

PUNJABI SUBA MOVEMENT, 1947-1966

What?

The Punjabi Suba movement was a long-drawn political agitation, launched by the Sikhs, demanding the creation of a Punjabi Suba, or Punjabi-speaking state, in the post-independence Indian state of East Punjab.

Why?

Though it was commonly recognized at the time of Independence that the Indian states were created not on a rational basis, but were the result of the exigencies of the progressive British conquest of the subcontinent, a commission that had been set up in 1948 by the Government of India, tasked with drawing up clean-cut states corresponding to demographic and linguistic boundaries, was not effective in the north of the country.

Its jurisdiction was limited to the southern states, with northern India kept out of its purview, specifically to avoid problems like those of Punjab, and specifically issues raised by the Sikhs.

The Sikhs now constituted a majority in the northwestern seven districts of the 13 districts of East Punjab state at the time: Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Firozpur, Ludhiana, and Ambala, along with Patiala and East Punjab States Union, or PEPSU, with sizable populations in surrounding districts, while Hindus formed a majority in the remaining six, including the southeastern districts between PEPSU and Delhi (Hisar, Karnal, Rohtak, and Gurgaon), and the eastern Kangra and Shimla divisions.

The seven Sikh-majority districts would be the suggested basis of the Punjabi Suba, for which Tara Singh campaigned vigorously between late 1948 and early 1949.

The new platform of the Akali Dal mobilized strong support among Sikhs, though a decision adopted by the Congress in its annual session held in December 1948 read, "We are clearly of the opinion that no question of rectification of the boundaries in Northern India should be raised at the present moment whatever the merits of such a proposal."

Tara Singh himself was arrested on 20 February 1949 and imprisoned for several months, during which time the agitation was continued under the leadership of Sardar Hukam Singh.

Dr. Ambedkar's Role

In January 1948, Akali Dal's three-member delegation of leaders, Harcharan Singh Bajwa, Bhupinder Singh Mann, and Giani Kartar Singh, met the Minister of Law and Justice Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar suggested that the Akali delegation demand a Punjabi-speaking state or Punjabi Suba (Punjabi Province) as a Sikh state, since the central government had declared a commitment to a linguistic basis for the reorganization of the states.

References

~Dr. Ambedkar's invaluable advice on the Sikh Right to Self-rule :

http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8787:dr-ambedkar-s-invaluable-advice-on-the-sikh-right-to-self-rule&catid=118:thought&Itemid=131

~ Fifty Years of Punjab Politics 1920-70

<http://www.panjabdigilib.org/webuser/searches/displayPageContent.jsp?ID=2123&CategoryID=1&Searched=W3GX>

~ Ambedkar's role overlooked

<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/features/ambedkar-s-role-overlooked-284135>

Sachar Formula- The Failed attempt to Divide & Rule

The Sachar Formula was introduced on 2 October 1949 under the government of Bhim Sen Sachar to forestall the growing agitation. Drafted by two Hindu members and two Sikh members of the Congress party, it proposed making Punjabi as the medium of instruction up to the matriculation stage, in the "Punjabi zone" area, with Hindi taught as a compulsory subject from the end of the primary level onward, and vice-versa for "Hindi zone" areas. Its goal had been bilingualism, but as it divided East Punjab into Punjabi and Hindi zones, it had the effect of sharpening the divide between the majority Sikh north and majority Hindu south. Tara Singh was released at this time in the hopes that the formula would be accepted by the Shiromani Akali Dal, but Tara Singh turned it down, reminding the Congress of its commitment to forming linguistic states, and that a Punjabi-speaking region had already been demarcated for the purposes of the Sachar Formula itself.

References

~ <http://14.139.60.114:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/955/15/Appendix%20V%20%2862-63%29.pdf>

1953 States Reorganisation Commission

Though the calls for a Punjabi Suba were initially disregarded by the central government, the problem did not subside, and for the sake of the democratic functioning of the new democracy, another States Reorganization Commission was set up in 1953. The Commission began its work in February 1954, and the Akali Dal submitted an 18-page memorandum on 14 May 1954, proposing the Punjabi Suba to include all of Punjab and Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU), excluding the districts of Gurgaon and Rohtak, Panipat Tehsil in Karnal, and a few tehsils of Hisar district.

