

AKALI STRUGGLE PAST AND PRESENT; A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**Dr.Daljit Kaur Gill /Jasvir Kaur**

(Research Scholar)

Assistant Professor (HOD)

Guru Kashi University

Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda.

***Abstract-** A combination of three Punjabi words Shiromani Akali Dal literally means the premier organisation of the Akalis- the immortal ones -and has been the most powerful representative body of the Sikhs since its inception on December 14, 1920. Akali Movement transformed into Akali Party or Akali Dal Party. He contributed to Society in Political and religious Sector.*

The Akali Movement also gave birth to the Shromani Akali Dal and the religion-based politics of the Akalis. The Shromani Akali Dal founded in December 1920 AD to manage the necessary resources in terms of men and money to run the Akali struggle, acquired a unique position of power and prestige in the religious and political life of the Sikhs. Because of the Akalis sacrifices in and contribution to the success of the Akali Movement, the Akali Dal gained tremendous influence with the Sikh masses, particularly in the rural areas.

The Akali-te-Pardesi summarized in the following manner the Akali contribution towards the strengthening of the forces of nationalism:

The Akalis have shown to the Indians how a most arrogant, oppressive, cunning and deceitful bureaucracy can be brought to its knees by means of non-violent Satyagraha. By sacrifices at Guru-ka-Bagh, they have destroyed the prestige of the bureaucracy and raised the dignity of India¹.

The Akali Movement provides one more illustration of the British policy of weakening popular movements by creating dissent among the leadership and among the masses supporting it. When Sir Malcolm Hailey, the Governor of the Panjab, realised that he could not suppress a popular movement like that of the Akalis by the earlier policy of repression and when each successive measure taken to suppress the Akalis had further added to the popularity and success of the movement, he tried to defeat the Akalis by splitting the ranks of their leadership, isolating the extremists from the moderates, separating the religious movement from the political issues, alienating the Hindus and the Muslims from the Sikhs and by organising anti-Akali associations to challenge the Akali leadership's exclusive hold over the religious and political affairs of the Sikhs.

The split in the Akali ranks continued to widen resulting in the formation of various rival groups working against each other. The first major split took place immediately on the passage and acceptance of the Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Bill in July 1925. While the moderates like Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh, Giani Sher Singh and others came out of jail after securing

¹ Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *Short History of the Sikhs*, Himmat Press, Jalandhar, 1969,p.51

conditional release and captured power. In laser Cap: Sir the extremists like sardar Teja Singh Samundri, Mastot Tata, Singh, Bhag Singh Vakil,. Gurcharia Sinsth Vakil, Sohan Singh Josh and others remained behind." its. Ever, the success of the moderates was only a short-lived one, as, Soon after their unconditional release, the extremists launched strong propaganda against the moderate group which had prestige of the Akalis by accepting conditional release. During the elections to the new S: G. P. C. under the provisions of the newly passed Bill, the extremists made a clean sweep over the moderates and other pro-British elements in the Akali leadership. Further polarization took place among the extremists. While Master Tara Singh and his lieutenants captured power in the Akali politics and the S. G. P. C., staunch nationalists like Baba Kharak Singh, rising above the factional Akali politics and scramble for power, joined the mainstream of Indian nationalism as they believed that a still bigger Gurdwara, i.e., the Indian sub-continent, was yet to be liberated².

Further, the progressives in the Akali ranks, who seem to have imbibed a Marxist bias during their early contacts with the Ghadriles, the Babbar Akalis and revolutionary elements in the country and abroad, started turning towards left-wing extremist groups in the country and ultimately joined the ranks of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Kirti Kissan Party, both of which had a strong Marxist bias.

Perusal of the data available on the Akali Movement and personal interviews with some of the Jathedars shows that while the leadership of the Akali Movement was provided by middle-class Sikh nationalists, consisting of barristers, school and college teachers, retired military officers and middle-class landholders, the rank and file of Akali volunteers came from the Sikh peasantry³.

