



DEMAND FOR NEW STATES ON LINGUISTIC BASIS IN INDIAN UNION: A STUDY OF PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a modest attempt to analyse the genesis and growth of the demand of Punjabi-Suba (Punjabi speaking province), which came into existence in 1966 on linguistic basis. It also analyzes its impact on socio-political structure of the state. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this paper. It has been divided into five parts. The first part deals with historical perspective, the second relates with Sikh movement for Gurudwaras Reform during the colonial period and its impact on freedom movement, the third with the Sikhs struggle led by Akali Dal for the separate state as Punjabi-Suba in post-independence period, the fourth with the impact of reorganization on the socio-political structure of the state and last with the conclusions.

Introduction

The present state of Punjab came into existence in 1966 on the basis of linguistic reorganization of the state. Since, Punjab has a great strategic, socio-economic and political importance for India; therefore it is very important to know the genesis and growth of the struggle for the creation of the present state of Punjab (Sikh majority state). Although the demand for the Punjabi-Suba (Punjabi speaking province) was presented as being based on language, but Akali leaders from time to time made explicit their aim of establishing a state in which Sikhs as a religious community would be able to hold political power.¹ The formation of new Sikh majority state has brought about the significant changes in the socio-political structure of Punjab.

An attempt has been made in this paper to analyze the genesis and growth of the struggle for the creation of the present state of Punjab and its impact on social and political structure of the state. The methodology used in this study has a holistic dimension. Historical and analytical approach has been adopted. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this study. The objectives of this paper are as below:

1. To know the historical background of the Punjab to understand the demand of Sikhs for separate state.
2. To analyze the British-Sikhs relations during the colonial period.
3. To know the Akali Dal-Congress relations during the colonial and post-independence period with special reference to demand of separate Sikh state.
4. To analyze the social and political implications of reorganization.

Historical Perspective

The word 'Punjab' is made of two Persian words 'Punj' (five) and 'Aab'(water). According to a widely accepted view the united province of Punjab of the pre-partition period derived its name from its five rivers namely the Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum, which traversed its length from north-east to south-west and joined the Indus at Mithankot (in the Dera Ghazi Khan district).²

The historians claim that Punjab was a part of the vast Iranian empire during the ancient period. But later on, it came under the domination of the *Moryas*, *Yunanis*, *Shaks*, *Kushans*, *Guptas* etc. and many other powers. Punjab remained under the *Afgan* rulers in the medieval period. It was subsequently conquered by *Mughal* and one of its expressions was in the form of the *Sikh Panth* in the 15th and the 16th centuries.³ The 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh gave to the Sikh religion a marshal character. He established a new order *Khalsa Panth* on April 13, 1699 and fought wars against the *Mughal* empire. The Sikhs continued their fight against the *Mughals* after the death of Guru Gobind Singh under the leadership of Baba Banda Bahadur. They were, however, crushed in 1716. When the position of the *Mughals* began to weaken, the Sikhs started to organize themselves into the *Misls*. The *Misl* resembled territorial militia. In times of strife, local leaders gathered bonds of able-bodies Sikhs who followed the leaders to their *Misl* for fighting battles. There were as many as 12 Sikh *Misls* at the time of Ranjit Singh and the latter too was leader of the 'Shukar-Chakia' *Misl*. He was able to build the Sikh empire in 1801 which was extended from *Khyber-pass* to the Sutlej and from Kashmir to almost Sind. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was dead in 1839. Sikhs fought bloody wars with East-India company but Britishers succeeded to annex the Punjab in East-India company in 1849. The Sikhs lost to the British as they not only lacked leadership but were also badly divided. Punjab remained under the British rule from 1849 till the independence of India in 1947.⁴

Colonial Period

The British were succeeded to get the support from the rulers of the Sikh states and the Sikh aristocracy. They were also got the support from the Jat-Sikh peasantry by creating a network of irrigation system and by settling the Sikh peasants in canal colonies.⁵ Besides, *Marshall* status provided to the Sikh community. It helped the British in securing the loyalty of the Sikhs. However, the Gurudwara Reform Movement (1920) created the differences between the British and the Sikhs. While the Sikhs wanted control over the Gurudwaras, the British regarded these as personal properties of the Hindu *Mahants*. As a result, the Sikhs began to cooperate with the Indian National Congress which had extended support to their cause. An agreement was reached between the colonial administration and the Sikhs and the SGPC Act was enacted in 1923. Mahatma Gandhi stated on this moment, "We have succeeded to win the first step for Indian freedom movement." The Akali Dal, the political party which represented the Sikhs, continued to support the Congress and oppose the British imperialism.⁶ Differences, however, emerged between the Congress and Akali Dal after the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. While the Congress did not want the Sikhs to join army, the Akali Dal felt that it was in their interest to do so. A prominent Akali leader, Sardar Baldev Singh joined the Unionist government led by Sikandar Hayat Khan after a pact was made between the Unionist party and the Akali Dal.⁷

