

## *Azad Punjab Scheme of the Sikhs*

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### **Abstract**

*The Akali leadership presented the Azad Punjab Scheme to counter the Pakistan scheme. They sought an ultimate solution to the ongoing communal problem of the Punjab in the redistribution of the British Punjab boundaries between the mixed population of the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs under the central government. They had not consulted any other stakeholder which left little hope for success but the Akali Sikhs invested all their energies in popularizing the Azad Punjab scheme. A strong opposition emerged against this scheme within the Sikh community. Generally, it is perceived that the Azad Punjab scheme moved by the Akali Sikhs during the British rule was an endeavour to secure a sovereign state but actually it was a move to re-demarcate the Punjab boundaries so that the Sikhs might be able to obtain a balanced proportion of the population in the British Punjab. It was initiated under the threat of the Muslim domination in the provincial assembly and other departments. Not having been a well-argued and efficiently worked-out scheme, it could not convince the decision-makers and the stakeholders within and outside the community. If the scheme had been adopted, the Sikh question would have been more complicated at the end of British rule. Jahangir Tamimi claims that the Indian National Congress forced Sikhs to demand Azad Punjab, Sikhistan or Khalistan, but he has quoted no evidence to prove it. Gurmit Singh is of the opinion that the Azad Punjab scheme was the best solution to the*

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*Sikhs while Hukam Singh repudiates it as an inappropriate solution with the argument that the expulsion of the Muslim and Hindu communities from the areas was not possible. This article is an endeavour to explore the divergent facets of the Azad Punjab Scheme. It also analyses the extent to which it was an appropriate solution to the Muslim-Sikh tangle in the British Punjab.*

### **Introduction**

Sikhs<sup>1</sup> made up 15 per cent of the total population of the British Punjab<sup>2</sup> but they had been living in all walks of life with prominent stature. Their religion and past political status had infused a sense of superiority in them. Their support<sup>3</sup> to the colonial rule in the Subcontinent endeared them to the British masters. Having been a ruling community in the past, they raised demand for a separate state, from time to time after the annexation of the Punjab, particularly when it became clear that the British would soon leave India. Shiromani Akali Dal had become a popular Sikh party soon after its inception and floated many options including Azad Punjab Scheme<sup>4</sup>, Sikh state, Sikhistan and Khalistan.<sup>5</sup> The most controversial of all these ideals was the Azad Punjab Scheme which severely divided opinion among the Sikh political elite.<sup>6</sup>

Sikh traditions influenced by the last Guru, Gobind Singh, had sowed the political seeds of separatism and Banda Singh Bahadur first materialised this hope when he established a form of Sikh state. *Raj Krey Ga Khalsa* (Khalsa will rule) activated Sikhs to have their own state. They had been proud of Maharaja Ranjit

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1 Guru Nanak Dev was founder of Sikhism which mainly concentrated in the Punjab, a region in north-west of India, now divided into East Punjab (India) and West Punjab (Pakistan).

2 British annexed Punjab in 1849 after winning the Anglo-Sikh wars. It at that time included the areas of the Pakistani Punjab, Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa, Indian Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Delhi.

3 Sikhs rendered wholehearted support to the British after the Anglo-Sikh wars.

4 Azad means 'independent and sovereign'; the scheme was launched to get independent Punjab.

5 Dr. Muhammad Jahangir Tamimi, *Sikh-Muslim Ta'aloqat: Aik Tehqiqi Jaiza* (Urdu) (Lahore: CSAS, Punjab University, 2007), p.172.

6 Gurmit Singh, *Failures of Akali Leadership* (Sirsa: Usha Institute of Religious Studies, 1981), pp.40-41.

Singh who stamped the dream of the Sikh Raj. Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928) was the first Punjabi leader who suggested partition of the Punjab in November-December 1924 as a solution to the ongoing communal problem between the Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>7</sup> It was not taken much seriously as it was perceived as resentment to the communal tussle. The nationalist leaders such as C. R. Das, Motilal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Abul Kalam Azad, and Hakim Ajmal Khan had already expressed this resentment about the Hindu-Muslim relationship in a Congress report in 1923. The government had concluded that any agreement between Hindus and Muslims was impossible. Both the Congress and the government agreed that the contributory factor to this communal problem in the Punjab was the Shuddhi Movement.<sup>8</sup> The Sikhs were more perturbed as they mainly concentrated in the Punjab only. They were conscious of their own rights but all of their political parties stood with the nationalist Congress. Since the demand for a sovereign Sikh state could deprive them of the Congress support therefore, they preferred the demand for re-demarcation of the Punjab boundaries. It was a partly workable deal which could gain the Hindu support but again it was fraught with numerous errors.

The Round Table Conferences (1930-32) organised at London by the British provided an opportunity to the Indian leaders to settle the constitutional issue. Sardar Sampuran Singh<sup>9</sup> and Sardar Ujjal Singh<sup>10</sup> represented the Sikhs. Sardar Ujjal Singh placed the Sikh memorandum which shared different options to solve the Sikh question. He presented the Sikh demands on the basis of their past ruling status and their financial and other contributions to the Raj:

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7 Kirpal Singh, *The Partition of the Punjab*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1989), p.10.

8 David Page, *Prelude to Partition, The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System on Control: 1920-1932* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.85.

9 Sardar Sampuran Singh from Lyallpur had been the MLC of the Punjab. He represented the Sikhs in the Round Table Conference along with Ujjal Singh.