On the basis of available figures it will be no exaggeration to say that the Sikh peasantry formed the backbone of the Akali Movement. That the movement was able to achieve a large measure of success was mainly due to this class of people involving itself whole-heartedly in the Akali struggle. Out of the total number of Akali volunteers from different areas, roughly 66 per cent belonged to the Jat Sikh peasantry, the majority of them hailing from the districts of Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Amritsar, Jullundur and Hoshiarpur. Similarly, in the case of the Akali Movement in the Sikh States the majority of participants again belonged to the peasantry.

The growing discontentment of the Sikh peasantry, which found its first organised expression in the form of the Agrarian Unrest of 1907 was fully exploited by the Ghadrile propaganda in making the rural classes aware of their exploitation at the hands of a foreign Government.

"Ghadrile activities also created a spirit of rebellion against the British authorities which continued to ferment and found expression in the form of the Akali struggle and later the terrorist activities of the Babbar militants. The demobilization of the Sikh soldiers at the end of the First World War and the unsatisfactory treatment that had been meted out to them during the War led to great discontentment. Both during the War and on their return to India they heard

² Sohan Singh Josh, *Akali Morchian Da Itahas*, Daman Publishers, Ferozpur, 1986,p.62

³ The Loyal Gazette, 27 February 1921, quoted in the Panjab press Abstracts, fortnight ending 28 february 1921, N.A.I.

from their fellow villagers and relatives of the internment of nearly 5,000 of their folk for alleged sympathy with the Ghadrites; of the enforcement of Indent System (under which every village was compelled to provide a certain number of recruits) and of the pressure to raise funds for the War.

The Akali Movement also gave birth to the Shromani Akali Dal and the religion-based politics of the Akalis. The Shromani Akali Dal founded in December 1920 to manage the necessary resources in terms of men and money to run the Akali struggle, acquired a unique position of power and prestige in the religious and political life of the Sikhs. Because of the Akalis' sacrifices in and contribution to the success of the Akali Movement, the Akali Dal gained tremendous influence with the Sikh masses, particularly in the rural areas⁴.

In spite of internal differences among the Akali leaders and the official patronage bestowed upon the moderate elements in opposition to the Dal, the latter acquired unfettered hold over the Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and the Sikh religious and political affairs.

The S. G. P. C., since its inception in October 1920, has continued to be under the exclusive control of the Akali Dal which has invariably gained a large majority in all the Gurdwara elections held from time to time⁵.

With its continued hold over the S. G. P. C. and its influence with the Sikh masses along with vast resources in terms of men and money, the Shromani Akali Dal has been wielding tremendous political influence and power among the Sikh masses since the days of the Akali Movement. The precedent of religion and politics being mixed together--the former serving the latter's interests- has continued to be a great asset to the Akalis so far.

As religious places were successfully used as platforms to fight the Mahants and the Government of the day during the Akali Movement, they continue to be used as such even after the conclusion of the Movement over fifty years ago. Successful political agitations--particularly the Akali agitation for the formation of a Panjabi speaking State and more recently their unique fight against the Emergency in the country- have since been launched by the Akali leadership from the Gurdwara platform.

Mobilization of a significant part of the Sikh population and representative of various economic and social strata within the community, had occurred by 1925. Concurrently institutionalization of the political. Forces activated by the reform movement and other developments took place. Prior to 1920, the organized channels for the expression of Sikh concerns were the conservative Chief Khalsa Diwan and its affiliated Singh Sabhas, the revolutionary movement as represented by the Ghadr Party, and certain eminent Sikh families. Contact with the Indian National Congress, particularly through the 1919 Civil Disobedience Movement, provided a model of organization for the newly mobilizing Sikhs and their emerging leaders such as Kharak Singh and Master Tara Singh⁶.

In retrospect, formal inauguration of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)

⁴ Rai Sethi, *Sikh Struggle for Gurdwara Reform*, Union Press, Bombay, 1927, p.42

⁵ *Ibid*, p.44

⁶ Mohinder Singh, *Akali movement*, Publication Bureau, Patiala 2015, p.42

on 12 December, 1920 can be seen as the single most important event in institutionalize!

From the Government viewpoint, it could be viewed simply as an elected committee of Sikhs responsible for particular religious assets of the Sikh community. The SGPC and the reform movement did not share this limited notion of its role and function.⁷

From its inception, the SGPC intended to extend its control over all Gurdwaras rather than the few that had been taken from or given up by the priests. A Sikh community existed and the SGPC began the process of becoming its primary institutionalized expression.

