased.<sup>37</sup> The Sikh masses played no role in the failure instead they followed whichever Sikh party approached them and presented their programme with sound arguments. They had diverted their sympathies from the traditional leadership to the Akalis. What else could they do? The Akalis brainwashed them through speeches and statements that the Muslims were their enemies and the Hindus were their friends. Since the leaders showed allegiance to the Congress and the British therefore the masses followed them. The masses did believe and demonstrate practically what they were taught. Therefore, Gurmit Singh's assertion accusing the masses cannot be justified.

Most importantly the Akali leadership lacked flexibility and competence to respond to a rapidly changing political environment. They should have foreseen all possible alternatives which might come out during dialogue with the other communities. Dialogical rationale in the politics was the need of the time. With a fixed point of view, Master Tara Singh undertook the anti-British stance while the Sikh community needed an opposite policy.<sup>38</sup> He took the British advice and showed strong reliance on them but acted differently. The decisions and erratic postures at this critical moment meant a narrow role and a disaster for the Sikhs. He was a Sikh by religion but a 'Hindu' by nature as Kapur Singh has written which exposed his pro-Congress character. The Sikh students named him a '*Hindu putt*' (Hindu son).<sup>39</sup> Gurmit Singh writes that 'Master Tara Singh lured by the false promises of the Congress leaders gave a wrong lead to the Sikh Community.'<sup>40</sup> Therefore, his politics as a Sikh leader helped the Hindus to secure a vast area, along with the military and a food bowl at a cost to the Sikhs.

Master Tara Singh remained unchallenged as the sole leader of the Sikhs during the period 1923 to 1947. The Sikh masses rendered their wholehearted support to him but at the most sensitive time he went into the background<sup>41</sup> and left the Sikh *panth* at the mercy of Sardar Baldev Singh and Sardar Swaran Singh.<sup>42</sup> Master Tara Singh was considered the strength of his community and a political force ever since the Pakistan scheme was passed but he pulled himself out of the mainstream and went behind the scene in politics. Although he kept on guiding the Akalis<sup>43</sup> his declaration of aloofness dispirited the

masses who were unaware of the internal party issues. In his absence, the reign of Sikh politics went into the hands of the Jat leaders, especially at this crucial time of negotiations with other political leaders and the Viceroy and did not prove to be a correct decision. One of the main causes of Master Tara Singh's aloofness was the severe opposition from within the Akali circles which convinced him to remain in the background for the time being as a deliberate tactic.<sup>44</sup> The Akali leadership at that time seemed to be working for self projection while they had put the future of Sikhs at stake.

It seems relevant to take personal weaknesses of Master Tara Singh into account. He was headmaster of a high school who lacked the vision of a national or provincial political leadership. There was no mechanism to train headmasters to become politicians, rather because they were government servants, they were not allowed to take part in political activities. Given the prevailing feudal structure, the landlords' relations with the political families and their influence in Punjab affairs, this discouraged an ordinary person to emerge as an influential and a successful politician. In this regard, although Master Tara Singh proved to be an exception and became the centre of Sikh politics, he had no relationship with the other prominent political families and this became a negative point for him and distanced him from other influential families. Training in the legal profession and/or sound family connections were required to become a successful politician but Master Tara Singh lacked both of them.

Another weak aspect of Sikh politics was the negligible role of the Sikh aristocracy in politics. The feudal or traditional leadership mainly focused on their personal benefits in the Punjab and did not assist in with the emergence of a parallel leadership within the Sikh community which may have paved the way for the middle and lower middle classes to come forward. The traditional leadership may have served the Sikhs better if they had come forward to dominate the arena. The Unionist politics harmed their reputation severely and put them in an awkward position as their respective communities considered them traitors and selfish. The Sikh parties presented the Unionist Sikhs as traitors and stooges of the British and the Muslim Unionists. They had not provided any revolutionary service towards the *panth*<sup>45</sup> which could have maintained their influence among the masses. They never tried to counter the propaganda propagated by the newly emerged Sikh parties with good planning. Therefore, soon their grip over their sympathizers began to wane.