10 Sardar Ujjal Singh (1895-1985) was an MLC in the Punjab Legislative Council in 1926. He had been Parliamentary Secretary (Home) in the Unionist government from 1937 to 1942.

We ask for a territorial re-arrangement which would take from the Punjab the Rawal Pindi and Multan divisions (excluding Lyallpur and Montgomery districts)...These overwhelmingly Muslim districts, with a population of seven millions, can either form a separate province, which will give the Muslims another majority province, or be amalgamated with North-West Frontier. This re-arrangement would leave a Punjab of about sixteen millions in which no single community would have an absolute majority and each community would be obliged to conciliate the others.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, Pandit Nanak Chand of the Punjab Hindu Mahasabha supported the demand for the re-demarcation of the Punjab and suggested an impartial boundary commission to draw a line under the Indian Federation.<sup>12</sup> The Gandhi-Irwin Pact<sup>13</sup> on 5 March 1931 enabled Gandhi to join the RTC. The Sikh delegation under Master Tara Singh declared him the Sikh representative as well and gave Seventeen Points which had been initiated by the Central Sikh League.<sup>14</sup> The main points were the redrawing of “the boundaries of the Punjab to give larger representation to the Hindus and Sikhs in addition to reservation of seats for the Sikhs on the basis of joint electorates.”<sup>15</sup>

Kirpal Singh is of the opinion that Sardar Ujjal Singh had raised the idea of re-distribution of the Punjab boundaries in reaction to the suggestion of the Chief Secretary Geoffrey Corbett in the 2<sup>nd</sup> RTC who had sought separation of the Ambala Division minus Simla District from the Punjab and its amalgamation into the United Provinces.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938) had announced in 1930 that the Muslim dominant areas, by separating

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11 Sikh Memorandum presented by Sardar Ujjal Singh at Indian Round Table Conference (Second session) 12 November 1931, file No. 15, Quaid-i-Azam Papers.

12 See details, A Punjabi, *Confederacy of India* (Lahore: Ripon Printing Press, 1939), pp.243-62.

13 According to the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, MK Gandhi was released from jail and represented the Indian National Congress and the Sikh political parties.

14 Kailash Chander Gulati, *The Akalis Past and Present* (New Delhi: Ashajanak Publications, 1974), pp.58, 238.

15 Ram Narayan Kumar and Georg Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle: Origin, Evolution and Present Phase* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1991), p.122; see also *International Journal of Sikh Affairs* 8 (November 1998): p.2. Editorial.

16 Kirpal Singh, *The Partition of the Punjab*, pp.10-11; see also Tahir Kamran, “The Unfolding Crisis in Punjab, March-August 1947: Key Turning Points and British Responses,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 14 (Fall 2007), pp.187-210.

Ambala Division from Punjab, could be converted into a Muslim state.<sup>17</sup> The Sikh intelligentsia resented it. To Uma Kaura, his perception to achieve a Muslim state in the northwest of India upset the Hindu Mahasabha circles. They provoked the Sikhs to demand the re-distribution of the areas of the Punjab which complicated the political situation. They also insisted on granting of similar rights to the Sikhs as given to the Muslim minority in the non-Muslim majority provinces.<sup>18</sup> To Satya M. Rai, Allama Muhammad Iqbal's design of the Muslim state alarmed Sikhs because it could result in the division of the Sikh community. A Sikh delegation placed demands, signed by 64 Sikh leaders, before the Viceroy which sought 30 per cent representation and partition of the Punjab by merging the Muslim majority areas into the NWFP,<sup>19</sup> (recently renamed Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa).

The Sikhs remained busy in internal feuds which kept them busy in running after the petty benefits. Therefore, no solid proposal came to light as an alternative to the re-demarcation of the Punjab. They seemed least interested in furthering this point as a political creed. On the other hand, the Muslims chalked out a well-planned demand for a separate Muslim state. In the late 1930s, the Sikhs started launching a campaign against the idea of Pakistan,<sup>20</sup> which was getting roots even before the passage of the Lahore Resolution of 1940.<sup>21</sup> The Sikhs protested against the League's idea of Pakistan in February 1940.<sup>22</sup> The most important

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17 Presidential Address of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal on 29 December 1930, Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, ed., *Foundations of Pakistan, All-India Muslim League Documents: 1906-1947* (Karachi: National Publishing House Ltd., 1970), p.159.

18 Uma Kaura, *Muslims and Indian Nationalism: The Emergence of the Demand for India's Partition, 1928-40* (Lahore: Book Traders, n.d.), p.63.

19 Satya M. Rai, *Legislative Politics and Freedom Struggle on the Punjab, 1897-1947* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1984), pp.179-80.

20 Joseph T. O'Connell, et al., ed., *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for Sikh South Asian Studies, 1988), p.325.

