

# Emergence of Punjabi Suba and Role of Congress Party

## Abstract

In the present research paper, the effort is to bring to light the role of Indian National Congress towards Punjabi Suba demand. The emergence of the demand for Punjabi Suba can be traced back to the 1909 Minto-Morley Reforms which first introduced the principle of separate electorates for Muslims. The concept of the Sikh State gathered momentum with the Muslim demand for Pakistan in 1940. Before the transfer of power Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi and Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru promised the Sikhs to give an area in the North where they could experience the glow of freedom without any fear and the Congress party never betrayed them. But after independence the attitude of the Congress party underwent change especially with regard to Punjab and Sikhs. Congress rejected the demand of Punjabi Suba on linguistic bases. After long struggle incomplete Punjabi Suba came into existence on 1 November 1966.

**Keywords:** Minto-Morley, Separate electorates, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Punjabi Zone, Hindi Zone, Pepsu



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## Introduction

Going back in the pages of History, the fact that comes to light is that the Congress and Akalis had cooperated with each other in 1937 elections, but wanted to fight elections independently. The Akali Dal fought the 1946 general elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly on its own tickets, at many places opposing the Congress Party. In January 1946, elections of Punjab Legislative Assembly were held. In these elections Muslim league won the largest number of seats but it needed the support of another party in 175 members assembly to form the government. However, a compromise could not be affected with Congress and Akali, so on Akali – Congress, Unionist coalition under Khizr – Hayat Khan took over the government in March 1946.<sup>1</sup>

The Sikh delegation was united in its opposition to Pakistan. On 21 March 1946, the Shiromani Akali Dal held meeting in the Assembly Chamber, Lahore in which Master Tara Singh and Baldev Singh was also present. Master Tara Singh said that he was for a united India; but if Pakistan demand was conceded, he was for a separate Sikh State with the right to federate either with India or Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

In a statement, Master Tara Singh had declared on 4 April 1946 that, "We want a Sikh State in a united India.... Such a state will belong to the Sikh Panth, but it will be democratic and not monarchical"<sup>3</sup> Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru had himself made a statement on that "redistribution of provincial boundaries was essential and inevitable" and Sardar Patel also declared: "Sikhistan issue will be considered in the Constituent Assembly after the transfer of power in the hands of the Indians". Giani Kartar Singh, the Secretary of Akali Party has stated: "The Sikhs should be allowed to form an independent State of their own in North India".<sup>4</sup>

## Aim of the Study

The Congress Party emerged as the strongest political force and assumed political power in the Punjab after partition. Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava was elected Chief Minister and Sir Chandu Lal Trivedi was appointed Governor.<sup>5</sup> Gopi Chand Bhargava formed the new ministry on 11 June 1948 which included Swaran Singh and Isher Singh Majhail and Udham Singh Nagoke<sup>6</sup> Recalling the promises of the congress particularly its resolution of 1929<sup>7</sup> and expressing their faith and trust in the Congress leaders, the Akalis resolved in March 1948 that all their legislatures should join the Congress Party.

Master Tara Singh, the Akali leader saw in the Sikhs constituting a majority in a strategic province, the possibility of the Akali becoming the

exclusive repository of power independently of the Congress. In his presidential address delivered at the Second Sikh Students Federation Conference at Ludhiana on 24-25 April 1948, he stressed the need to preserve the separate political integrity to the Sikhs and insisted that the Shiromani Akali Dal should retain its independent authority to take political decision on behalf of the Panth.<sup>8</sup>

The movement for redrawing State boundaries on the basis of linguistic and cultural homogeneity has had a long history as Congress Party had accepted the idea of the Linguistic redistribution of provinces at its Nagpur Session in 1920.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of the Independence, a new political State called Pepsu came into being in July 1948. It consisted of Patiala and other Princely States in the East Punjab.<sup>10</sup> Sardar Patel while performing its inaugural ceremony characterized it as 'Homeland of the Sikhs'. However, the Linguistic Provinces Commission recommended that no new provinces should be formed for the time being and that the question could be taken up when India would become strong both physically and emotionally.

In 1948, a Committee was appointed by the Indian National Congress at its Jaipur Session to consider the question of linguistic province and to review the position in the light of the report of the Dar Commission. This Committee known as J.V.P. Committee<sup>11</sup> was the first Congress body to sound a note of warning against the linguistic principle.<sup>12</sup>

The Punjab was excluded from the purview of the Dar Commission followed by the J.V.P. Committee on account of various problems then facing the province as a result of the partition.<sup>13</sup> Linking the change in the Congress attitude with partition, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru said, "Partition of the country has made undoubtedly many of us hesitant about changing the map of India".