The Sikh demographic pattern was such a critical disadvantage which could not be adequately addressed by the Sikh leaders. They did not form a majority of the population in any district of the Punjab. As a result, this scattered strength forced the Sikh leadership to align with the Congress. A competent leadership could have met the challenge with a well-worked out strategy but the Sikhs could not hit upon such a leadership or strategy throughout this period. The communal clashes which erupted from time to time in different corners of the Punjab proved troubling. The Sikhs reported numerous complaints against the Muslim but their enmity with the League was not handled properly and was considered a weak point in the political arena.

The League was a political party and it had demonstrated nothing negative against the Sikhs since its inception in politics. The League leadership had been supportive of the Sikh cause from the 1920s onward but no positive response came from their side. However, the League believed in minority rights and tried to bring the Sikh political leaders closer during the League ministry-making days but they never showed any flexibility. The partition of the Punjab requires to be studied further in the light of the British-Sikh and then Muslim-Sikh relations. If India was to get something from the Punjab, this could only be possible with Sikh help. The Punjabi Hindus were of reasonable size, far more than the Sikhs but they did not come to the front as the Sikhs did. The Congress leadership was aware of this fact and saw the political goings-on on the Sikh part and supported them because all the Sikh political activities were geared to fulfill the Congress agenda. When the Sikhs tried to take an independent course like the *Azad Punjab* scheme or *Sikhistan*, the Hindus opposed them and forced them to reverse their stand on the schemes pledged with their community. The coincidence of compatibility of the Akali demands and the Congress's maintained the image of the Akali Dal among the Sikhs otherwise their failures could have drowned the party for ever.

The leadership crisis was a potent factor in the Sikh failure which forestalled the possibility of meeting their appropriate demands as Sangat Singh writes:

The Sikhs did not have a leader of towering stature, of high standing, higher education, much less a Bar-at-Law or a statesman who could exert his primacy.<sup>46</sup>

To their chagrin the Sikh community constantly lacked a quality leadership. They were considered simple to the extent of being imprudent but nothing was done to redress the weakness. Sardar Kapur Singh in his book shares a light discussion over a cup of tea with his other friends. In 1932, Sardar Kapur, Chaudhri Barkat Ali, Abdul Rahim (ICS) and Shri Shanti Sarup started a discussion on the possibility of creation of Pakistan at Cambridge. Ch. Barkat Ali said that everyone knew that the determination of the Muslims would help them in winning Pakistan. Shanti replied that the Hindus would do nothing else but use an effective weapon against Muslims i.e. Sikhs. Everybody started laughing. Sardar Kapur recalls that he protested and declared that the Sikhs were not as *lohley* and *khotey* (simple and fools) as perceived by the fellowman. Nevertheless, Lala ji asserted that the time would decide whether they were imprudent or not. Kapur writes that ultimately the Sikhs proved in the late 1940s what he had tried to deny.<sup>47</sup>

In March 1946, Surjit Singh Majithia opposed the separate electorates and Sikh state on the ground that by accepting the principle of Pakistan, the Sikhs would weaken their position and the task of the League would become easier while the Sikh state would even then be a doubtful phenomenon.<sup>48</sup> Amazingly he did not address his own questions; for example, if the Sikh state was not feasible because it had to be dependent either on the Muslims or Hindus, could

they be free of the Hindu domination with the suggested principle of the joint electorates within united India?

