

MEMOR(IES) OF PARTITION IN THE POLITICS OF SIKH IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The long-awaited independence of India came with the undesirable fruit of the Partition. The power was transferred to two sovereign unions – India and Pakistan. West Pakistan was carved in the north-western part of the country, leaving Punjab province vivisected. The present paper attempts to delineate the ways in which two-nation theory and the concomitant prospects of partition implicated the politics of Sikh identity in the late colonial Punjab province. Furthermore, it explores the role of the memory of partition in conditioning the public opinion and political attitudes in the post-colonial Indian Punjab.

KEYWORDS: *Post-Colonial Punjab, Sikh Identity, Partition, Collective Memory, Akali Dal, Idea of Khalistan*

INTRODUCTION

The partition of India in 1947 was an unprecedented incident, not only because of its scale and ferocity but because of its legacies that still are the main constituents of the sub-continent's political, social and cultural life. Certain events in the history have the potential to change its course forever; the partition of India was such an event. But the beauty of the historical forces lies in the fact that they themselves give birth to those events and phenomenon which in turn affect their interplay in the times to come. Despite the debates and disagreements among historians over the origins of the partition; it has been acknowledged universally that it was a tragic event. Indian historian Anita Inder Singh treats partition as unfortunate and disastrous (Anita Inder Singh, 1989). Similarly, for prominent Pakistani scholar Ayesha Jalal, Pakistan was something that didn't fulfill the cause of the Muslim minority in the sub-continent (Ayesha Jalal, 1985). Even if the origins of partition, cited by both of these scholars are different the similarity lays in the lamentation over this historical event. Deviating a bit from the complicated academic exercise of scrutinizing the roots of partition, this paper attempts at accounting the relevance of the memor(ies) of the partition at the different levels of the post-colonial politics of Punjab.

POLITICS IN THE SHADOW OF PROSPECTIVE PARTITION IN LATE COLONIAL PUNJAB

The passing of this resolution proved to be a milestone document in the Indian politics whose effects continued to be relevant in the politics of the subcontinent. It posed the idea of religion-based nationhood that challenged the very idea of modern, liberal and enlightenment thought. The third resolution of All India Muslim League's Lahore resolution of 1940 stated that,

"...no constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to Muslims unless it is designed on the following basic principle, namely that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted, with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the Northwestern and Eastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute "Independent States" in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign"¹

This demand disturbed the established equilibrium of the Punjab politics. The prospects of a separate Muslim State- Pakistan and the two nation theory implicated the politics of Sikh identity for the next seven years. Because of the presence of Sikhs as the third biggest religious community in the Muslim majority province of Punjab, the situation was more complicated. As the third angle, it added another dimension to the two nation theory.

Prior to its annexation by the East India Company in the mid-nineteenth century, Punjab was the part of the Ranjit Singh's kingdom known as '*Khalsa Sarkar*' with its ruling elite comprised predominantly of Sikhs (Rishi Singh, 2015). But by the 1940s, Sikhs constituted a minuscule minority in the province within a new modern state set up. According to the 1941 census, Muslims comprised 53.2% of the total population, while Hindus and Sikhs constituted 29.1% and 14.9% respectively (Census of India, 1941). Political parties like Akali Dal, and Khalsa Nationalist Party (KNP), that had been articulating their politics around the discourses of Sikh identity and interests, were participating in the constitutional arena with the vocabulary of minority rights (S.S. Bal, 1989). The demand for Pakistan was condemned by these parties fiercely (Tan Tai Yong, 1989). Addressing a public meeting in 1942, Akali leader Master Tara Singh stated that,

"...I am opposing it..For I believe that the object of Pakistan is to create domination of Muslims over Sikhs."(Indian Annual Register Vol. 2, 1942).

Meanwhile, the idea of an independent Sikh state (or Khalistan) emerged as a reaction to the demand of Pakistan. The name Khalistan first appeared in a tract written by V.S. Bhatti, in which he formulated the idea of a sovereign Sikh State constituting thirteen districts of Punjab under the rule of Maharaja of Patiala (J.S. Grewal, 1999). Similarly, in its annual session on April 29th, 1940, at Lahore, Khalsa Nationalist Party resolved to claim back the sovereignty of the Sikhs in Punjab (Indian Annual Register Vol.1, 1940).