21 Sir Zafarullah Khan also used 'Pakistan' in his scheme presented to the Viceroy on 6 March 1940, MSS. EUR. F 125/135.

22 The All India Akali Conference was held at Attari (15 miles from Lahore) on 10-11 February 1940 in which the Akali Sikhs from all parts of India participated. Isher Singh Majhail, Professor Ganga Singh, Santokh Singh, Sant Singh, MLA, and Partap Singh, MLA condemned the idea of a separate Muslim state. Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, Punjab (1940), File No. S-408, Para 73.

proposal pressed by the Akalis was the Azad Punjab Scheme, an idea of balanced population given by Giani Kartar Singh<sup>23</sup> which faced severe opposition from other factions. Glancy, the Governor, in his fortnightly report of December 1942 pointed out that the Akali Sikhs were not active in propagating the “Azad Punjab” scheme. The Hindu Mahasabha clarified their position and said that they would oppose the Azad Punjab because they had already stood against the Muslims’ separatist movement of Pakistan. The Sikh community could not show unanimity for the scheme. Master Tara Singh along with other leaders toured the western parts of the Punjab but could not move the people in favour of the Azad Punjab. He only secured a little support from the central Punjab. The All-India Sikh Youth Conference held at Lahore sided with this scheme, but sought an amendment. They were of the opinion that to further it the scheme should be approved by two-third of the Sikh community. The Central Akali Dal and Namdhari leaders also opposed the Azad Punjab Scheme. The Akalis decided to hold a conference at Bhiwanigarh in Patiala State to motivate the community to follow them but the task to secure support seemed unexpectedly very difficult.<sup>24</sup> The main reason for this opposition was to maintain the nationalist character which could link them to the Hindus or Congress. Ostensibly, the Sikhs being in minority needed the Hindu support to dilute the Muslim domination in the Punjab which convinced them to remain cohesive to the Hindu idealism.

Though the Akali Sikhs faced harsh criticism on the Azad Punjab Scheme but they did not abandon the idea of a partition of the Punjab and pursued it constantly without using the term ‘Azad Punjab’. Master Tara Singh stated very carefully on the Akali agenda that the Sikhs were not keen to have Khalistan if the Muslims showed the same zeal in case of Pakistan scheme.<sup>25</sup> However, the Sikh leaders of other parties kept on voicing demands for a Sikh state. In 1942, Sardar Kirpal Singh Majithia said that the Sikh community wanted to restore the Sikh rule in the

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23 Harbans Singh, *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* Vol.I, 4th ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2002), p.228.

24 Fortnightly Report of the Punjab Governor, L/PJ/5/246.

25 Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, (Punjab) File No. S-408, Para 266.

region. The meeting of the Working Committee of the Central Akali Dal was held in Amritsar on 2 April 1942 in which the party backed out from the core manifesto of the united India and favoured the partition of the Punjab. Baba Kharak Singh rejected the Cripps proposals and asserted that India would face an immediate split in the near future therefore the Sikhs should demand a separate state extending from River Jhelum to River Sutlej in case of the division.<sup>26</sup> According to the police report, the Sikh leaders seemed uncertain about how to block the Pakistan scheme. Though they had been demanding separate state nevertheless they also doubted whether Khalistan would be the best alternative or not. On the other hand, the Khalsa Youth League propagated for Khalistan.<sup>27</sup> On 2 May 1942, at Amritsar, Master Ajit Singh pledged to take Khalistan by force. In the Working Committee meeting of the Central Akali Dal at Lahore, Bakhshish Singh, editor of *Khalsa*, asked for starting a movement to attain Khalistan.<sup>28</sup> The police report said that Master Tara Singh also discussed the issue of partition and Sikh rule in the non-Muslim minority areas with Vir Savarkar, the Mahasabha leader.<sup>29</sup> The police reports reveal that after the Sikandar-Baldev Pact (15 June 1942), the Akalis demanded the Azad Punjab.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the accommodating attitude of the Unionist government towards the Sikh rights motivated them to go further with their demands. The Akali Conference was organised in Kot Moman (District Shahpur) on 2-3 October 1942 in which Dalip Singh of Sargodha opposed the Pakistan scheme and tried to clarify that the Sikhs desired no Khalistan. Giani Sher Singh approved the Sikandar-Baldev Singh Pact and demanded re-demarcation of the Punjab in which no community would constitute an utter majority.<sup>31</sup> Sardar Baldev Singh said that he would prefer slavery of British to the partition. Giani Sher Singh elucidated that in case of the success of the Muslim League, they would create Khalistan in the Punjab. In

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26 *Ibid.*, File No. S-410, Para 162.

27 *Ibid.*, Para 183.

28 *Ibid.*, Para 206.

29 *Ibid.*, Para 295.

30 *Ibid.*, Para 452.

31 *Ibid.*, Para 473.

November 1942, a Gurmukhi poster was displayed with the signature of Bhagwan Singh in which the “revision of provincial boundaries” of the Punjab was demanded. Sardar Kartar Singh, an Advocate from Patiala, and Professor Ganga Singh emphasized the need for re-demarcation of the provincial boundaries to achieve the Sikh rule.<sup>32</sup> The crisis in the Sikh leadership remained an outstanding feature of the time. The lack of vision and disunity was profoundly affecting the Sikh strategy. According to an Intelligence Report, Master Tara Singh refrained from any personal negotiations with Jinnah<sup>33</sup> whereas it was clear that nothing could be done without mutual negotiations on the conflicting issues. As a matter of fact, Master Tara Singh lacked solid arguments on which he could face Jinnah, a staunch constitutionalist. Disunity devastatingly gripped the Sikhs and their leaders could be distracted by trivialities. Sant Singh, MLA resigned from the All Parties Sikh Conference in 1942 just because his name was not included among the Sikhs who were proposed to meet the Cripps Mission.<sup>34</sup> Nothing clearly was included regarding Azad Punjab Scheme in the Cripps Proposals nevertheless the Sikhs asked for the similar arrangements. After the Cripps Proposals, a letter by a Sikh was sent to Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah suggesting solution to the Sikh question. The writer explained that Sikhs had been nobody in their own homeland before 1920s, but they got prestige not on numerical basis but on the military strength in the shape of the Shiromani Akali Dal. The solution to the Muslim-Sikh problem was that a new state be created for the Sikhs where all the communities should have balanced population. Otherwise, Pakistan was a matter of life and death for the Sikh community.<sup>35</sup> The Cripps Proposals produced nothing concrete in favour of the Sikhs. On 31 March 1942, the SGPC presented a memorandum to Cripps in which, as usual, they asked for the re-demarcation of the Punjab boundaries from the river Ravi to Delhi. The language and points of the memorandum were mostly the same as those presented in the RTC by the Sikh

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32 *Ibid.*, Para 529.