Sikhs issued every statement that could undermine the Muslim cause whether it helped their own cause or not. At the crucial juncture when some practicable and beneficial alternatives were required in the light of ground realities, the Akali leadership came up with a new objection against the census report of 1941. They were of the view that it did not present accurate population figures particularly of the Muslims.<sup>49</sup> If addressed, the lengthy process of rechecking the census reports was not acceptable for the major parties. The redress, as sought by the Sikh leadership, could take a very long time and even then it may have been unacceptable to other communities because the Muslims had already filed objections that the non-Muslim officials had made wrong entries during the working of the census.<sup>50</sup> The Akali leaders were trying to raise such issues during the negotiations and these added more complexities. These newly raised points could hardly strengthen their position in dealing with the core issues. On 29 May 1946, Jogindra Singh initiated a new demand in a letter to Major Short, on whether the Muslims would accept parity in the provinces as they themselves had in the centre.<sup>51</sup> The Sikhs had rejected the Cabinet Mission proposals but even then they were pursuing a change in the plan which testifies to their weak performance in the political contest.

### **One Item Agenda**

The demand for partition of the Punjab in the 1940s was a clear-cut decision of the Sikhs to join India. By this blunt and bare tilt, they had drawn a line between India and Pakistan by dividing the Punjab into two portions.<sup>52</sup> Actually, they did not need to stand for division if there had been a slight possibility of their joining Pakistan. After the 3rd June Plan, they clearly stood for India given that all their demands in the discussions with the Governor and Viceroy related to the Indian government and not Pakistan. Therefore, the Akalis' pro-Congress politics as a one item agenda throttled the possibility of their being workable alternatives for the Sikh future.

### **Evan Jenkins as Administrator**

The office of the Governor of Punjab had a decisive position in the provincial affairs under the constitutional powers. As head, this office was supposed to perform its duties honestly under the democratic spirit because it had to protect the democratic system introduced by the British. It was also a custodian of the minorities living in Punjab. During the initial decades of British rule in the province, this office was used to strengthen the pro-government Unionists because the British needed a peaceful Punjab for recruitment in the army and for other support. After the elections of 1937, this policy needed to be revised as the major political parties of India had plunged into regional politics whereas the Governors followed the retrograde traditional strategy which

furthered the decay of communal peace and harmony. Sikhs trusted Jenkins a lot but he gave them nothing. By using his friendly relations with the Sikhs, he obtained information from them regarding their plans and dispatched it to the Viceroy. He could have convinced them to join the League coalition ministry after the elections of 1946<sup>53</sup> which could have released tension between Sikhs and Muslims on the issue of Pakistan and this patch-up might have revived communal harmony and could have secured territorial unity. The Governor's role to bring communal harmony in the province could have consolidated the democratic tradition as well. A positive role by the Governor in the government decision-making process would have benefitted the Punjab but unfortunately he pursued a negative agenda which resulted in the utmost endeavour to resist the League ministry. The encouragement of undemocratic measures was a perilous game which locked the way for communal harmony. The apologetic policy of the Governor was one of the factors which consequently caused the territorial split.

Sikhs shared information, desire and even their secret plans with Jenkins. As far as the Sikh strategy was concerned, sharing Sikh grievances with the Governor was their political right but placing blind trust in the British was not an appreciable strategy of the Akali leadership. They should have considered several options to cope with the political manipulations but to place their trust mainly on Jenkins, Louis Mountbatten and the government machinery proved to be a stunning setback for them. The 'notional boundary' mechanism for the partition plan was obvious as all the stakeholders including the Sikhs had agreed to it but they kept on rallying against it whilst making requests to the British authorities for a special favour.<sup>54</sup>

The Governor's office was playing the role of a post office. He dispatched collected information from the local leaders to the Viceroy while the province needed careful planning to cope with the fragile situation. Responsibility of the Governor was mounting day by day as the province was heading towards chaos and a split and local leadership was working under the influence of the central command. But this office displayed nothing more than a post office as on 30 July 1947, Evan Jenkins, through a report, informed the Viceroy that Giani Kartar Singh appeared in Nankana Sahib and caused serious trouble on 28 July but the Sikhs were convinced to abandon their plan of *hartal* expected on 5 August under the impression that such protests might endanger their position.<sup>55</sup> Most of the time, he loyally conveyed just messages or reports about the meetings with Punjabi leaders but practically took no action against any troublemaker.