Such demands were kept on being raised by different groups and parties, but these didn't get support from the most significant Sikh party, the Akali Dal which under the leadership of Master Tara Singh condemned the idea of Pakistan and advocated the independence of a united India (J.S. Grewal, 2017). Instead of going with the idea of a separate state for the Sikhs, it formulated the demand for "Azad Punjab" after the proposal made by the Cripps mission, which had envisaged the possibilities for the provinces to opt out of the Union (Baldev Raj Nayar, 1966). Thus, Akali Dal demanded the partition of Punjab into two provinces, the eastern one would be "Azad Punjab" comprising of nine districts of Eastern Punjab. However, on many occasions, Tara Singh made it explicit that he and his party were strongly in favor of the formation of a National government, and the proposal for Azad Punjab was a move to cripple the Pakistan scheme (J.S. Grewal, 1999).

¹ The full text of Muslim League's Lahore resolution is included as the appendix-I in, *Gandhi Jinnah Talks : Text of Correspondence and Other Relevant Documents etc.* Central Office- All India Muslim League, 1944.

After the termination of world war in Europe, the British government decided ultimately to transfer the power to the native Indians and to make provisions for the same it sent a mission of three British statesmen. Accordingly, Sir Pethick Lawrence, Sir Stafford Cripps, and A.V. Alexander came to India for arriving at the widest possible agreement on framing a Constituent Assembly and an interim government. A delegation of Akali Dal met with the Mission on April 5th, 1946 and demanded the abolition of the statutory Muslim majority and increased representation for Sikhs in the provincial legislature of Punjab (Kirpal Singh, 2006).

The mission made a declaration on May 16th, 1946, proposing the three-tier system for an all-India Union, according to which there would a union of All-India consisting of three principal levels of governance- a center of the Union, provinces, and the groups of Hindu and Muslim majority provinces. Congress' initial response to this declaration was favorable. But, the acceptance of the Congress Working Committee to the 16th May declaration of the Mission was qualified, it did object to the provision of grouping system which was kept ambiguous by the Mission. Later on, by July 1946 Congress leadership retracted its support to the Cabinet Mission's scheme (Sucheta Mahajan, 2000). However, the proposals of Mission disappointed Akali leadership, as they were not provided with any safeguards in the Punjab province. Writing to Pethick Lawrence Master Tara Singh expressed his indignation in following words,

"... it appears that the Sikhs have been studiously debarred from having any effective influence in the province, group or central Union."²

Thus, on June 10th, 1946, a big convention of Sikh leaders (came together to form a Panthic Pratinidhi Board) under the leadership of Col. Niranjan Singh Gill resolved to boycott the proposed constituent assembly and the interim government (K.G. Lamba, 1999).

But Congress leadership was eager to go ahead with the proposals of Constituent Assembly and the interim government. Thus, Congress leaders tried to persuade the leadership of Panthic Pratinidhi Board to reconsider its decision of boycotting the elections for the constituent assembly. In a letter dated July 13th, 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru conveyed the Congress leadership's decision to reject Mission's proposals to Niranjan Singh Gill. He tried to convince Gill in following words,

"... you perhaps know, we have rejected the proposals for a government. So far as the long-term proposals are concerned, we are accepting them subject to our own interpretation...obviously, it is to the interest of the Sikhs to have a powerful co-operation and support of the Congress. Obviously also the Congress must pay full attention to the needs and desires of the Sikhs." (S. Gopal, 1972).

In this regard, the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution on August 9th, 1946 that appealed to the Sikh leadership stating that

"...the Sikhs would serve the cause of the country's freedom better by participating in the Constituent Assembly. The Working Committee assures the Sikhs that the Congress will give them all possible support in removing the legitimate grievances and in securing adequate safeguards for the protection of their just interests in the Punjab".³

² Letter of Master Tara Singh to Pethick Lawrence, *Papers Relating to the Cabinet Mission to India- 1946*, (London, Manager of Publications, 1946), 61.

³ AICC papers(1946), NMML.

Responding favorably to these gestures made by Congress leadership, on 14th August 1946, the Panthic Pratinidhi Board revoked its earlier decision to boycott the elections for the constituent assembly (Times of India, 16.08.1946). Subsequently, Sardar Baldev Singh, a member of the Pratinidhi Board, joined the interim government as the Defense Member.