Legislative legitimacy and its basic rights were accorded to the organization with passage of the SGPC Act in 1925. These rights have been confirmed in each of the succeeding Punjab to the present.

In conceptual terms, the SGPC can be described as a political system for a particular and varying range of Sikh affairs. Externally it has relations, both direct and indirect, with other systems such as the Punjab Government and with Sikh and other groupings which relate to SGPC concerns. Internally, the dynamics of the system have revolved around the relations between the contending political parties and groups⁸.

This latter aspect is perhaps best symbolized by the Teja Singh Samundri Assembly Hall in the SGPC headquarters in Amritsar which contains opposing rows of benches based on the British House of Commons model for accommodating the ruling and opposing parties. Individual Sikh leaders and their contending groups contest for supremacy locally and then within the S.P.G.C. Following independence and through the 1950s, Master Tara Singh and his Akali Dal dominated with continual challenges from the Malwa Akali Dal, the Sadh Sangat Board (Congress Sikhs) and the Desh Bhagat (Communist Sikhs).

The individuals involved subsequently changed, but the basic pattern of internally contending groups continues. Opposition to the Akali Dal in the 31 March, 1979 SGPC elections came from the Dal Khalsa, Which allied with the All-India Sikh Students Federation, the Panth Khalsa and the Baba Jiwan Singh Mazhabi Dal. Dissatisfaction also appeared from the Akali Dal's women's wing, the Istri Akal Dal, When Rajinder Kaur forcefully stated her displeasure with number of allotted seats "as well as the functional alignments."⁸¹ The splits that resulted in competing Akali Dals a still more significant and will be discussed separately.

Control over the SGPC through its quinquennial election of 175 members based on adult Sikh franchise (including Sahajdhari Sikhs) provides the winning party with the material and symbolic assets of the organization. Material assets included, as of 1964, direct management of 56 gurdwaras, supervision over several hundred other temples and a total budget of Rs. 6,306,000 (c. US 1,340,000) a year.³² In 1970, the SGPC claimed a total revenue of nearly of Rs. 20 million (c.US \$ 2,600,000) more than twice the rupee total of 1964.³³ By 1977, the SGPC annual budget had climbed to Rs. 30 million (about US \$ 4 million³⁴ and by 1980 it probably reached Rs. 60 million (about US \$ 8 million).

⁷ *Ibid*,p.45

⁸ Harcharan Singh Bajwa, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics Issue and Trends*, Delhi, 1988,p.51

Authority over the temples also provides access to what is probably the major political communication channel of the Sikh community. Religious and political communications are cable related in the Gurdwaras, just as the Akal Takht in inextricable symbolizes the inseparability of spiritual and temporal Amritsar authority for the Sikh community,³⁶ More conventional media utilized⁹.

Azad Panjab-where Sikhs were to hold the balance with Hindus and Muslims being in almost equal number--was being made to counter the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. Both the British government as also the Akali leaders knew that the Sikhs did not constitute majority in any particular area of the undivided Punjab. It was only after the Partition of India and subsequent migration of the Sikhs from the West to the East Punjab that they got consolidated in one state and after the merger of P.E.P.S.U. with Punjab, and its division on linguistic principle in 1966, that they have come to constitute nominal majority in the new state's population.?

While a detailed discussion on the Akali agitation for the creation of a Punjabi speaking & state is not possible it is worth mentioning that the very purpose for the creation of such a state seems to have been defeated. Contrary to the Akalis' expectation of perpetual domination in the newly created state, experience has shown that they have never been able to have a full term of a stable Akali ministry. Akali anxiety to capture power at the provincial level and to "experience the glow of freedom promised to them by Jawaharlal Nehru and other important Congress leaders, and Congress policy of monopolizing power both at the provincial and central level, was bound to result in clash sooner or later.