In the meanwhile, Muslim league adopted the Lahore resolution for the creation of Pakistan on the basis of 'Two Nation Theory'. Besides, it became clear that India was going to get independence after the Second World War. These developments made the Akali leadership to demand the creation of a sovereign Sikh state in 1943. The Akali leader, Master Tara Singh, kept on voicing this demand till India got independence on August 15, 1947. After the rejection of the demand by the British and the inevitability of the creation of Pakistan had become clear, the Sikhs decided to remain in India instead of staying in Pakistan. It was this factor which played a major part in the decision of the British to divide Punjab. Here it may be pertinent to point out that Nehru had promised that the Sikhs will be able to enjoy glow of freedom in North-Western India.⁸ Punjab was also partitioned along with India in 1947. The Sikhs were hit the most by this decision.⁹

Post-Independence Period

The post-independence period began with a honeymoon between the Akali Dal and the Congress. The Akalis joined the Congress government in East Punjab.¹⁰ But soon the differences emerged between them on the issues of reservation to the Sikh scheduled castes¹¹ and Akali demand for making Punjabi in *Gurmukhi* script as the sole official language of East Punjab.¹² Besides, they began to realize that demographic changes following partition have created an objective situation for the creation of a Sikh majority state. This is what made Master Tara Singh to raise this demand in 1949 and a break in the ties between the Congress and the Akali Dal before the 1951-52 elections to Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly.¹³

Although the Akali Dal could not achieve much success in these elections, it was able to establish its hegemony in the elections to the SGPC and emerge as the representatives of the Sikh community. It raised the demand for Punjabi *Suba* (Punjabi speaking province) which in reality was a demand for a Sikh majority state. The Akali Dal presented this demand before the States Re-organization Commission in 1953. It was, however, rejected by the commission on the ground that it does not enjoy the required popular support.¹⁴ The Akali Dal launched a *Morcha* for it in 1955. Ultimately a settlement was made between the central government of the Congress and the Akali Dal. The Regional Formula was evolved in 1956.¹⁵

As a result of this agreement, the Akalis joined the Congress and the Akali Dal ceased to be a political party. It was converted into a religious and cultural body.¹⁶

The Akalis contested the 1957 elections as the candidates of the Congress. Some of them entered the fray as *Panthis* candidates independents claiming to be the candidates of the *Panthis*.

The differences between the Congress and the Akalis emerged sooner than expected. Master Tara Singh revived the demand for Punjabi *Suba* and started a *Morcha* for this purpose in 1960. When the *Morcha* did not succeed to make any effect, Master Tara Singh resorted to fast unto death at 'Manji Sahib' in the Golden Temple, Amritsar. However, he gave up the fast on the appeal of Yadavindra Singh, Maharaja of Patiala because his health had deteriorated.

The Akali Dal was split into Akali Dal (Master) led by Master Tara Singh and Akali Dal (Sant) led by Sant Fateh Singh in 1962. After strengthening his hold on Sikh politics,¹⁷ Sant Fateh Singh threatened to undertake fast unto death from September 10, 1965 and to subsequently commit self-immolation on September 25, 1965 in case the demand for Punjabi *Suba* was not accepted. Sant Fateh Singh gave legitimacy to the demand for Punjabi *Suba* by pleading for its creation on linguistic basis instead of religious/communal basis.¹⁸ As a result, the then central government constituted a parliamentary committee under the chairmanship of Hukam Singh which accepted the demand for Punjabi *Suba* and recommended linguistic re-organization of Punjab for this purpose. But the Akali Dal (Master) was not satisfied with the acceptance of demand for Punjabi *Suba*. It reiterated its demand for a 'Sikh Home Land.' On the other hand, the Jan Sangh strongly opposed the recommendation of the committee for formation of Punjabi *Suba*. It demanded the creation of 'Maha Punjab' consists of Punjab, the union territories of Delhi and Himachal Pradesh. The working committee of the Congress, however, recommended the union government on March 9, 1966 that a state with Punjabi as state language may be created out of the existing Punjab. While this was welcomed by the Sikhs, the *Haryanvis* and the *Paharis*; the Punjabi Hindus reacted very strongly. There were strikes and cases of arson alleged to be instigated by the Jan Sangh. On April 17, 1966, the then Union Home Minister, Gulzari Lal Nanda announced the appointment of a Boundary Commission. The report of the Commission was accepted by the government of India with some modifications on June 8, 1966. The Punjab reorganization Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 3, 1966 and passed on September 7, 1966. It received the President's assent on September 18, 1966. Thus, the present state of Punjab came into existence on November 1, 1966 on linguistic basis.¹⁹