The Congress in Punjab, on the other hand, proposed the state integration of East Punjab, PEPSU, and Himachal Pradesh, which was similar to what the Arya Samaj and the Jan Sangh memoranda had stated, which had proposed the amalgamation of not only these territories but even Delhi as well.

SAD's victory in 1955 SGPC elections

The Akali Dal entered the 1955 SGPC elections on this platform and won resoundingly, winning all 112 seats it contested against the Punjab Congress, which had contested under the banner of the "Khalsa Dal," which had only won 3 out of 112 contested seats. The results proved a strong morale booster for the party, which had demonstrated strong Sikh support for its platform, and felt encouraged to start a movement for the Punjabi Suba.

Retaliation and Reception to the Retailition

The opportunity presented itself when on 6 April 1955 the **Punjab Congress banned the shouting of Punjabi Suba slogans**; twenty days later the **Akali Dal issued an ultimatum** to rescind the ban by 10 May or face an agitation. **The ban was not lifted, and the agitation began** that day with Tara Singh and 10 companions being arrested for shouting Punjabi Suba slogans. In the next five days more than 1,000 prominent Akali leaders were arrested, and by July as many as 21,000 Akalis were jailed in Congress efforts to quash the growing movement.

1955 Golden Temple Raid

A flashpoint occurred on 4 July 1955, when a group led by Fateh Singh had arrived from Ganganagar a few days prior to take part in the protest movement. Government police forces came onto the temple premises and heavy-handedly took the entire group into custody, along with the head granthis of the Akal Takht and Golden Temple, volunteer protestors, and even cooks of the temple's langar.

The Guru Ram Das Serai and Shiromani Akali Dal offices were also raided, and batons used and tear gas and shells fired to disperse the protestors gathered on the periphery of the temple, damaging the periphery and sarovar, or pool, of the temple. Over 200 protestors were killed, more than 2000 arrested, and thousands, including women and children, were injured.

The reaction from this event gave further momentum to the movement, opposite to the intention of the government, and proved to be so potentially destabilizing to the government that on 12 July, the government under Sachar used the pretext of a "triumphal return from peace mission abroad" to lift the ban on Punjabi Suba slogans, appealing for peace. It also announced the release of Akali prisoners in installments, which proved slow to be implemented; Tara Singh was released on 8 September, and the last Akalis were not released until 18 October.

In addition, Inderjeet Singh, a 10-year-old boy from Moga visiting relatives in Karnal, would be beaten with batons, killed, and thrown in an irrigation well on 21 September 1955 by policemen for raising slogans

Amritsar Convention

The States Reorganization Committee submitted its report to the Government of India on 10 September 1955 where it was considered and published on 10 October. The Commission recommended the integration of PEPSU and Himachal Pradesh with the Punjab, which was considered unacceptable by the mainstream Sikh political body, the Shiromani Akali Dal, whose leader, Master Tara Singh, took the opportunity to exhibit Sikh unity and resolution on this point, summoning a representative convention of Sikhs at Amritsar on 16 October 1955; nearly 1,300 invitees attended.

The Amritsar convention strongly rejected the Commission's proposal, castigating it for bias against Sikh claims. The resolution called on the government to create the Punjabi Suba not only in the interest of the Sikhs but in the interest of the Hindi-speaking peoples of East Punjab; Tara Singh received authorization from the Amritsar Convention "to take suitable steps to for conveying the views and sentiments of the Sikh community to Government of India and urging them to do their duty to the Sikhs.

Tara Singh's first action was to arrange a conciliatory meeting with the Prime Minister, **Jawaharlal Nehru**, who had been quoted in the **9 January 1930 edition of the Lahore Bulletin** during the freedom struggle that,

"The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special considerations. I see nothing wrong in an area set up in the North of India wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom," though afterwards telling the Sikhs after the British left that the "circumstances had now changed."