33 *Ibid.*, Para 517.

34 *Ibid.*, Para 174.

35“ The Sikh Problem,” file No. 930, *QAP*.

representatives. The memorandum evaluated their services towards the British Empire and their past political status in the Punjab. They also expressed their resentment on the points of Cripps Proposals which undermined the Indian integrity and the Sikh position. In the memorandum, they presented facts and figures about the communal proportion in different areas of the Punjab. They maintained that originally Jhang and Multan districts and trans-Jhelum areas were not a part of the proper Punjab. They demanded not to include these areas into the Punjab.<sup>36</sup> All this did not move Cripps from his understanding who believed that the Sikh scattered position was a setback to them and they either should bargain with the Hindus or the Muslims to secure maximum concessions.<sup>37</sup>

The third All-India Akali Conference at Vahila Kalan (Lyallpur District) was held on 26-27 September 1942 and presided over by Master Tara Singh. The main resolutions passed by a 15,000 Akali gathering were that the Sikhs would support the Congress for the Indian Independence and the provisional cabinet at the Centre. The Akali leader said that the effort to establish the Muslim domination in the Punjab would only result in a foreign rule. He went on condemning the Pakistan scheme and asserted that trust in the British was necessary, however the Sikhs would support any agreement by which the civil administration would be given to the Indians immediately. He insisted that the British should quit India at once without any condition. Giani Sher Singh supported the partition of the Punjab into two portions so that a Sikh majority could be achieved.<sup>38</sup> The points raised by Tara Singh in this speech were not clear as usual except the support for the Congress and National Independence. The foreign rule to which Master Tara Singh hinted in his speech could be the Japanese because before this he had made it clear that the Sikhs would prefer the Japanese rule to the Muslim domination in the Punjab. Therefore, this speech was a threat to the British authorities that if they acceded to the demand for Pakistan, the Sikhs might join the

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36 Kirpal Singh, *The Partition of the Punjab*, pp.15-16.

37 Henry Hayes, ed., *The Sikh Question in India* (London: Helms Publishing, n.d.), pp.7-9.

38 Fortnightly Report, (Punjab) September, 1942, L/PJ/5/245.

anti-British forces. In this Conference, they further pressed for the partition of Punjab. The Governor reported to the Viceroy that in the subsequent Akali meetings “fresh emphasis on the need to counter pro-Japanese tendencies” was laid. They beset a plan to the re-demarcation of the Punjab to achieve a balanced proportion.<sup>39</sup> The Akali leaders started testing political reaction to the re-arrangement of the provincial boundaries synonymous to the ‘Azad Punjab Scheme’. The immediate reaction of the Hindu press was very hostile and the *Vir Bharat* declared Master Tara Singh as Jinnah. Master Tara Singh explained through a press statement that the Akali plan did not desire to form Khalistan outside the federation. The report found Jinnah “willing to consider it favourably.”<sup>40</sup> During the first half of December 1942, Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh tried to convince the Sikhs to support the Azad Punjab Scheme. They got some support from their co-religionists but could not secure either the Muslim or the Hindu support. However, the Akali leadership seemed convinced to continue the traditional policy of opposition to the Pakistan scheme. The leaders also attacked the Unionist government<sup>41</sup> and pledged that the Sikhs would never accept the majority rule of the Muslims. They also claimed that the Unionists were violating the Sikander-Baldev Singh Pact, therefore the Unionist regime was tantamount to Pakistan. They also complained that the recent visit to the province by Jinnah had accelerated communalism in the Punjab.<sup>42</sup> The Sikh politics exhibited nothing new, rather the leadership continued anti-Pakistan campaign with violent statements. They repeated their demands such as Azad Punjab or Khalistan while the other pro-Congress Sikh groups opposed the same.

The Akalis under the internal and external pressures finally concluded that the re-distribution of the Punjab boundaries

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39 *Ibid.*, October, 1942, L/PJ/5/245.

40 *Ibid.*

41 The Unionist Party was founded by Sir Fazl-i-Husain and Ch. Chhotu Ram in 1923 to protect the interests of the agricultural or landed class of the British Punjab. These loyalists belonged to all the communities including Muslim, Sikh and Hindu. They remained in power until the final breakdown of the British Raj in August 1947.

42 *Ibid.*, December 1942, L/PJ/5/245.

envisaged in the Sikh memorandum in the RTC might be the best solution to the existing deadlock. The Azad Punjab Conference was held at Amritsar on 28 February 1943 which consoled the Sikhs, as eight thousand persons from the Central Punjab attended this pro-Azad Punjab gathering.<sup>43</sup> This convinced the Akalis to continue the efforts to popularise the scheme.