While in the case of other states issues did not take communal shape in the case of Punjab it became so because the agitation for the creation of Punjabi Suba was spear-headed by the Akali Dal and Punjabi, which in fact was the language of this people of Punjab, Willy got associated with the Sikhs. Along with Akalis as its most vocal spokesmen. While Punjabi Hindus are to be squarely blamed for disowning their mother, tongue for political reasons some of the Akali leaders should also share the blame for confusing the Punjabi Suba agitation with the 'Sikh-majority state. Since the Congress leadership, Which ruled India, was unwilling to seriously consider any proposal based explicitly on religious and communal grounds, the Akali Dal tried to present its demand before the States Reorganisation Commission in 1953, on linguistic pattern without emphasizing the point of Sikh-majority.¹⁰

As the Commission members had already been prejudiced as a result of Akali leaders' earlier arguments that "the Sikhs were promised the right of self-determination both by the British and the Congress leaders in 1946 Akali demand for Punjabi Suba was summarily rejected. Punjabi Hindus' opposition to the Suba was used by the Commission to argue that the "demand lacked general support of the people inhabiting the area",

The Commission had not only rejected the Akali demand but also questioned the validity of

⁹ Rai Sethi ,*Sikh Struggle for Gurdwara Reform*, Union Press, Bombay,1927,p.117

¹⁰ Rai Sethi ,*Sikh Struggle for Gurdwara Reform*, Union Press, Bombay,1927,p.102

Punjabi in Gurmukhi script as the language of the people of Panjab which made the Akali leaders feel humiliated¹¹.

After rejection of their demand for Punjabi Suba the Akalis launched a powerful agitation to achieve the goal. The Congress ruled center tried to contain their Akali agitation through the Regional Formula, which almost accepted the principle of division of Panjab by dividing the legislative work among two regional committees, one for the Panjabi and other for the Hindi speaking areas of Punjab.'

As a result the Akali Dal suspended its agitation and decided to merge with the Congress in contesting 1957 Assembly elections. But the Akalis soon realised their mistake. Partap Singh Kairon, who became the Chief Minister of Punjab, did not have any sympathy with the Akali demand for Punjabi Suba. Ironical as it may sound this old Akali turned to Congress became the biggest and most powerful instrument in suppressing the Akali agitation for Punjabi Suba in the years that followed. Without going into the details of the Akali agitation for Punjabi Suba what is relevant here is the point that the Akali leaders were clear about the issue.

While there were differences of approach-with Master Tara Singh still airing his grievance against the Congress and accusing Nehru and others of going back from their promises to the Sikhs and new leaders like Fateh Singh trying to give regional tone to the Akali demand-all the leaders were united in their basic object of getting their demand conceded through peaceful agitation within the constitutional and democratic framework. It was during the Akali agitation for Punjabi Suba that major development occurred when the leadership of the Akali Dal changed from the traditional non-Jat urban leadership to the newly emerging rural jat leadership¹².

Master Tara Singh, a middle-class educated non-jat leader, who emerged on the scene during the Akali agitation for Gurdwara reform in the 1920's and dominated the Akali politics for nearly four decades, was now ousted by Sant Fateh Singh, his own hitherto little known lieutenant who was till then known more for his religious and social work in Ganganagar area of Rajasthan and had little knowledge of or interest in Punjab politics¹³.

Backed by a powerful Jat peasantry Sant Fateh Singh introduced a secular note in the Akali politics by presenting the Punjabi Suba demand as based on "purely linguistic consideration? "We do not seek a Sikh majority area", the Sant declared, "we are not concerned about percentages.

We want the Punjabi Suba to comprise an area where Punjabi language is spoken regardless of the fact whether the Sikhs are in a majority or minority?

This shift in stand weakened Hindu opposition to the Suba demand. By another clever move the Sant and his followers succeeded in creating a wedge amongst the opponents of Punjabi Suba by demanding Haryana and Punjabi Suba in one and the same breath. The new slogan had

¹¹ Ganda Singh, *Some confidential papers of Akali Movement*, S.G.P.C., Amritsar, 1960, p.114

¹² *Ibid*, p.116

¹³ Jagjit Singh Aulakh, *Ik Jiwan Ik Ithas*, Sodhi Press, Chandigarh, 1922, p.49

an electric effect in the Hindi speaking districts with the result that the Punjabi Hindus, who had been blocking the creation of a Punjabi Suba, were quickly isolated from the Haryanavis who, for their own interests, became supporters of Punjabi Suba demand. In the meantime some other developments took place which brought about a major change at the national level.

