

Azad Punjab Scheme and Resistance among the Sikhs: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The politics of Punjab from 1940 to 1947 is replete with many important events and happenings. These seven years formulated the partition drive and witnessed the great partition. The Punjab played a very vital role during this crucial phase. Punjab politics was heated up, especially after the Lahore Resolution of 1940. The demand for Pakistan and the rise of the All India Muslim League in the masses got pace. The Sikhs tried to counter the demand of Pakistan and they floated a new scheme to counter the Pakistan scheme and this was the Azad Punjab Scheme. The underlying study explores the dimensions of the Azad Punjab Scheme and also digs out critique of the scheme by the various Sikh factions and leaders. It is the widespread notion that Sikhs entirely supported the Azad Punjab Scheme but there is evidence that the Azad Punjab Scheme was categorically rejected and criticized by various Sikh factions and leadership. The Sikhs were lulled by the Indian National Congress and ultimately they were betrayed later on they (Sikhs) resented and criticized their leadership, especially Master Tara Singh. This research paper is imploring the need to re-understand and analyze the Azad Punjab Scheme which was once understood as the sole voice of the Sikh community.

Keywords: Partition, Azad Punjab, Sikh Leadership, Tara Singh, Muslim League, Akali Dal, Congress

Introduction

The 20th century is full with many eventful incidents¹ and observed many critical occurrences in Sub Continent as well as in the whole world. The political elite emerged in various regions and the resistance against the kingship or monarchy got pace. Many states got independence and threw the chain of oppression in many regions. The international political landscape is rich with important events those changed the course of history. The 20th century observed two world wars which proved very catastrophic for the world.² The colonialism got new concept and many states witnessed revolutions either bloody they were in nature or peaceful. The powerful states emerged as failed states and others emerged as vibrant stakeholders of international arena of politics.

The Sub Continent emerged as very important and dominant contributor to British Raj across the occupied colonies and supported Raj's powers with human force as well as capital resources. The establishment of canal colonies, the improved conditions of agriculture and abundance of raw material enhanced the production capacity of the industries of Manchester and other British industrial towns.³ The human capital supported British authorities in the wars and the soldiers of Sub Continent fought on all the fronts which were against the British colonial Raj. During the course of Raj's power, Punjab emerged as the bread winner and recruiting base of the forces of British authorities. The Punjab with its diversity proved very important base of the Raj which always provided possible support to it.⁴ The political landscape of Punjab was too much secular and pro-British that not a single party floating the slogan the "Sawraj" got any prominence in the province till the elections of 1945-46.

The elections of 1936 resulted into the landslide victory of the Unionist Party which was the flag bearer of secular politics and tactfully managed the diversity of political leadership of all the communities of Punjab. The Sikandar Jinnah Pact 1937, although considered as the major victory of Jinnah to enter into the Punjab Politics and Punjabi political giants like Sir Chhotu Ram, Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan managed to save the repute of secular politics of Unionist Party. The Lahore resolution which was termed as "Pakistan Resolution" by the Hindu Press created huge hue and cry among the various factions of the Punjabi political elite. The prominence of Lahore Resolution made the anti-Pakistan leadership to think to counter the demand for Pakistan especially from the Punjab's ground which was now turning its base towards All India Muslim League and the enormous participation of the masses in the annual meeting of All India Muslim League of 1940 proved it and threatened the other stakeholders of Punjab's politics those were earlier claiming as the major stakeholders of Punjabi politics. The active participation of the masses and clear road map for the future of the Muslims by All India Muslim League further tainted the political future of the regional or religious parties of Punjab. The Sikh leadership was prominent stakeholder of Punjab politics⁵ and especially after the Sikh Gurdwara Act

1925 and Communal Award 1932; they were in the swings of politics. The Akali Dal emerged as the voice of the Sikhs and served as the platform for the protection of Sikh rights’.

In the wake of partition, the Sikh leadership of Akali Dal presented the idea of Azad Punjab to counter the idea of Pakistan. Generally it is perceived that it was moved by the Sikhs to secure a sovereign state but it was actually the demarcation of the boundaries for a balanced proportion of the population⁶. It is widely understood that Punjabi Sikh community was in the strong favor of this scheme and it was termed as best proposal for the Sikhs but unfortunately they were lulled by the Indian National Congress and it was like a pressure proposal to challenge the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan which was asked from the platform of Lahore Resolution of 1940. Azad Punjab scheme is much debated scheme and also considered as ominous to Pakistan scheme but accepted scheme of the Sikhs but this scheme was highly opposed by the other Sikh factions and even some of the Akali leaders also opposed it like Duleep Singh of Sargodha⁷.