The stage of macro politics carries only one aspect of the tragedy of Partition whose intensity was much more magnified at the ground level of the masses where polarization between different religious communities had acquired the form of almost a civil war (Gyanendra Pandey, 2001). Political negotiations got concluded with the announcement of the Mountbatten plan on June 3rd, 1947; but the frenzy of sectarian violence which was unleashed by the Muslim League's call of Direct Action on August 16th, 1946, went on to engulf the national life even after the formal declaration of the independence of India and Pakistan on 15th and 14th August respectively. As many as five million Muslims were hounded out to Pakistan and twice as many Hindus and Sikhs evacuated to India. It might be difficult to quantify the exact loss of lives and property but, one can reckon that being a small non-Muslim religious minority, the position of Sikhs was very vulnerable in the Muslim majority Punjab. Gurbachan Singh Talib accounts 592 incidents in the year 1947, wherein non-Muslims were attacked, forcibly converted, and killed by the Muslim League activists and volunteers in Punjab (Gurbachan Singh Talib, 1947). According to former Lahore High Court Judge, G.D. Khosla,

"...Sikhs had opposed the partition of India with even greater vigour than Hindus, because they felt that as a community they could only expect disaster in Pakistan, therefore it was against the Sikhs that spear point of Muslim attack was first aimed." (G.D. Khosla, 1946)

The significance of the partition, as a political event, was so substantial that it continued to be an important point of reference for the leaders and ideologues claiming to represent the interests of the Sikh community. The unsavory memories of the past and that too of a recent past could not be wished away by the Sikh leadership in the post-colonial Punjab.

INVOKING THE SPECTRE: MEMORIES OF PARTITION IN THE POST-COLONIAL PUNJAB

Memories of Partition, and particularly those of the political negotiations on its eve, featured extensively in the writings and speeches of Sardar Kapur Singh. Kapur Singh was an ex- ICS officer who became a political ideologue of the Sikh identity politics in the post-partition Punjab. He was a renowned exponent of the theme of "betrayal of the Sikhs" (at the hands of Congress leadership), which he articulated thoroughly in his autobiography- *Sachi Sakhi*. In the light of his allegations of discrimination against Sikhs by the Congress governments in the state and center, he regretted the decision of the Sikh leadership during the 1940s to support Indian National Congress. On 23rd December 1967, addressing The Convention of Sikh Intelligentsia in Chandigarh, he stated,

"...the Sikh leadership showed no better acumen in political understanding...Repeated, firm and generous offers made by Muslim leadership to the Sikhs to accept an autonomous Sikh- oriented Punjab, externally integrated to Pakistan, and repeated hints and suggestions by the British guaranteeing secure and effective political status to the Sikh people, in their homelands were summarily and naively rejected by the Sikhs in return of a treacherous assurance of the Congress that the Constitution of free India shall not be framed except that the Sikhs accept it freely."(A.I.S.S.F., 1969).

Although Kapur Singh's thoughts remained motivational for a generation of those leaders and activists who

articulated their politics around the idea that the Sikh community had been facing discrimination in independent India, his thematic of the betrayal of the Sikhs and the particular interpretation of the memory of partition remained irrelevant in the mainstream politics of Punjab. It found political relevance only in the decade of 1980s.

The memory of partition of India re-emerged in the Khalistan movement of the 1980s. The incident of 13th April 1978, in which thirteen Sikhs got killed in a clash with the followers of the Nirankari sect on the Baisakhi day in Amritsar, created indignation and discontent among the Sikh leaders and ideologues (Indian Express, 14.04.1978). The deceased were hailed as martyrs and their dead bodies were carried in big processions throughout the city of Amritsar (The Spokesman, 24.04.1978). Many Sikh organizations claiming to represent the interest of Sikhs, and Punjabi vernacular press condemned the incident. As an aftermath to it, Punjab politics witnessed the outgrowth of militant organizations and a militant-contestatory discourse of Sikh identity that heralded the return of the idea of Khalistan. Damdami Taksal (an institution of Sikh orthodoxy), Dal Khalsa, Babbar Khalsa and AISSF (All India Sikh Students Federation) emerged as the most prominent champions of the idea of Khalistan in Punjab.⁴ However, the head of *Damdami taksal* Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale who became the figurehead of Khalistan movement in the 1980s, never explicitly advocated the demand for Khalistan.

On many occasions, Bhinderanwale developed on this theme. When asked about his stand on Khalistan he would recount the political experience of partition and reply that,

"...this time we shall not repeat the mistake of 1947"(Ranbir Singh Sandhu, 1999.)