Jawaharlal Nehru died on 27 May, 1964, and Lal Bahadur Shastri became the new Prime Minister of India. In Panjab Partap Singh Kairon, the powerful Chief Minister of Panjab was replaced by a rather weak non-Sikh named Ram Kishan. With this change in leadership at almost all levels, opposition to the Punjabi Suba demand started dwindling and soon after a Cabinet sub-committee was appointed to consider the question of formation of a Punjabi speaking state which, ironically enough, became a reality in November 1966 with Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister of India.

While the creation of Punjabi Suba put an end to the long Akali agitation, the later history shows that it created more problems while solving one.

The new Punjab was not the one the Akali Dal had demanded and hoped for. Since the division was made on the basis of 1961 census, wherein a large number of Punjabi Hindus had been returned Hindi-speaking for political reasons, as a result a large chunk of area which, in reality was Panjabi speaking, was left out of the new Punjab. Chandigarh, which was built on the Punjab territory and out of the resources of Punjab as its new capital, was put under the central control and declared a Union Territory and also joint capital of both Punjab and Haryana. Also control of the Bhakra Dam and Madhopur and other head-works was taken over by the centre. All this gave the Akali leaders a new cause to revive their agitation for redressing their grievances and keeping their agitation alive. But in the meantime a new development had taken place.

For the first time Sikhs had come to form a majority (55%) in one of the states of the Indian union which created amongst the Akalis a hope of perpetual rule by emerging as regional alternative to the Congress rule in Punjab. While upto the creation of the Punjabi Suba the Akali leaders were united in their demand and were clear about the major issues, creation of the Punjabi Suba and their lust for power created serious differences. Addition to capturing the S.G.P.C. and its resources the Akalis now had another and much bigger source of strength and weakness that is capturing political power in the new state.

During the general elections of 1967, one year after the creation of the Punjabi Suba, the two Akali Dals-The Master and the Sant groups-worked at cross purposes.

In trying to knock each other out, the two ended by capturing between themselves 26 out of 104 Assembly seats (Sant Akali 24 and Master group 2). In the newly created Punjabi Suba the party with 48 seats¹⁴.

During nearly two years' tenure as the Chief Minister of Punjab Gurnam Singh faced various crisis and awkward situations the worst of them being Darshan Singh Pheruman going on fast unto death for the inclusion of Chandigarh into Panjab and dying a martyr's death after having lived on water for 74 days¹⁵. While both the Akali leaders-Tara Singh and Fateh Singh-had

¹⁴ Sangat Singh, *Freedom Movement in Delhi*, Associated Publishing House, New Delhi, 1972, p.94

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.97

broken their vows by going on fasts unto death and breaking them without achieving their goals, Pheruman, a veteran Congressman, put the Akalis to shame by living upto the Sikh tradition of never going back from the sacred oath. His martyrdom shook the conscience of the central government which announced that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would give her Award on Chandigarh and other issues. The Award, which was announced on 29 January, 1970, gave Chandigarh to Punjab in return for some Hindi speaking villages of Chandigarh together with cotton-rich Fazilka and Abohar as a 'compensation' to Haryana. This was a strange justice. Haryana was to be compensated (and this has become a live issue since then) for losing Chandigarh which did not belong to it. For sheer political expediency and to discredit the Akalis in the eyes of the Sikhs Haryana now onward was made a 'party' to most of the issues which were to be raised by Punjab whether through the Congress or the Akali Chief Ministers. And this is what complicated matters in the years to come.