The word ‘Azad’ was used for demarcation of territories of Punjab. Azad Punjab Scheme called for the detachment of Muslim majority districts from Punjab so as to create a new province in which the Sikh population was maximized and no single community constituted a majority in the proposed set up. This scheme in no way envisaged the grant of sovereignty to the Punjab. It was a counterblast to partition. Master Tara Singh mentions that Sikhs were a nation. This scheme was the first popular formulation of territorial rearrangement as a means of protection for Sikh community. To enhance the political influence of Sikh community was a turning point in the development of modern Sikh politics.

Actually the scheme was demanding the areas of Layallpur (Faisal Abad), Montgomery (Sahiwal), Sheikhpura, from the areas of eastern Punjab⁸. As the Sikhs were 14% of the total population⁹ and they were demanding territorial re-arrangement from the Punjab, Rawalpindi and Multan division. Sikh Student Federation sided it but with some amendments. The central Akali Dal and Namadhari leaders also opposed this very idea. Akali Dal under Master Tara Singh decided to support the Indian National Congress (I.N.C) in the demand of partition. Kirpal Singh is of the view that Sardar Ujjal Singh raised the idea of re distribution of the Punjab¹⁰ and even they were ready to take Khalistan by force¹¹. Akalis were failed to get the support of the whole Sikh nation and also failed to propagate the Azad Punjab Scheme. Sikhs of northern Punjab also opposed the idea as they were not the part of the scheme¹².

The idea of Azad Punjab scheme was not acceptable for Hindus as well as Muslims¹³. Akalis were demanding that area adjacent to N.W.F.P also should be merged into the province and the rest of the areas should be declared as Azad Punjab scheme. Sikh leadership was not at the same page to decide the destiny of the nation and this crisis of leadership later on proved very disastrous. They severe hue and cry was all around and even Sikh Akali Dal of Faisalabad was suspended on the charge of working against the parent party. In November 1940 at Nankana Sahib, Harcharn Singh Bajwa also condemned the scheme at the platform of Sharomani Akali Dal Conference¹⁴. Giani Kartar Singh 1st time discussed the Azad Punjab scheme with Quaid I Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah at Delhi. Jinnah said that “If the Sikhs are ready to accept Pakistan then the Muslims are also ready to accept Azad Punjab Scheme¹⁵. The Sikh leadership was failed to achieve their goal of Khalistan or Azad Punjab. Azad Punjab scheme not only failed to attract the British Congress and League’s attention but also brought clear differences among the Akalis. Though Akalis faced harsh criticism on their scheme but they did not abandon the idea of partition of Punjab and pursued it constantly without using Azad Punjab¹⁶. Master Tara Singh stated very carefully that the Sikhs are not keen to have Khalistan if the Muslims showed the same zeal and zest in the case of Pakistan¹⁷. Azad Punjab scheme was presented by Tara Singh from the platform of Akalis but it created strong differences among the Sikh leaders but many a leaders considered it an appropriate way to counter the demand for Pakistan.

Baba Kharak Singh declared it as Azad Punjab scheme had justified the scheme of Pakistan¹⁸. Very furious reaction came from the Sikhs of Rawalpindi, Attock, and Jehlum which were not the declared as the parts of proposed Sikh province. In 1943, as a result Master Tara Singh showed his willingness to include these districts to his proposed Azad Punjab scheme¹⁹. The Sikh leaders from pothohar region played no constructive role. Seven members of Rawalpindi Akali Dal were excluded as they condemned Azad Punjab scheme.

In Sharomani Akali Dal Conference at Nankana Sahib in Nov. 1943, Harcharn Singh Bajwa condemned the scheme and in the same conference Tara Singh vowed to fully support his Azad Punjab scheme. On the contrary, Bajwa organized anti scheme conferences²⁰.

Muslim League opposed all types of anti-League agenda. On 28th-29th August 1943, a League meeting was held in Chak No 258/ G.B. Dist. Faisalabad (Layallpur) and Maulvi Jamal Mian presided the session and condemned the Azad Punjab scheme of the activities of Sir Chottu Ram²¹. The Sikh opposition to the idea of Azad Punjab again gained strength and Sikh faction started criticizing Tara Singh even eminent Akali leaders condemned Tara Singh²². Hindu Mahasabha also launched strong campaign against Azad Punjab scheme later on this agenda was abandoned and neutrality was adopted towards it. In return, Master Tara Singh consented to resist against any kind of possibility of League- Unionist coalition ministry.