Social and political Implications

The reorganization of Punjab in 1966 has brought about far reaching changes in the social and political structure of Punjab. The most important change was that the new Punjab became a Sikh majority state. The Sikhs were in a minority in the composite Punjab constituting 33.33 percent of the population. But in the reorganized Punjab, the Sikhs formed 60.22 percent. The Hindus are largely concentrated in the urban areas and thinly scattered in the rural areas; and those in the rural areas are largely scheduled caste Hindus. The Sikhs are clustered in the rural areas and formed the main land-owning classes. It created the differences of outlook and interests between the rural and the urban population. Besides, social cleavages had been sharpened in Punjab in the post reorganization period. The divide between the two major communities the Sikhs and the Hindus became a more important variable in the politics of the state than earlier and the questions of a separate identity of the Sikhs too acquired added importance in the post 1966 period. Since the political behaviour of the common man in Punjab was considerably influenced by communal outlook, the reorganization of Punjab affected the electoral scenario. The increased economic development in the post reorganization period created large scale disparities and unemployment. These had significant political consequences. The crisis of development in agriculture since the middle of the 1970's too made a powerful impact on the politics of the state. So far as the impact of reorganization of Punjab on the political parties is concerned, it had benefited the Akali Dal. The Congress had stood to lose by the reorganization of Punjab. The political party to suffer most was the Jan Sangh.

Performance of Political Parties in Punjab Assembly Elections

Table - I

Name of Party	1967	1969	1977	1985	1997	2007	2012
	Seats won	Seats Won	Seats Won	Seats Won	Seats Won	Seats Won	Seats Won
Congress	48	38	17	32	14	44	46
Akali Dal	26	43	58	73	75	48	56
JanSangh /Janata Party/BJP	9	8	25	6	18	19	12
CPI	5	4	7	1	2	-	-
CPI (M)	3	2	8	0	0	-	-

Source: Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Punjab, Chandigarh.

As Table-I shows that the Akali Dal had gained the most by the reorganization. In the composite Punjab, the Akalis could never hope to win a majority of seats and form the government. But after the reorganization, the Akali Dal was able to form

the coalition ministry in Punjab during the 1967, 1969 and 1977 Assembly elections. The Akali Dal won the 1985 Assembly elections on its own. The Akali Dal has also formed the coalition government in Punjab during the 1997 Assembly elections. An Akali-BJP coalition government has also been formed in the state by the 2007 and 2012 Assembly elections.

Conclusions

It may be concluded that Punjab has been under various empires in the pre-colonial period. It was under the *Mughal* empire when Sikh *Panthis* was formed. After Maharaja Ranjit Singh it was annexed by the Britishers. The demand for the creation of Pakistan led to the demand for a sovereign Sikh state by the then leadership of the Sikhs. The demand for a Sikh majority state (Punjabi-*Suba*) as a part of the Indian Union was raised by the Akali leadership soon after independence. The struggle for this demand culminated in the formation of the present state of Punjab as the result of the acceptance of demand of Punjabi-*Suba* on the linguistic basis in 1966. The linguistic re-organization of the Punjab had brought about significant changes in the social and political structure of the state. Besides, social cleavages had been sharpened in Punjab in the post reorganization period. The divide between the two major communities the Sikhs and the Hindus became a more important variable in the politics of the state. Consequently, politics of coalition was started in the state. Akali Dal-BJP coalition was formed to unite the rural-urban and Hindu-Sikh voters.

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