The Azad Punjab Scheme sought areas up to the river Chenab as Azad Punjab. Jaspreet Walia opines that Master Tara Singh did not claim areas next to the Chenab River because areas beyond this river had “cultural affinity” to the Frontier. She concludes that Pothohar and Pakhtoon cultures were similar, therefore the Muslim majority areas were asked to be merged into the NWFP.<sup>44</sup> In fact, both the areas have entirely different cultures.<sup>45</sup>

The Hindu concern over the Azad Punjab Scheme was evident which was weakening the position of the Shiromani Akali Dal. The All-India Shiromani Akali Dal Conference was held at Bhiwanigarh (Bhowanigarh) in the Patiala State on 14-15 March 1943. Master Tara Singh presided over the fourth annual session of the Conference and the speakers sought enthusiastic support from the audiences for the Azad Punjab Scheme.<sup>46</sup> According to Mitra, Master Tara Singh briefed the participants about the Azad Punjab and said that this achievement would enable the Sikhs and Hindus to get rid of the Muslim domination and Pakistan. He further explained that collectively they would become 40 per cent (15% Sikhs and 25% Hindus) without the Hindu Jats and Achhuts who were inclined to the Muslims for their personal benefits. The Azad Punjab would force the Indian Jats to change their attitude because

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43 FR, March, 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

44 Jaspreet Walia, “Master Tara Singh and Sikh Politics, 1920-47” (Ph.D. diss., Guru Nanak Dev University, 2005), p.210. The researcher has asserted cultural affinity between the Pakhtoon and Pothohari cultures without any example like that of language, dress, customs or traditions. As a matter of fact, there is nothing common between the two cultures in many domains of life.

45 Feroz Khan Noon presented resolution in 1922 in the Punjab Legislative Council against the re-amalgamation of NWFP with the Punjab and argued that language, habits, geography, customs and way of life marked the people entirely different from the Punjabis. Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, “Redefining Constitutional Politics: the N-WFP and the Raj, 1901-1932,” *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vols. XXI & XXII, Special Number (1999-2000): 118 (115-137).

46 FR, March 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

they had natural inclination to the non-Muslims. Master Tara Singh also bragged that this scheme could not be disadvantageous to the Hindus.<sup>47</sup> His standpoint in favour of the Hindus was profoundly true because the Azad Punjab Scheme had less benefit for Sikhs but it could surely benefit the Hindus. It could enable the Hindus to establish a permanent domination over the Sikhs who could hardly challenge their position in the new arrangements. But even then the real scenario of the politics of the day was the nationalist and communalist trends which maintained the Hindu opposition to all the partitioning schemes.

On 23 April 1943 an Akali meeting was held in Amritsar wherein the Sikh speakers decided to announce a board to investigate and suggest measures relating to the grievances of the Sikh officials working in the different government departments including District Boards and Municipalities. The next day, the eligibility for voting in the Gurdwara elections was unanimously decided that a Sikh who did not drink, smoke and eat *Halal* meat could cast the vote. The speakers also resolved in favour of the Azad Punjab Scheme. Giani Kartar Singh left for Delhi to negotiate with Jinnah on the Azad Punjab Scheme.<sup>48</sup> The Police report reveals that the Giani could not get complete willingness from the League leader.<sup>49</sup> The report gives further information of the meeting that Giani Kartar Singh was quite optimistic in getting the approval of the Azad Punjab Scheme as a Hindu group under Seth Jugal Kishore Birla, Raja Gopalachari and K. M. Munshi had conceded the scheme. He also informed that Gandhi showed his willingness to accept the agreement concluded between Shyama Prasad Mukerji, Master Tara Singh and the League. Giani Kartar was pleased that he had an opportunity to get approval for the Azad Punjab Scheme.<sup>50</sup> He went on to secure benefits for the Sikhs and held negotiations with Jinnah in Bombay. The Police report says that Jinnah remarked 'if the Sikhs agreed to accept Pakistan, the Muslims would accept Azad Punjab'. Both the Schemes could

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47 H. N. Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I (1943) (New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1990), pp.294-95.

48 FR, April, 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

49 Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, 1943, File No. 411, Para, 171.

50 *Ibid.*, Para. 178.

be more fascinating if the populations were exchanged. Giani Kartar Singh promised Jinnah that he would try to obtain support for Pakistan if the League would support the Azad Punjab publicly. The Giani group continued to seek a way out to secure Muslim-Sikh harmony but the anti-Pakistan Conferences of the Akalis overturned the situation.<sup>51</sup> According to the Police reports, Giani Kartar Singh also assured Jinnah for the support in the Punjab Assembly if the League succeeded in forming the ministry in the Punjab.<sup>52</sup> No doubt, such assurances of the Sikh leaders convinced the League leadership that a Muslim-Sikh patch-up was not beyond the realms of possibility. The Giani group's keenness in the pact with the League was a gimmick to secure more and more Sikh benefits from the Muslim governments whether it was a Unionist or a League government.

A meeting of the Akali Dal Committee was held at Amritsar on 4-5 June 1943. In his presidential address, Master Tara Singh fixed the boundaries of the Azad Punjab which included Ambala, Jullundur and Lahore divisions, the Lyallpur and Montgomery districts, and a portion of Multan.<sup>53</sup> The next day, the Working Committee issued a statement in which they postponed the boundary issue and declared that it would be decided later by a free and unbiased commission. Afterwards, they advocated for the same boundaries which had been fixed on the 4 June.<sup>54</sup>

Baba Kharak Singh in Roomi<sup>55</sup> addressed an Akhand Hindustan Conference on 19-20 June 1943 and rejected the Azad Punjab Scheme considering it the vivisection of India by Master Tara Singh and Jinnah group.<sup>56</sup> In June 1943, addressing the Anti-Pakistan Conference at Lahore, Baba Kharak Singh pledged that the Sikhs would fight Jinnah and Master Tara Singh if they dared

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51 *Ibid.*, Para. 456.