The meeting was facilitated by former cabinet member Baldev Singh, who presented Nehru with correspondence between Sikh leaders and the Muslim League, reminding him that the Sikhs had rejected the League's overtures to side with India. Baldev Singh would act as a mediator between the Akali leaders and the government in their meetings.

Government Talks (After 1955)

How INC orchestrated an "impasse" using covertly tactics

1. The first meeting took place on 24 October 1955 in Delhi between
-THE GOVERNMENT, represented by Nehru and two of his senior cabinet colleagues, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant,
-AND THE SIKHS, represented by
Master Tara Singh, who would present opening statements,
Bhai Jodh Singh, also a member of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, who would explicate the language problem,
Giani Kartar Singh and Sardar Hukam Singh, who were to meet the political points, and
Sardar Gian Singh Rarewala; a second meeting followed on 23 November the same year.
2. The talks were 'friendly but rather vague'. On 8 February 1956, a plan, generally known as the **Regional Formula**, was discussed by the Sikh leaders.

If you can't beat them, BREAK them! - How INC used Divide & Rule amongst

SAD Leadership

It is not the first time that the terms “Divide & Rule” and Indian National Congress have been used in the same sentence. Old habits die hard they say, and INC surely has a habit of following this age-old colonial formula to break the consensus of the masses and take the leftover pieces to mould and sculpt it into a puppet of its own.

In his address to the All-India Akali Conference on 11 February, **Master Tara Singh dwelt on Punjabi Suba as the real solution** for the Punjab problem.

The Regional Formula was put to a vote at a general meeting of the Shiromani Akali Dal at Amritsar on 11 March 1956. There were critical voices raised, on grounds of constitutional propriety as well as the perceived inadequacy of the measure. In addition to this, Giani Kartar Singh conceded that what was offered was not the Punjabi Suba of their conception, and other prominent Akali leaders including him, Jodh Singh, and Sardar Ajit Singh advocated the acceptance as the beginning point of the discussions that day, or instead a tentative promise, of a Punjabi Suba from the Congress government.

But the Akali Dal accepted the Regional Formula in March 1956.

Furthermore, the Akali Dal Working Committee resolved in September 1956 to implement the Formula. The constitution of the Akali Dal was suitably amended and the Akali legislators joined the Congress party.¹

Consequently, most of the front-rank Akali leaders joined the Congress. On 30 September 1956, the Akali Dal renounced politics. It proposed to hold a rally a few weeks later and 'present' two lakh Akali members to the Congress. After the Assembly elections, the Congress Government that came to power in Punjab on 3 April 1957, with Partap Singh Kairon as chief minister, included former Akalis Giani Kartar Singh and Gian Singh Rarewala, as members of his cabinet. It would be interesting to note that Parkash Singh Badal, Punjab's five-time Akali Dal chief minister, fought the 1957 elections as a Congress candidate.

*“As Master Tara Singh had told in an interview, he did not join the Congress. Disillusioned by subsequent developments that failed to achieve the objective of a 'wholesome' Punjabi-speaking state of his dreams, **Master Tara Singh repudiated the regional formula on 14 June 1958 and resurrected the demand for a Punjabi Suba.***

On 14 February 1959 he called a general body meeting of the Akali Dal at Patiala. The meeting resolved, among other things, to restore the political character of the party.

*Later, however, the rival leaders of the **factionalism-ridden Akali Dal** succeeded in isolating Master Tara Singh, resulting in the emergence of a new Akali leadership in the form of a secular and saintly figure:*

Sant Fateh Singh. Chief Minister Partap Singh Kairon played a covert role in bringing about the change in the Akali leadership's hierarchy.”²

¹ The Akali–Congress Compromise, J.S. Grewal

² Behind Closed Doors: Politics of Punjab, Haryana and the Emergency, BK Chum