The Akali Sikhs on the other hand were attacking on Gandhi and Jinnah which made the Hindus and Muslims furious. Azad Punjab Scheme was neither acceptable for Hindus nor for the Muslims²³. The Sikh community living in Punjab was divided on bradari, geographical and economic lines so it was tough for the Akalis to take them all on board. Even Azad Punjab scheme was highly opposed by the other Sikhs, Akalis and religious bodies as well²⁴. But in spite of all these odds, Akali leadership struggled for their plans.

Conclusion:

Azad Punjab Scheme proposed the detachment of Muslim majority districts from the Punjab to create a new state in which no single community constituted a majority. It intended to be a new province between Yamuna and Chenab rivers, under the authority

of the central government to prevent the constitutional domination by a single community and thus bolster Sikh influence. The Sikhs wanted to avoid the perpetual slavery of both the Hindus and Muslims and they wanted a share in the political power and not merely a change of masters. As the demand for the partition of Punjab grew, this scheme became irrelevant. The Azad Punjab Scheme was condemned as communal, anti-Hindu, anti-National, reactionary and opportunistic by the Congress and the Communist Sikhs, the protagonists of the Akhand Bharat and the Hindu leaders of the Punjab, as was resisted by the Sikhs of the Rawalpindi division, which was situated on the other side of the river Chenab. But the importance of this scheme has to be seen as a first popular formulation of territorial re-arrangement as means of protection of the Sikh community. This Scheme reflected the Sikh mind. At the end, there was a contradiction some contemporaries of Tara Singh believed that Azad Punjab scheme of Tara Singh was actually to strength Pakistan scheme and titled him as “Traitor of Sikh Community²⁵”.

¹ W. H. Sewell Jr, The temporalities of capitalism. *Socio-Economic Review*, 6(3), 2008. 517-537.

² Paul Fussell. *The Great War and modern memory*, (London: Sterling Publishing Company, Inc. 2009).

³ https://www.oup.com.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/58230/Chapter-7-Introduction-to-the-Industrial-Revolution.pdf

⁴ Hassan Javid, *Class, Power, and Patronage: The Landed Elite and Politics in Pakistani Punjab*, an unpublished PhD dissertation, submitted at LSE for the partial fulfillment of PhD, 6-8.

⁵ A. H. Sandhu, Sikh Failure on the Partition of Punjab in 1947, *Journal of Punjab Studies*, 19(2) (2012).

⁶ . Akhtar Hussain Sindhu, , *An Anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*, (Lahore: Dogar Publishers; 2015), 231.

⁷ . David Page, *Prelude to Partition*, (London: Oxford University Press; 1987), 85.

⁸ . Ibid.

⁹ Akhtar Hussain Sandhu, *An Anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*, 232.

¹⁰ Ibid., 234.

¹¹ Ibid, 236.

¹² Sube Singh, *Master Tara Singh: Azad Punjab Scheme 1943*, (Haryana: India Journal of Research; vol III, issue no: 5 ; May 2014), 1.

¹³ Sindhu quoted in his book “*An Anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*” that Muslims supported the idea of Azad Punjab scheme by motivating them to demand their separate homeland. See page 244-46.

¹⁴ Akhtar Hussain Sindhu, *An anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*, 246.

¹⁵ . ibid 241

¹⁶ . It is pertinent to mention that other Sikh parties also demanded for partition and for Sikh state. In 1942, Sardar Karpal Singh Mijitia called for the revision of Sikh rule in the region. For detailed study see, R.C DOGRA and Dr Gobind Singh Mansukhani., *Encyclopedia of Sikh religion and character*.

¹⁷ . Sube Singh, *Master Tara Singh: Azad Punjab Scheme 1943*, 9

¹⁸ . Akhtar Hussain Sindhu, *An Anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*, 244.

¹⁹ . Secret Police Abstract, 1943, Para. No. 159.

²⁰ . Ibid, File No 411, Para No 489.

²¹ . Akhtar Hussain Sindhu, *An Anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*, 248.

²² . Ibid. 250.

²³ . Tan Tai Yong, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, 111-112.

²⁴ . Mohinder Singh , *Akali Movement*,(New Delhi: Manohar Publications; 1999), 38

²⁵ . Akhtar Hussain Sindhu, *An Anatomy of Sikh Muslim Politics*, 258.