52 *Ibid.*, Para. 471.

53 *CMG*, 6 June 1943.

54 Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I (1943), p.298.

55 A place in Ludhiana district.

56 Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I (1943), pp.298-99.

to cut India into pieces because Azad Punjab and Pakistan were a synonym to each other.<sup>57</sup>

The Akalis remained critical of the Unionist government as usual and asserted that the coalition ministry could not protect the Sikh rights:

It is true that S. Baldev Singh's ministership cannot protect us from all the *zulum* of the Muslim members, influential persons and officials whose heads have been turned by this intoxicating powers...I demand Azad Punjab.<sup>58</sup>

The Akali Conference was held at Udhowali district Gurdaspur on 18-19 September 1943 in which Jathedar Teja Singh repudiated the Sikh representation in the Punjab and demanded joint electorates. He also supported the Azad Punjab Scheme. In another Akali Conference held at Dhaniwala, district Montgomery, Sardar Sampuran Singh, MLA, Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and Giani Sher Singh repeated the demand for re-demarcation of the Punjab boundaries. The speakers of different conferences held at Durbar Sahib Kartarpur, Bains Tani (district Hoshiarpur), Nankana Sahib and Pakpattan condemned the Pakistan idea and demanded the Azad Punjab.<sup>59</sup>

### **Anti-Azad Punjab Sikhs**

Azad Punjab Scheme presented by Master Tara Singh was considered as protection of the political status of the Sikhs. It was thought to be the only way-out which could save the economic and political future of Sikhs as an honourable community in the Punjab. He also suggested that the Muslim majority districts should be attached to the NWFP. According to the resolution passed by the All India Sikh Youth Conference held at Lahore on 30-31 January 1943, a referendum of the Punjabis on the Azad Punjab Scheme was suggested. Baba Kharak Singh, a pro-Congress leader, in his presidential address to All-India Akhand Hindustan Conference at Lahore on 6 June 1943, condemned the League and the Akali Sikhs who had joined hands with the League in the NWFP government. He also pointed out that the demand for

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57 *The Civil and Military Gazette*, 8 June 1943.

58 *Ibid.*, p.301.

59 Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, 1943, File No. 411, Para No. 397 and 407.

Azad Punjab had justified the Pakistan scheme. The Sikhs, he asserted, would block the anti-nationalist activities of Jinnah and Master Tara Singh with tremendous power.<sup>60</sup> It was the Sikh community who had attacked the Muslims from every side while the League leadership was expecting a policy based on an open mindedness from the Sikhs as Professor Hassan Suhrawardy wrote in 1943 that 'they will show the characteristic clear thinking and broad-mindedness of brave people.'<sup>61</sup> But the Sikhs did not demonstrate geniality towards the Muslims. On the other hand, the Akalis went on voicing demands in favour of the Azad Punjab Scheme although there was little hope of the Hindu support. The *Partap* wrote that the Azad Punjab Scheme should be shelved because both the Hindus and the Sikhs had rejected it.<sup>62</sup>

Very furious opposition came from the Sikhs of the northern Punjab districts like Rawalpindi, Attock, Jhelum which were not declared as a part of the proposed Sikh province. Actually, the Sikh community was residing in different corners of the Punjab which had weakened their integrity. The inability to come up with a united political response to the constitutional situation unfolding as a result of the British departure and the growing support for the Pakistan demand had paralysed them. It was not only the personality traits of these leaders but the unfavourable circumstances also undermined the Sikh response. Nevertheless, in April 1943, Master Tara Singh showed willingness to include districts of Rawalpindi, Jhelum and Attock which placated the Sikhs of the region.<sup>63</sup> Practically, the Akali leadership took no solid step in this regard and the Sikhs of these areas kept on crying against the Akalis. The assurance to include Jhelum, Attock and Rawalpindi was not feasible and there was no possibility of the Muslim acceptance to surrender these areas. Master Tara Singh's promise seems to be a political gimmick to get rid of the severe opposition from his followers. In the Punjab Provincial Hindu Conference held at Lyallpur on 30 April 1943, Dr. Mukherji

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60 Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, vol. 1 (1943), pp.205-07.

61 Professor Hassan Suhrawardy, "The Indian Crisis: Muslim View Point," *Asiatic Society* 39 (January 1943), p.56.

62 FR, March, 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

63 Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence, 1943, Para. 159.

advised the Hindus and Sikhs to be united against the common foe, the claimants of Pakistan which would be detrimental economically and politically for the solidarity of India. Through a resolution, the Azad Punjab Scheme by Sikhs was disapproved.<sup>64</sup>

The Sikh leaders from Pothohar area, a very sensitive region regarding communalism, played no constructive role in bringing the Muslims and Sikhs closer. All the seven members of the Rawalpindi district were expelled from the Akali Dal due to their opposition to the Azad Punjab Scheme. The Lyallpur Akali Dal branch was also suspended on the charge of working against the parent party.<sup>65</sup> Master Tara Singh in his book refers to this reality and writes that the Sikh leaders of Rawalpindi who had opposed "Azad Punjab" had been his supporters. But they launched a campaign against the scheme when they were deprived of the Presidentship of Gurdwara Panja Sahib. These Sikhs later tried to contact him through Giani Kartar Singh and offered that they would work for the Azad Punjab Scheme if the Presidentship was restored.<sup>66</sup>

In the Shiromani Akali Dal Conference at Nankana in November 1943, Harcharn Singh Bajwa condemned the Azad Punjab Scheme. In the same conference, Master Tara Singh evaluated the Azad Punjab Scheme and fully supported the drive for the Sikh rights.<sup>67</sup> Bajwa, a Sikh activist, organised anti-Azad Punjab Conferences and awakened the Sikhs against the Akali politics. During the Akhand Hindustan Conference held at Rawalpindi on 4-5 December, the speakers snubbed the Akali role in advancing the League agenda of Pakistan. The NWFP Congress leaders delivered objectionable speeches and many speakers accused the Akali leadership of furthering the British policy of divide and rule.<sup>68</sup>

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64 Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol.1 (1943), pp.271-73.