In Punjab Gurnam Singh was succeeded by Parkash Singh Badal, a rich landlord from Gidarbaha area of Malwa region, who formed coalition government with the Jana Singh in March 1970 which lasted barely a year. In the Punjab Assembly elections in 1972 Congress recovered most of the ground it had lost soon after the creation of the Punjabi Suba¹⁶,

After emerging as the largest party in the state Assembly with 67 seats, the Congress formed government in Panjab with Giani Zail Singh¹⁴ as the Chief Minister. Deeply rooted in Sikh tradition and having understood the Sikh psyche much better than his predecessors Giani Zail Singh took over from the Akalis much of their religious issues. By introducing religious tone to the Panjab politics while Giani succeeded to a great extent in weakening the Akalis the result-growing communalization of the provincial politics-was disastrous. In an attempt to secure votes for the Congress Giani organized one of the biggest religious processions commemorating the march of Guru Gobind Singh from Anandpur near Bhakra Nangal to Damdama near Bhathinda to woo the Sikhs.

At the same time he tried to make inroads into the S.G.P.C. and the Akali Dal by promoting Dal Khalsa to oppose the Akalis in the S.G.P.C. elections. A good deal of literature dealing with recent Sikh problem points to Giani Zail Singh' involvement Bhindranwale phenomenon in Punjab politics Mark Tully quoted Zail Singh having foot the bill of the inaugural meeting of the Dal Khalsa held in Aroma Hotel, Chandigarh on 13 April, 1978.

In the Akali politics unprecedented developments have taken place during the last decade. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, who got himself elected as the President of the S.G.P.C. in 1973 and has maneuvered to remain in position till date (except a brief interregnum from March to November 1986) has proved to be the cleverest of the Akali politicians. In a well-written article, 'Punjab and Mr. Tohra' Patwant Singh blames Mr. Tohra for most of the past and present troubles in Punjab. To quote him: "The central fact which emerges out of a careful reading of Punjab's politics is that Mr. Tohra is the one who has woven the many webs in which the State and Central

Governments have so frequently been trapped. By allowing Tarnail Singh Bhindranwale to use the shrine for his inflammatory politics, Tohra helped to place the Golden Temple, that sacred

¹⁶ Baldev Singh Nayyar, *Minority Politics in an Indian State*, Princeton University Press, 1966,p.49

and exalted emblem of Sikhism, in the very eye of the political storm. It is entirely likely that its eventual destruction formed a part of his calculations, for he seems to have foreseen that an attack on the temple would do another event. More to drive the Sikhs and the rest of India apart than What makes him doubly suspect is that he seems prepared to enact this scenario once again.¹⁷

Patwant Singh fears that Tohra's re-election as the President of the S.G.P.C. in November 1986 is fraught with dangers because "it could be the precursor of yet another calamitous collision over the Golden Temple" because his very first action after being elected as the President of the S.G.P.C. on 30 November, 1986, was to disband the special task force raised to keep the Temple precincts free from undesirable elements. Other Akali politicians played their part equally well in falling into the trap of Mrs. Indira Gandhi by creating conditions which led to the traumatic events of June 1984 and disastrous consequences which followed. Jagdev Singh Talwandi, who was ousted from the president ship of the Akali Dal tried to recover the lost ground by raising the slogan for more autonomy for Punjab which became the basis of the controversial Anandpur Sahib Resolution¹⁸.

A careful comparison between the past and present Akali leaders shows that there has been a qualitative change since the days of the Akali Movement. We no longer have men of stature like Baba Kharak Singh, Master Tara Singh and Sant Fateh Singh, who refused to bargain for personal or political benefits. In spite of his very close association with Jawaharlal Nehru and others in the Congress who occupied positions of power in free India, Kharak Singh refused to get any position or personal benefit, not even pension as a freedom fighter to which he was legitimately entitled. Similarly Master Tara Singh refused to compromise the interests of his community over the issue of Sikhs' recruitment during World War I and resigned from the Working Committee of the Congress to help Sikhs get into the armed services. He had differences with the Congress but he always kept the doors for negotiations opened. But at no stage did he bargain for any political position by compromising with the center and sacrificing the interests of the Sikh community. In utter contrast for the present leaders the S.G.P.C. and other Gurdwara platforms have become ladders to climb to political power.

The classic examples of this change of attitude are those of the President of the S.G.P.C. and the Head-Priest of the holy Harmandir Sahib seeking nomination to the Rajya Sabha.

¹⁷ Gokal Chand Narang, *Transformation of Sikhism*, Panth Sewak Publishing House, Amritsar, 1961,p.97

¹⁸ *Ibid*,p.101