According to Raghuvendra Tanwar, the Unionist Party had no place in the newly emerged political environment of the 1940s, which was a jolt to the harmony between Muslims and Sikhs.<sup>56</sup> The Governor wanted to seize the League's influence which had downed the Unionists to the bottom of political life. His intention was to go ahead with his personal rule in the Punjab. Therefore, he exploited the political situation on the issue of the war effort, compensation for the soldiers returned from fighting and the minorities. Communal riots were declared as initiations by the League partly by the

British and fully by Sikh and Hindu leaders. The Punjab issue was a political matter while the riots were purely an administrative and a judicial matter, which could be solved with the ‘rule of law’. However, the Governor could hardly find time from the political manipulations to restore peace in the affected regions. He confined his character to the main job of transfer of power. He believed that the British should focus on the transfer of power and rest of the evils would be the issue of the newly created governments of India and Pakistan. Jenkins was on good terms with the Sikhs but could not convince them to abstain from the violent strategy they had planned. He failed to utilise his friendly relations.<sup>57</sup>

### **Undemocratic Stance**

Principle of majority rule is the spirit of democracy but after the elections of 1946 it was entirely ignored by the anti-League forces including the Governor and the Congress. According to the results, the League turned out to be the largest party in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. The party position was as follows:

<b>Party</b>	<b>Seats</b>
Muslim League	75
Congress	51
Unionists	21(13 Muslims)
Panthic Sikhs	21
Independents	07

*Source:* Letter from Glancy to Wavell, 28 February 1946 in Lionel Carter, ed., *Punjab Politics, 1940-1943* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2005), pp. 172-74.

Under the party position, the election results offered the following options:

1. Premier should be a ‘Leaguer’ as the largest Assembly party;
2. Premier should be a ‘Congressman’ as it stood second by numbers;
3. The Sikhs and Unionists were at the third position in the option for the Premier office.

Setting aside all the democratic norms, the Congress, Unionist Party, Sikhs and other non-Muslims joined hands under the auspices of the Governor against the League and formed a coalition ministry under Khizr Hayat Tiwana who had only 13 Muslim members with him. In this way, the largest party was forced to sit on the opposition benches. The Sikhs committed a grave mistake by rejecting the League because they were the co-partners of the League in the coming political scenario. They should have valued the political mandate of the Muslims in favour of the League. By this, they could have secured their due share in the concessions. The League’s victory was a vivid sign of their importance in the Punjab which was to be recognized by other parties but their mandate was not honoured. Iftikhar Malik writes that Khizr Tiwana should

have provided a chance to the League to form the government<sup>58</sup> but no logical step was taken up. As a matter of fact, history of the Punjab may have been very different if the Sikhs had acknowledged the League's mandate.

### **The Last Decision**

Creation of a Sikh state or joining Pakistan or India were the main options available to the Sikhs but as freedom was coming closer the Sikhs started restricting their options. Their leaders were not talking to the Muslim leaders and were least interested in taking advantage of their bargaining position. They were pleasing the Hindu leadership by posing themselves as the champions of united India and protectors of the Hindus. They relied on the Congress which had betrayed them on every important political turn in their history. The Congress and the Hindu press gave a cold shoulder to the Sikhs but still they did not take the independent course in politics.

The second option was to join Pakistan which seemed impossible as the Sikhs had always been raising voices against the Muslim Unionists who had been their allies in the coalition governments. The communal riots, especially in the northern districts of the Punjab, stamped the anti-Sikh character of the Muslims as the Sikhs and Hindus were slain and their property was looted during daylight. These riots convinced them to part with the Muslims for good. Under these circumstances, purely a Muslim state could never be acceptable for them. They also feared that Muslims would eliminate them and Sikhism from the earth.<sup>59</sup> This perception was built on the prevalent scenario of communal disturbances and past conversions to Islam in the Muslim majority areas.<sup>60</sup> The third option was Khalistan or Sikhistan which had no concrete foundation due to the scattered population of the Sikhs and dissent within the community, the attitude of the Congress and the League which were the main stakeholders. They had negligible numerical strength and disunity among themselves. The Akali leadership had chalked out an unofficial option i.e. to capture Punjab by force after the departure of the British.<sup>61</sup> This was a dangerous option and could cause loss of human lives, but they propagated it and were sure to materialise it. Several options could have worked but to contemplate use of force at the time of partition against Muslims narrowed their vision.