65 CMG, 6 June 1943.

66 Jaswant Singh, *Master Tara Singh: Jeevan Sangharsh tey Udaish* (Gurmukhi) (Amritsar: 1972), 193; also see Gurmit Singh, *Failures of Akali Leadership* (Sirsa: Usha Institute of Religious Studies, 1981), p.47.

67 *Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence*, 1943, File No. 411, Para, 484.

68 FR December, 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

Rawalpindi's Sikhs continued opposition to the Azad Punjab Scheme and opened a branch of the Central Sikh League. In reaction to this, the Akalis decided to hold a conference in Panja Sahib, District Attock on 14 August 1943. The Akali leadership ordered the armed Akalis to be active during this conference to maintain order.<sup>69</sup> On 16 August 1943, the Anti-Azad Punjab Conference was held at Panja Sahib District Attock which Baba Kharak Singh presided over.<sup>70</sup> Kharak Singh expressed his anger over the Azad Punjab and Pakistan scheme and declared Master Tara Singh and Jinnah as agents of the British government. He repeated the unequivocal faith of the Sikhs in a United India and said that the Azad Punjab Scheme was launched to weaken the central government of India.<sup>71</sup> A pro-Azad Punjab Conference, the Attock Akali Conference, was held the same day (16 August) at the Bardari Gurdwara which Sardar Haram Singh, an Advocate from Lahore, chaired. Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh MLA, Giani Sher Singh, Principal Ganga Singh reiterated their full support in favour of the Azad Punjab Scheme. Ganga Singh made a tirade against the Hindus particularly the Arya Samajists and the Hindu press. The resolution also expressed deep concern over the food situation in the country and demanded formation of a national government.<sup>72</sup>

Harbans Singh Sestani and Amar Singh, editor of *Sher-i-Punjab*, in the Akhand Hindustan Conference held at Chakwal (district Jhelum)<sup>73</sup> on 14-15 September 1943, rejected the Azad Punjab Scheme.<sup>74</sup> According to Intelligence Reports, in the Azad Punjab Conference on 14-15 August, Master Tara Singh and Giani Sher Singh spoke for the establishment of a Sikh province, whereas the same day, at the same place Baba Kharak Singh

69 *Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence*, 1943, File No. 411, Para, 320.

70 Sardar Sant Singh, MLA (Central), Amar Singh of *Sher-i-Punjab* (a magazine), Harbans Singh Sestani, Labh Singh Narang, Maher Singh Chakwal, Durlabh Singh, Secretary, Progressive Akali Party, and Bakshi Rachpal Singh Advocate, Rawalpindi, Chairman Reception Committee also participated. Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. II (1943), p.300.

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

73 Chakwal, an independent district now.

74 *Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence*, 1943, File No. 411, Para, 389.

arranged an Anti-Azad Punjab Conference which threatened the peace as many Sikhs came with axes but the proceedings concluded peacefully.<sup>75</sup> The commitment with the Azad Punjab Scheme was resented by the Jullundur chapter of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Under Babu Labh Singh's leadership, it challenged Master Tara Singh and threatened that many Sikh leaders from Amritsar, Lahore, Sheikhpura, Ferozepore and Ambala would resign from the party if the Akalis tried to abandon their nationalistic character. Master Tara Singh was quite perturbed by this incident.<sup>76</sup> In an Akali meeting on 27 August 1943, Babu Labh Singh had a clash with Giani Kartar Singh but he himself had to walk out when the Giani vociferated that they would do anything to conclude an agreement with the British, the Congress or even the League to achieve the Azad Punjab. On 5-6 September 1943, Master Tara Singh, in the Akali Conference at Thatian Mahatan (Amritsar District) expressed the importance of Azad Punjab and condemned the Pakistan scheme. He also evaluated that the Hindus had achieved much benefit because of the Sikander-Baldev Singh Pact.<sup>77</sup>

The Akali Conference at Lahore Minto Park passed a resolution in favour of Azad Punjab on 7 July 1943 (Jor Mela, the day of assassination of Guru Arjun Dev). It was presided over by Giani Sher Singh who supported the Azad Punjab Scheme while the Akhand Hindustan Conference rejected the Azad Punjab and Pakistan schemes. The same day, in a latter conference, the Sikhs demanded resignation from Sardar Baldev Singh and expressed dissatisfaction over the Unionist-Akali Pact. The Akalis passed three resolutions within three minutes but no speech was made to explain the background of these resolutions. Master Tara Singh maintained that the Sikhs had only a minor difference with Hindus whereas a vast political gulf existed between them and Muslims who desired a permanent rule over the Sikhs. He further said that the only solution to the political deadlock was the establishment of Khalsa Raj.<sup>78</sup> Actually, the Sikh leader meant by the term 'Khalsa

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75 *Ibid.*, Para, 332.

76 *Ibid.*

77 *Ibid.*, Para, 365.

