Research Paper History

Master Tara Singh: Azad Punjab Scheme 1943

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to elaborate on "Master Tara Singh: Azad Punjab Scheme 1943". The word 'Azad' was used for redemarcation 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 maximised 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 enhence the political influence of Sikh community was a turning point in the development of modern Sikh politics.

KEYWORDS

Historical Background

"Azad Punjab" was the name given to a province envisaged in the memorandum of the Sikh all Parties Committee to Stafford Cripps.1 Sir Stafford Cripps arrived in India in March 1942 with constitutional proposals aimed at creating a new Indian union after the end of the second world war. The Muslim League declared at its annual conference at Lahore in March 1940 that the Muslims of British India were a separate nation and demanded that a sovereign Muslim state should be constituted in areas in which the Muslims were in a majority. The Punjab formed the core of this demand. The Cripps Mission made the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan seem an independent reality. "The possibility of the creation of a sovereign Muslim state of Pakistan greatly perturbed Sikh leaders, for a division of the Punjab along Muslim-Hindu communal links would split the Sikh population in two".2 The Akalis denounced the principle of partition. Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh declared that Pakistan could be formed over their dead bodies. Master Tara Singh wrote to Stafford Cripps, "since the Sikhs could not dominate in large area because of their more or less thin distribution over the province, it was unthinkable to demand domination. However a province could certainly be carved out "in which the Sikhs are dominated by no single community".3 The demand for Pakistan posed a serious danger for religious, social, economic and political interests since its creation would leave them at the mercy of the Muslims.4 March 23, 1943 was celebrated in Punjab as "Pakistan Day".5

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Master Tara Singh constrained to admit in 1943 that Baldev Singh's ministry alone could not protect Sikh interests. He became vocal when the Akalis who had participated in individual Satyagraha were all out of prison and they did not share Baldev Singh's opinion.6 "Master Tara Singh stated for the first time that the Sikhs were a nation. Nevertheless, a resolution demanding a Sikh independent sovereign state was rejected as an impossible demand. Ujjal Singh and Giani Kartar Singh said explicitly that the Azad Punjab scheme was only a counterblast to partition".7

On June 7, 1943 the Akali Dal passed Azad Punjab resolution putting a stamp of approval on Muslim League's demand for Pakistan.8

Akali Dal meeting under the presidentship of Master Tara Singh in June 1943, declared that, "In the Azad Punjab, the boundaries should be fixed after taking into consideration the population, Property, Land revenue and historical traditions of each of the communities. If the new demarcations are affected on the above mentioned principles, then the Azad Punjab comprise of Ambala, Jullundur, Lahore division and out of Multan division Lyallpur district, some portion of Montgomery and Multan Districts".9

The main aim of Azad Punjab Schemne was to insist upon the partition of Punjab. Baba Kharak Singh of the central Akali Dal declared that so long as there was a single Sikh there could be no Pakistan in the Punjab.10 The supporters of pro-government Kirpal Singh Majithia too expressed opposition to Pakistan.11 The Azad Punjab Scheme in no way envisaged the grant of sovereignty to the Punjab. The word "Azad" was used to indicate that Punjab territories should be redemarcated in a way so as to make the new province free from the domination of any of the communal segments of population i.e. Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. This scheme called for the detachment of Muslim majority districts from Punjab so as to create a new province in which the Sikh population was maximised and no single community constituted a majority in the proposed set up.12 The Akali Dal published a pamphlet explaining its proposal detail. The demarcation of the boundaries of Azad Punjab would create a province which the Muslim population would be only 40 percent, The Hindu population would be 40 percent and the Sikh being 20 percent would serve to maintain the political balance between the two communities. The Pamphlet stated that Sikhs would be able to take sides and maximize their political advantage. Moreover, in time the Sikh princely states would be merged into the new province and thereby raise the Sikh population to 24 percent. The Akali Dal argued that as Sikh population growth had been quite rapid during the previous years, during the course of time it would rise to 30 Percent in Azad Punjab.13 Master Tara Singh said, "Sikhs can not attain their rightful position or protect their interests effectively unless Punjab is re-distributed into two provinces with Ravi forming the boundary between them".14 The Azad Punjab Scheme was essentially a defensive strategy adopted in response to the recognition of the idea of Pakistan by the government through the Cripps proposals and by the Congress through its resolution of April 2, 1942. 15

Reaction of other organisations

"During 1942-43, the Azad Punjab scheme evoked strong reaction from various quarters, particularly from various the Congressite and Communist Sikhs, the protagonists of the Akhand Hindustan and the Hindu leaders of the Punjab, all of whom dubbed it communal, anti-Hindu, anti-national, reactionary and opprtunistic".16 The Sikhs of the Rawalpindi di-

vision, which was situated on the other side of the Chenab, were particularly vocal. They dubbed the scheme as "suicidal" and master Tara Singh as "Pakistanist" and "an agent of British Imperialism".17

"The Azad Punjab scheme evoked strong reaction particularly from the Congressite and Communist Sikhs, The protagonists of the Akhand Hindustan and the Hindu leaders of the Punjab. The Sikhs of the Rawalpindi division dubbed the scheme as 'suicidal' and Master Tara Singh as 'Pakistanists' and agent British imperialism. The anti-Azad Punjab conferences were organised at different places in the Rawalpindi division with the Congressite leaders Baba Kharak Singh and Sant Singh mostly being in the forefront. Seven members of the Shiromani Akali Dal from the Rawalpindi district were expelled for their open opposition to the Azad Punjab Scheme. In several conferences in 1943, Baba Kharak Singh criticised the demand for Azad Punjab. He felt there was no distinction between Pakistan and Azad Punjab and both schemes involved the vivisection of India and destruction of Indian unity and integrity. He also charged that Jinnah and Master Tara Singh were sailing in the same boat 'as agents of British' imperialism and that Azad Punjab would be suicidal for the country, the Panth and the Punjab".18 The Akali Dal passed a resolution in 1943. The Akalis declared that they primarily stood for united India and wanted Azad Punjab only if Pakistan was to be formed. "No Sikh leader ever demanded a sovereign Sikh state. The demand for Azad Punjab was only to counterblast to Jinnah's demand for Pakistan on the basis of religion".19

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 irrelevent. 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.

Objectives

This study will contribute in the Historiography of the Akali movement in Punjab and nationalist movement in India by critically exploring the multiple layers of this political articulation from Microlevel local and provincial politics and much larger National mobilisation. This aspect is ignored in the existing literature.

Methodology

This Research Paper is based on a Comprehensive Qualitative Analysis of the Historical documents. Archival documents include the official proceedings of the provincial government in Punjab as well as colonial government in Delhi, available at National Archives, New Delhi and Punjab State Archives at Patiala and Chandigarh.

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