### **Dilemma of Punjabi Leadership**

The land of five rivers could not produce a leader of national calibre<sup>62</sup> in all the communities and this resulted in havoc at the critical juncture of history. The Punjabi leadership seemed satiated with their personal benefits in the domains of the Punjab. The Sikh leadership also became victim of this traditional weakness. Moreover, they had to deal with the competent leadership like M. A. Jinnah, M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru which put them in a defensive position.

### **Conclusion**

Creation of Pakistan was a political issue which was being dealt with through constitutional negotiations, but the Sikhs were depending mostly on bluster and agitation. The League was a direct stakeholder in the Punjab after winning elections of 1946 but the Sikhs did not welcome and honour this victory. They continued their traditional policy of attributing every evil to the League. They intermittently got into conflict not only with the League but also with the British, Congress and the Unionists. They launched a war on all fronts at this crucial time. Attaining Khalistan was the best option; joining Pakistan would have been the second best option while joining India was never a good option for them but they went for it in 1947 without paying attention to British advice and the concessions offered<sup>63</sup> by the League leadership.

Despite friendly relations between Sikhs and the British, the Shiromani Akali Dal could not achieve any success. Their objective to secure maximum territory or a free state when the region was going to be partitioned among Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities came to naught. Sikh leadership, in the run up to partition, could not gauge the depth of the political issues confronting their community. They joined hands with the Congress and favoured united India in which they were only one per cent of the population. The main reasons behind this decision was their religious and cultural affinity to Hinduism, weak leadership, disunity, Mughal atrocities during the early centuries of the rise of Sikh tradition, and the Muslim onslaught in the late 1940s. M. A. Jinnah had warned them that by joining Hindus, they would repent one day but it would be too late<sup>64</sup> to revise their decision but unluckily they met the same fate.

### **Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup>Sher Muhammad Grewal, ‘Quaid-i-Azam and Sikhs,’ *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan XXXVI* (October 1999): pp. 1-17.

<sup>2</sup>Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Delhi: Uncommon Books, 1996), pp. 247-248.

<sup>3</sup>Gurmit Singh, *Failures of the Akali Leadership* (Sirsa: Usha Institute of Religious Studies, 1981), pp. 32-33.

<sup>4</sup>Punjab, the north-western region of India was annexed by the British in 1849 by defeating the Sikhs who had been a ruling community during 1799-1849 though they were a minority against the other communities such as Muslims and Hindus.

<sup>5</sup>Ten spiritual or religious leaders of Sikhs.

<sup>6</sup>The Sikhs constituted only 14/15 per cent of the population of the British Punjab.

<sup>7</sup>The local communities including Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, has much regard for Sufi, recluse persons who believed in love, peace, harmony and co-existence. Their purity, spirituality or transcendentalism proved a binding force

among the local communities. The Muslim saints are still honoured by Sikhs and Hindus.

<sup>8</sup>Dr. Trilochan Singh, ‘Political Relations between Aurangzeb and the Sikh Gurus,’ *Punjab History Conference* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1968): pp. 100-101.

<sup>9</sup>Some Muslims accepted Sikhism as quoted by Harbans Singh. See, Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, vol. 1 (Patiala: Punjabi University Patiala, 2002), pp. 35-36, 83.

<sup>10</sup>Guru Arjun Dev was murdered by Mughal emperor Jahangir in 1606, Guru Tegh Bhadur in the court of Aurangzeb Alamgir in 1675 and the two sons, Fateh Singh and Zorawar Singh, of Guru Gobind Singh were buried alive at Sarhind.