In February 1949, a Hindu dominated Municipal Committee of Jullundur resolved to introduce Hindi in Devnagri script in all schools. The Sikhs argued that Punjabi in Gurmukhi script should be declared the sole language of the Punjab. But the Hindus opposed this suggestion.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Senate of the Punjab University at its meeting on 9 June 1949, rejected by a majority vote, the proposal of Punjabi being adopted as the medium of instruction in Punjab.<sup>15</sup>

On March 1949 a well knit group of the Akali legislators joined the Congress Sardar Partap Singh Kairon, Swaran Singh and Ranjit Singh joined Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava's Ministry.<sup>16</sup> The Akali Dal extended its support to Bhim Sen Sachar who became Chief Minister on 6 April 1949 and members such as Ujjal Singh, Sardar Joginder Singh Mann, Ch. Lahri Singh, Babu Bachan Singh joined the ministry.<sup>17</sup>

In October, 1949, Sachar Formula was evolved by Giani Kartar Singh and the Chief Minister Bhim Sen Sachar to accommodate the Sikh concern for Punjabi. It was announced on 2 October 1949. The proposals were signed by the other members Ujjal Singh and Gopi Chand Bhargava.<sup>18</sup> The Punjab Government announced its decision to adopt a language formula, known as Sachar Formula which

provided the regional division of the province into two zones, a Punjabi zone and a Hindi zone.

The Punjabi Zone of the carving of Sachar Formula consisted of the districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, Gurdaspur, Ferozepur, Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur, all the portions of Hissar district, lying to the East of Ferozepur, Patiala side of the Ghaggar river and Ropar, and Kharar tehsil of Ambala district, to the Hindi Zone were assigned the districts of Gurgaon, Rohtak, Karnal, all portions of Hissar district lying to the South of Ghaggar river and Jagadhari and Naraingarh Tehsils of Ambala district and Kangra, The remaining areas Simla, Ambala, Chandigarh and Sirsa were declared bilingual.<sup>19</sup>

The year 1950 was followed by the conventions, conferences, rallies and statements by different leaders relating to the issue of Punjabi Suba. The Sikh Conference at Ludhiana on 26 March 1950 marked an important step towards mobilizing the Sikhs behind the demand for a Punjab speaking State. It turned out to be a massive rally. The President Sardar Hukam Singh gave a long persuasive address. He said that Sikh demanded the creation of a Punjabi speaking State on the basis of language and that its denial for the reason that it would otherwise benefit them was arbitrary and unjust.<sup>20</sup> His views were strongly supported by Master Tara Singh.

On the other hand, the Punjab Congress decided to oppose the Akali demand of an autonomous status for Punjab speaking State. On 15 December 1950, Partap Singh Kairon called an All India Congress Sikh Convention in which all the leading Congress Sikh made attack on Akali Dal's demand of Punjabi Suba.<sup>21</sup> While addressing the Convention, President Sardar Singh Caveeshar advised the Akali leaders that their slogan of Punjabi Suba was synonymous with the slogan raised by Jinnah while demanding Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

The Shiromani Akali Dal issued a manifesto stating that they were in favour of formation of provinces on a linguistic and cultural basis throughout India but it endorsed that it was the question of life and death for the Sikhs for a new Punjab to be created immediately. The Shiromani Akali Dal believed that a Punjabi speaking province may give Sikhs the needed security.

The first general elections in the country held under the new constitution in 1952 gave Akali Dal the opportunity to take the issue to the voters. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in his electioneering tour strongly opposed the creation of Punjabi Suba, and named it to be a division of the country. Speaking at Patiala on 4 January 1952 when some activists of Punjabi Suba demand interrupted him during his speech by shouting out the slogans, 'Le Ke Rahenge Punjabi Suba', Nehru declared, "I will not allow India to be divided again. I will not allow any further trouble. If there is any trouble in any part of India, I would put it down with all my strength."<sup>23</sup> The Akali Dal fought the elections in the Punjab as well as in Pepsu. In Pepsu Akalis succeeded in forming a United Front Ministry headed by their Chief Minister Sardar Gian Singh Rarewala.<sup>24</sup> The Congress ministry was replaced by

an Akali dominated ministry which took office in Patiala on 22 April 1952. This was the first non-Congress government established anywhere in India.