Characterization of the decisions of the Sikh leadership to support INC and join Indian Union as a "mistake" makes it clear that Bhinderanwale drew much on Kapur Singh's viewpoint and implicitly advocated the assertion of Khalistan - a separate sovereign state for Sikhs.

Much like in Bhinderanwale's statements, the memory of the partition appeared in the counter Khalistani propaganda too. The anti- Khalistani propaganda undertaken by some noted journalists and intellectuals in the national press emphasized the nationalism and patriotism for India, displayed by some Sikh individuals and organization in different historical contexts. In such an article on the editorial page of the Times of India, Sikh historian Gopal Singh, referring to the migration of Sikhs in India during partition, noted,

"...the lot of the Sikhs to walk out, wholesale, from Pakistan, because they refused to live under a communal dispensation and opted freely for the secular, democratic state of India, which they had brought about along with others, with immense sacrifices. History does not witness to a similar instance anywhere else in the world." (Times of India, 14.07.1986).

Similarly, journalist K.S. Khosla accounted the decisions of the Akali leadership and especially those of Master Tara Singh, as creditworthy and farsighted. Highlighting the contribution of the Sikhs towards Indian nationalism, Khosla stated,

"The Sikhs demand for a separate Sikh State was never put forward seriously. It was never considered seriously by any party. Eventually, when India came to be partitioned what the Sikhs succeeded in was to partition Punjab also.

⁴ White Paper on the Punjab Agitation, (Government of India, 1984).

So that the Sikhs could cast their lot with secular India and merge themselves in the mainstream of Indian society."(Tribune, 24.04.1982)

Besides being crucial for the voices representing the subject positions on the field of politics, the memory of Partition became important also to the masses of Punjab, the rise in militancy and the increased polarization on religious lines had refreshed the memories of partition days.

During the heydays of Khalistan movement, the specter of partition started haunting the minorities in Punjab. While reckoning the contemporary situation, people started relating the memories of partition. This is sufficiently expressed in the following anonymous letter to the editor of Hindustan Times, in which the writer observed that,

“...the prolonged fight for freedom from the colonial rule gave the nation a sense of purpose and coherence which will outlast movements like the one engaged in by the Akali leaders. In the long run they are only hurting the interests of the Sikhs. By isolating the community from the rest of the Indian population, they are sowing the seeds of suspicion and distrust. This was exactly the climate that suited the All India Muslim League in pre- partition India. Jinnah was not a communalist indeed; he was not even a religious person. But he allowed full play in the run of communal passions. The result was Pakistan, with its history of tumult, violence and dictatorship. If the present generation of Akali leadership has learnt nothing from all this, it is a tragedy for the entire Sikh community....” (Hindustan Times, 29.02.1982)

Similarly, the following letter to the editor of The Tribune presents a quintessential example of the ways in which the people of Punjab used the living memory of partition as a tool to make contemporary judgments. Drawing parallels between the partition days of the 1940s and the heydays of Khalistan movement in the decade of 1980s, B.S. Tyagi wrote,

“I was a student in the late 30s and 40s when Pakistan as a concept was being given a shape by such anti-Pakistanis as Rajendra Babu and Dr. Ambedkar. What was renounced as fool's paradise soon became a geographical reality. Is that totally irrelevant today? A sinister aspect of this movement is its impact on non-Punjabi workers in factories and fields of Punjab. There is already a demand for disenfranchising them”(Tribune, 5.01.1984)

From these feelings expressed in the letters to editors, one can sense that the level of distrust had elevated so much in Punjab that even the cultural activities around the 'Punjabi' language and identity were perceived with suspicion. Whatever the specificities of the political location of such subjectivities might be, it is clear that the time of political crisis had re-ignited the memories of partition among the intelligentsia and masses of Punjab.

CONCLUSIONS

The above discussion makes it clear that the memory of partition remained relevant in the post-colonial Punjab politics. In the writings of Kapur Singh, the partition signified a betrayal of the Sikhs by the Congress leaders; similarly, Bhinderanwale acknowledged it as a lost opportunity for the Sikhs to gain sovereignty. The anti-Khalistani scholars and journalists regarded it as something that testifies the love of Sikhs for India. On the other hand, in the feelings expressed by the masses of Punjab in letters to editors, the memory of partition figured as a source of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear. Thus, in the light of this brief account of the instances of the re-appearance of the memory of partition, it would be pertinent to draw the conclusion that just like a historical text which is subjected to a multiplicity of interpretations, memories of past experiences of groups and communities are also polysemic in nature.

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