<sup>11</sup>Khalsa National Party emerged in the late 1930s under Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, a Sikh landlord, which served the Sikh community by joining coalition ministry of the pro-British Unionist Party in the Punjab.

<sup>12</sup>Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Shiromani Akali Dal were the popular religious and political platforms which were founded in 1923.

<sup>13</sup>All-India Muslim League was founded in 1906 by the Indian Muslims. This was the party which ultimately won Pakistan.

<sup>14</sup>Indian National Congress was a Hindu representative political party, founded by an Englishman, A. O. Hume in 1885.

<sup>15</sup>Punjab Unionist Party was a pro-British party which was founded in 1923 by Mian Fazl-i-Husain and Ch. Chhotu Ram.

<sup>16</sup>They remained with the British and Congress throughout the political history of the British Punjab on crucial occasions.

<sup>17</sup>Deputy Commissioner of district Amritsar was said to be the ambassador of the British who had been in touch with the top Sikh leaders.

<sup>18</sup>As Sardar Bahadur Ujjal Singh, MLA was insulted in the Sikh Political Conference held on 29-30 May 1941 on supporting the Sikh recruitments for the war. Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, Punjab, vol. LXIII, 1941, file no. S-409, para 245.

<sup>19</sup>Letter from Emerson to Linlithgow, Linlithgow Papers in P. N. Chopra, ed., *Towards Freedom, 1937-47*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1985), 166.

<sup>20</sup>Gurmit Singh, *Failures of Akali Leadership*, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup>Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, file no. S-409, para. 406 and 482.

<sup>22</sup>Gurmit Singh, *Failures of Akali Leadership*, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup>H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain-India-Pakistan* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1970), p. 19.

<sup>24</sup>Sangat Singh, *Sikhs in History*, pp. 211-213.

<sup>25</sup>The annual session of the Congress was concluded on the bank of Ravi River, Lahore in 1929 in which the Hindu leadership promised that they would not ignore the minorities including Sikhs in the political decision.

---

<sup>26</sup>A political party founded in 1906 and struggled for the Muslim rights and then Pakistan.

<sup>27</sup>Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, file no. S-408, para 515; also see Kailash Chander Gulati, *The Akalis Past and Present* (New Delhi: Ashajanak Publications, 1974), p. 77.

<sup>28</sup>Punjabi people under the cultural psyche like bold and daring person who talks to destroy enemies.

<sup>29</sup>The Tenth and last Guru of the Sikhs who played excellent role in identity formation of the community.

<sup>30</sup>Sardar Kapur Singh, *Sachi Sakhi* (Gurmukhi) (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1993), pp. 88-89.

<sup>31</sup>Sir Evan Meredith Jenkins remained Governor of the Punjab from 8 April 1946 to 15 August 1947, the crucial period regarding partition of the Punjab.

<sup>32</sup>Meeting of Master Tara Singh with Evan Jenkins on 19 May 1947, MB1/D261.

<sup>33</sup>Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal, 'Urban Legend: Master Tara Singh's Kirpan,' [www.sikhchic.com/history/urban\\_legend\\_master\\_tara\\_singhs\\_kirpan](http://www.sikhchic.com/history/urban_legend_master_tara_singhs_kirpan), 4/6/2012.

<sup>34</sup>Letters from Lord Mountbatten to Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru on 4 July and Nehru's Reply on 7 July 1947, MB1/D290; see also Latif Sherwani, *The Partition of India and Mountbatten* (Karachi: Council for Pakistan Studies, 1986), p. 117.

<sup>35</sup>Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, p. 208.

<sup>36</sup>Gurmit Singh, *Failures of Akali Leadership*, 54; also see Jaswant Singh, *Master Tara Singh: Jeevan Sangharsh tey Udaish* (Gurmukhi) (Amritsar: 1972), p. 196.

<sup>37</sup>Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, file no. S-408, para. 556, 515, 492, 475, 449, 398.