The Shiromani Akali Dal now got extremely keen on demanding the amalgamation of the Punjabi speaking regions of the Pepsu and the Punjab.<sup>25</sup> In December 1952, Potti Sriramula, one of the oldest Congress leader of Andhra queered the pitch by starting a fast unto death. Four days after his death, the Prime Minister announced the government's decision to form a State of Andhra by the partition of Madras and it came into being in October 1953.<sup>26</sup> The problem of reorganization of the provinces in India became emergent because with the programme of large scale planning, it was essential to have ending political units. On 29 December 1953, the Parliament appointed the States Reorganization Commission to examine 'objectively and dispassionately' the question of reorganization of the States of the Indian Union so that the welfare of the people of each constitution unit as well as the nation as a whole be promoted.<sup>27</sup>

The appointment of the Commission under the chairmanship of Saiyed Fazal was welcomed by the Sikhs as it is an opportunity of them to place their case of Punjabi Suba and get adjudication thereon. The Akali Dal further argued that the demand for Punjabi Suba was in line with demands in other parts of India for the linguistic reorganization of States. It further said that the Punjabi was a distinct language and had been so recognized in the Indian constitution. It is also endowed with a special script known as Gurmukhi which is not derived from Devnagri script of Hindi but from Brahmi.<sup>28</sup> The areas claimed to be included in the proposed Punjabi speaking State would be the districts of Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Ferozepur, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Hosiarpur, Ambala, Karnal (except Panipat tehsil) and tehsils of Sirsa and Fatehabad and sub-tehsil Tohana of Hissar district, Patiala, Barnala, Bhatinda, Kapurthala, Fatehgarh Sahib and Sangrur (except Jind, Nirwana tehsils) and Ganganagar district in Rajasthan.<sup>29</sup>

The States Reorganization Commission issued its report in October 1955. The States Reorganization Commission did not accept the Akali Dal's demand for a Punjabi-speaking State, as they did not exist among the people of Punjab a Minimum measure of agreement necessary for making the change in the present setup.<sup>30</sup> The proposal Punjabi-speaking State in the view of the Commission, "will solve neither the language problem nor, the communal problem and far from removing internal tension, which exists between communal and not linguistic and regional groups, it might further aggravate the existing feelings."<sup>31</sup> The Commission further recommended the merger of Punjab, Pepsu and Himachal Pradesh.

At the submission of the report, Giani Kartar Singh stated that out of fourteen languages provided for in the constitution, 13 States had been reorganized on the basis of languages, only the Punjabi Suba had not been formed because the loyalty of the Sikhs was suspected.<sup>32</sup> Master Tara Singh summoned a representative convention of the Sikhs at Amritsar on 16 October 1955. The convention rejected the

recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission and castigated it for treating the Sikh claims with "undisguised bias".<sup>33</sup>

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru invited Master Tara Singh for talks on Punjab problem in the light of this demand for reorganization of the State on linguistic basis. Master Tara Singh along with Principal Jodh Singh, S. Gian Singh Rarewala, S. Hukam Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and Bawa Harkishan Singh met Nehru and on 22 January 1956, a compromise formula known as Regional Formula was evolved.<sup>34</sup> The Punjab Pradesh Congress was sharply divided on the issue of regional scheme.

The Regional Formula divided the Punjab State on linguistic basis with a view to safeguards the interests of the language groups.<sup>35</sup> The Regional plan was accepted by Master Tara Singh and the Akalis after long deliberations. In a press statement on 15 March 1956, explaining the reasons for the acceptance of the plan, Master Tara Singh said that the scheme fulfilled the aspirations of the Sikhs to an extent but at the same time did not give them any opportunity to dominate others as a power, if given might make them 'undemocratic and narrow minded'.<sup>36</sup>

Under the Regional Formula, the State was divided into two regions called Punjabi speaking, and Hindi speaking regions. Giani Kartar Singh conceded that what had been offered by the government was not the Punjabi Suba yet he condemned its acceptance as a promise of the Punjabi Suba.<sup>37</sup> Partap Singh Kairon, the then President of Punjab State Congress was opposed to the division of the State on linguistic basis. Pt. Nehru felt that Kairon was indispensable for Punjab and got him (Kairon) elected in place of Bhim Sen Sachar. Partap Singh Kairon became Chief Minister of Punjab on 23 January 1956.<sup>38</sup>

The General Conference of Akali Dal (November 1956) decided by 350-353 votes to merge the Akali Party into the Congress. After the assembly election of 1957, Partap Singh Kairon was elected as the leader of the Congress Assembly Party on 3 April 1957. He formed the Congress Ministry and inducted two erstwhile Akalis – Gian Singh Rarewala and Giani Kartar Singh in his Cabinet. The largest group in the Congress Party at this time was that of Partap Singh Kairon with a following of about 55 members.<sup>39</sup> The government leadership believed that the Akali Dal was the main political party of the Sikhs and Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee was the mini Parliament and representative body of the Sikhs.

In 1960 Punjab Government appointed a 20 Member Language Committee under the Chairmanship of the State Governor, Mr. Gadgil to suggest a solution to the language tangle. As this Committee was also appointed under threats from 'Save Hindi' agitators, the Sikhs gained the impression that this Committee too was constituted to recommend two scripts for the Punjabi language and thereby torpedo the Sachar Formula and Regional Formula which allowed Punjabi to be written only in Gurmukhi script.<sup>40</sup>

Master Tara Singh won a resounding victory at the elections in March 1960. Partap Singh Kairon, Gian Singh Rarewala and Kartar Singh fought the election against the Akali Dal. In the meantime the decision of the Congress High Command on 23 December 1956 to bifurcate the State of Bombay into two States, Maharashtra and Gujarat had an impact on the Sikh masses on the eve of election of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. This gave teeth to the demand by Sikhs for their own Punjabi-speaking people.<sup>41</sup>

The election results were declared on 19 January 1960. The Akali Dal secured a tremendous victory. Soon after the Akali Dal began telling the Sikh masses that a morcha for Punjabi Suba would be launched immediately.<sup>42</sup> On 23 January 1961, Sant Fateh Singh got a personal letter from Prime Minister inviting him to meet him at Delhi on 8 February 1961.<sup>43</sup> The Working Committee of the Akali Dal discussed the draft for the bifurcation of the States on linguistic basis. Sant Fateh Singh had series of meetings with Nehru. In the meantime Master Tara Singh felt that there had been a set back to his leadership and Sant Fateh Singh had emerged as his rival. He decided to go on a fast unto death himself from 15 August 1961 for the creation of Punjabi suba.<sup>44</sup>

The Prime Minister Nehru remained opposed to the creation of Punjabi Suba until the end of his life. Partap Singh Kairon had dominated Punjab politics from 1956 till 1964, period in which he had the backing of Pt. Nehru. He opposed to the creating of a Punjabi speaking State on political consideration as he feared that the Congress would go out of office in Punjab and that his political career would suffer a set back if Punjabi speaking State was created.<sup>45</sup>

After the Indo-Pak war, the Central Government took initiative to resolve the Punjab problem. At a press conference on 14 July 1965, Master Tara Singh after scathing criticism of the Congress and Sant Fateh Singh declared that he had decided to re-enter politics to ensure the dignity, honour and freedom of the Panth. He said that the Sikhs should be given right to determine their political status in a State where they should feel their religion and culture to be safe.<sup>46</sup>

The Punjab Congress had mixed reaction about the Cabinet Committee and Consultative Committee of Parliament. Punjab Pradesh Congress held its meeting on 1 October 1965, it was decided that the demand of Punjabi Suba be opposed.<sup>47</sup>

The Congress Legislative Party of the State too could not put a united point of view.<sup>48</sup> It appeared that the Punjab Congressmen were divided into several groups. These were:

1. Those who opposed the partition of Punjab;
2. Those who supported the demand for Punjabi Suba;
3. Those who were in favour of a separate Haryana Prant; and
4. Those who wanted the hilly areas of Punjab to merge with Himachal Pradesh.

### Conclusion

Sikh members of the Congress Party in Punjab Assembly submitted a memorandum under Giani Kartar Singh. It was emphasized that:

1. Punjabi Suba demand, i.e. a State demarcated on the basis of continuous areas where the spoken language of the majority of the People is Punjabi, be conceded immediately.
2. The non-Punjabi speaking areas of Punjab may be accommodated according to their wishes.
3. After creating two or three States out of the present Punjab Himachal Pradesh, a Commission may be appointed to go through the question of the adjustment of boundaries.

A large number of memoranda were submitted to the Consultative Committee by the various political parties and groups whose views were well known by this time. After the sad demise of Lal Bahadur Shastri at Tashkent, Mrs. Indira Gandhi becomes the Prime Minister. The factional fight in the Congress was also reflected on the attitude to the organization towards the Punjab problem.