<sup>38</sup>Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, p. 247.

<sup>39</sup>Kapur Singh, *Sachi Sakhi*, p. 125.

<sup>40</sup>Gurmit Singh, *Failure of Sikh Leadership*, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup>On 4 March 1944, Master Tara Singh resigned from the presidentship of the SGPC and Akali Dal. The Punjab Governor declared it a tactic. Fortnightly Report, (Punjab) March 1944, L/PJ/5/247.

<sup>42</sup>Both were Jat and MLAs. Baldev Singh was a Minister in the coalition government of the Punjab.

<sup>43</sup>IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

<sup>44</sup>Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, 1944, file S-412, para. 114.

<sup>45</sup>The educational and other services were worthwhile but the new circumstances required more than this.

<sup>46</sup>Sangat Singh, *Sikhs in History*, 247; see also Robin Jeffery, *What's Happening to India?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994), p. 71.

<sup>47</sup>Kapur Singh, *Sachi Sakhi*, p. 124.

<sup>48</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 25 March 1946.

<sup>49</sup> Report of Evan Jenkins to the Viceroy on 2 May 1947, MB1/D260.

<sup>50</sup> See Khwaja Hasan Nizami, 'Muslim League kay liey kam,' *Weekly Munadi* (Delhi) 8 January 1939.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Jogindra Singh to Major Short (Private Secretary to Cripps, Office of Cabinet Mission, Viceroy's House, New Delhi) on 29 May 1946. IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

<sup>52</sup> Note by GEB Abell 2 July 1947, MB1/D290.; see also MSS Eur F230/31, Moon Collection.

<sup>53</sup> In the elections 1946 the Muslim League entered the Assembly as the largest assembly party.

<sup>54</sup> Sikh leadership asked Evan Jenkins for a favour. Report of Evan Jenkins to the Viceroy on 2 May 1947, MB1/D260.

<sup>55</sup> Dr. Muhammad Azam Chaudhri, *Tehrik-i-Pakistan Mein Punjab ka Kirdar* (Urdu) (Karachi: Royal Book Co., 1996), p. 440.

<sup>56</sup> Raghuvendra Tanwar, *Politics of Sharing Power: The Punjab Unionist Party, 1923-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1999), p. 194.

<sup>57</sup> Responsibility of the violence cannot be put on the shoulders of Jenkins totally because he had been convincing the Sikh leadership that violence could harm their position but other factors such as past and near past religious and political situations, anti-Muslim psyche and communal happenings, did not let them move from their anti-League contention. Nevertheless, he cannot be absolved totally as he never took 'practical steps' to bridle the violent leaders.

<sup>58</sup> Iftikhar Malik, 'Pluralism, Partition and Punjabisation: Politics of Muslim Identity in the British Punjab,' *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 5 (January-June 1998): pp. 118-19.

<sup>59</sup> The Hindu-Sikh Case For Nankana Sahib Tract by Giani Kartar Singh, MB1/D262.

<sup>60</sup> Most of the Muslim Jats in Pakistan were converted from Sikhism.

<sup>61</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: 1839-1964*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 240-41; also see MB1/D290; Lord Wavell also writes about it that the Sikhs could not forget their rule over the Punjab. See Penderel Moon, *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 288.

<sup>62</sup> Akhtar Hussain Sandhu, 'Voice from the Rural Punjab-Muslim-Sikh Relations in the British Punjab,' paper delivered at the PRG Meeting, Coventry University, UK, 28 June 2008; visit also <http://theprg.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/Akhtar-coventry-presentation2.doc>.

<sup>63</sup> Quaid-i-Azam assured the Sikhs that he would sign whatever they had written. Patwant Singh, *The Sikhs* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1999), pp. 206-207.

---

<sup>64</sup>Sardar Kapur Singh, *Sachi Sakhi*, 144-145n; also see M. H. A. Ispahani, *Quaid-e-Azam-As I Knew Him* (Karachi: Forward Publication Trust, 1966), p. 219.