The government of India approved in principle the report of the Parliamentary Committee recommending that Punjab should be reorganized on linguistic basis and setup a Commission known as a Punjab Boundary Commission on 23 April 1966.<sup>49</sup> The Commission was told to take the census figure of 1961 into consideration along with the other considerations like geography, homogeneity and communication. Master Tara Singh said at Jullundur that "to make the 1961 Census, the basis of division would mean sabotaging the Suba by reducing its size and making it economically weak."<sup>50</sup>

The Commission held its meeting from 9 May 1966 till 23 May 1966. The Punjab Reorganization Act was approved by both the houses. It received the President's assent on 18 Sept. 1966. The new Punjab was reduced to just 20, 254 square miles and 11.58 million populations out of which 56 percent were Sikhs. It came into existence on 1 November 1966.<sup>51</sup>

Akalis were not satisfied with the reorganization. They started second phase of agitation for the inclusion of the Punjabi speaking areas which were not included earlier.<sup>52</sup> On 20 November 1966, a jatha of 75 Akalis, headed by Jathedar Mohan Singh Tur, set out for Chandigarh.<sup>53</sup> Sant Fateh Singh also announced that this would be the first and last jatha to march to Chandigarh and he would declare his next step on 5 Dec. 1966.<sup>54</sup> The march plan however did not have the desired impact and the incomplete demands still persist.

### Foot Notes

1. K.C. Yadav, *Punjab Colonial challenge and Popular Response, Haryana, 2003, 178.*
2. *Akali Patrika, 22 March 1946.*
3. *Akali Patrika, 3 March 1946*
4. *The Tribune, 20 January 1947*
5. *The Hindustan Times, 13 June 1948*
6. *Joginder Singh, Sikh Leadership Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Amritsar, 1999, pp.265-66.*

7. *All India Congress Committee Papers, 1929, No. 32 (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi).*
8. *The Hindustan Times, 25-26 April 1948*
9. *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission, Manager, Government of India Press, New Delhi, 1955, p.13 (Central Secretariat Library).*
10. *The eight Princely States were: Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot, Malerkotla, Kalsia, Kapurthala, Nalagarh.*
11. *It consisted of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya*
12. *The Tribune, 23 December 1948*
13. *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission, Para 120*
14. *Akali Patrika, 20 March 1949*
15. *Akali Patrika, 10 June 1949*
16. *The Tribune, 10 April 1949*
17. *The Hindustan Times, 15 April 1949*
18. *Akali Patrika, 3 October 1949*
19. *Urmila Chaudhary, 'Sachar Formula' in The Tribune, 2 October 1949, p.8*
20. *Akali Patrika, 27 March 1950*
21. *Among those who attended the Convention were Giani Zail Singh, Surjit Singh Majithia, Gurdial Singh Dhillon, Jathedar Udham Singh Nagoke, Sarmukh Singh Chamak and Jathedar Sohan Singh Jallalusman*
22. *Partap, 16 December 1950*
23. *The Tribune, 5 January 1950*
24. *Gursharan Singh, 'A year of President Rule in Pepsu (5 March 1953 to 8 March 1954)' in Punjab Past and Present, Vol. XXIV, April 1990, p.156, Punjabi University, Patiala.*
25. *Ajit, 22 July 1953*
26. *The Tribune, 20 December 1952*
27. *Resolution of Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs No. 53/69/53-Public, 29 December 1953, (available at National Archives of India, New Delhi); see Appendix V.*
28. *Memorandum to the States Reorganization Commission (Punjab), Amritsar, n.d., pp.3-4*
29. *Report of the States Reorganization Commission, Manager, Government of India Press, 1955, para 571, pp.140-41*
30. *Report of the State Reorganization Commission, op. cit., para 548, p.148*
31. *Ibid., para 540, p.146*
32. *The Tribune, 14 October 1955*
33. *Ajit, 17 October 1955*
34. *Naya Zamana, 23 January 1956*
35. *The Tribune, 23 May 1956*
36. *Partap, 16 March 1956*
37. *Sant Sipahi, May 1956*
38. *Ajit, 24 January 1956*
39. *Partap, 9 April 1957*
40. *Gurmit Singh, History of Sikh Struggle, Vol. I, New Delhi, 199, p.129*
41. *Ajit, 24 December 1956*
42. *Akali Patrika, 21 March 1960*
43. *Partap, 24 January 1961*
44. *Akali Patrika, 17 August 1961*
45. *Akali Patrika, 10 March 1962*
46. *Master Tara Singh Di Thamki, 'Sikh Manga Da Faisla Maiden-a- jung vich Hobayga' in Ajit, 2 August 1965, p.2*
47. *Ajit, 2 October 1965*
48. *Gian Singh Rarewala Papers, File No. 28 (National Archives of India, New Delhi)*
49. *Partap, 24 March 1966*
50. *Ajit, 12 March 1966*
51. *The Tribune, 1 November 1966*
52. *Sadhu Singh Hamdard, 'Punjabi Da Katal' in Ajit (Editorial), 21 November 1966, p.2*
53. *Ajit, 22 November 1965*
54. *The Tribune, 6 December 1966*