78 Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I (1943), pp.296-97.

Raj' a sovereign Sikh state which was against the spirit of the Azad Punjab Scheme. In fact, the Akali leadership had no firm and clear vision about the demand for the Azad Punjab. This is evident from the fact that in the Chauthi Sarb Hind Akali Conference in October 1944, Master Tara Singh consented to abandon his Azad Punjab drive if the Sikhs demanded a Sikh state instead of his own scheme.<sup>79</sup>

### **Muslim Reaction to the Azad Punjab Scheme**

The Muslim League opposed the plans of all the anti-League political groups in the Punjab. On 28-29 August 1943, a League meeting was held in Chak No. 258/G.B. Lyallpur District and Maulvi Jamal Mian (from Firangi Mahal Lucknow) presided. The resolutions passed by the meeting laid stress on the replacement of the Unionist Ministry with the League Coalition Ministry. They also condemned Chhotu Ram's activities in the Punjab and requested the Muslim Jats to stay away from the Jat Mahasabha.<sup>80</sup> The resolution also demanded of the government to ban the publication and sale of Qur'an by the non-Muslims.<sup>81</sup> Chhotu Ram spoke to the Jat Mahasabha at Lyallpur and admitted that religion provided foundation to organise people for the political rights. He advised that the Jats could join any political organisation in their individual capacity either to achieve Azad Punjab, United Punjab, Pakistan or United India but political ideals of the Jat Mahasabha did not allow its followers to be a part of such politics.<sup>82</sup> Chhotu Ram's exhortation to the followers signified the depressing condition of the Unionist leadership which had not been able to work out a way to get rid of the rising popularity of the League and the Shiromani Akali Dal whose ideals had been embedded in the minds of the masses. His contradiction regarding the Jat Mahasabha was entirely directionless and lacked a solid solution to the communal problem of the day. The Azad Punjab Scheme attracted the attention of the Muslim circles but as a matter of fact,

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79 Jaspreet Walia, "Master Tara Singh and Sikh Politics," p.152.

80 Jat Mahasabha was a sincere attempt of Chhotu Ram to save the people of Punjab from the religious influence which had prevailed at that time.

81 *Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence*, Punjab, 1943, File No. 411, Para. 366.

82 Letter from Rafi Butt to Jinnah on 11 April 1944, Punjab IV, Shamsul Hasan Collection.

the Sikh claim had numerous drawbacks. They were claiming the areas overwhelmingly populated by the Hindus and the Muslims while the Sikhs possessed very meagre percentage in all the Districts of Ambala and Jullundur Divisions:

City	Hindus	Muslims	Sikhs
Hissar	64.8	28.33	6
Rohtak	81.6	17.22	0.15
Gurgaon	76.42	23.40	0.7
Karnal	66.93	30.58	2
Simla	76.38	18.20	2.67
Ambala	48.41	31.64	18.44
Kharar Tehsil	36.9	22	39
Ropar Tehsil	23.3	37.7	41.1

Source: "Akalis' Azad Punjab Scheme," Editorial, *The Eastern Time*, 27 October 1944.

The central districts had a better proportion of the Sikh percentage but still the Muslims were more in number than the Sikhs:

City	Hindus	Muslims	Sikhs
Amritsar	15.35	46.5	36.14
Ferozepore	19.6	45.08	33.68
Moga Tehsil	11	24	65
Ludhiana	20.36	36.92	41.69
Ludhiana Tehsil	21.8	39.3	38.3
Jullundur	17.6	45.17	26.4
Hoshiarpur	40.0	36.6	16.9
Kangra	94.1	5.09	.5

Source: "Akalis' Azad Punjab Scheme," Editorial, *The Eastern Time*, 27 October 1944.

The government of a minority over the majority communities was impossible, therefore the Azad Punjab Scheme could not expect Muslim sympathy. The pro-League paper, *The Eastern Times*, pointed out that because of the population weightings, even if Azad Punjab came into being, the Sikhs would have to depend on the Hindus. Though the Sikhs were closer to the Hindus yet they should not forget Guru Nanak Dev's teachings.<sup>83</sup> This

83 "Akalis' Azad Punjab Scheme," Editorial, *The Eastern Time*, 27 October 1944.

reminder shows that the Muslim opinion looked for a basis for rapprochement based on the message of love and fraternity propounded by the founder of the Sikh religion.

### **Anti-Tara Singh Campaign**

The Sikh opposition to the Azad Punjab idea gained strength to such an extent that forty eminent local Akalis in Amritsar held a meeting in which a series of resolutions were passed criticising Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and Giani Sher Singh. They opposed the Sikander-Baldev Singh Pact and demanded that Tara Singh be replaced as the Akali leader. Baba Kharak Singh in an Akhand Hindustan Conference arranged at Lahore also condemned the Azad Punjab Scheme. The Governor's Report analyses that while there was a meagre opposition against Master Tara Singh in the Akali Dal, he was sufficiently perturbed to start pressing the government to implement the Unionist-Akali agreement particularly with reference to the use of jhatka meat in the Government institutions, hoping that such a measure would deflect criticism from his leadership.<sup>84</sup>

The Sikh-Hindu relations experienced a number of ups and downs not just because of the political issues surrounding the Azad Punjab Scheme, but also because of the long held view of Hindu communal organisations such as the Arya Samaj that Sikhism was not a separate faith, but was part of Hinduism. The Executive Committee of the SGPC in May 1943 passed a resolution that the Sikhs were not Hindus and the defiant Sikhs who followed the Hindu slogan could not be the true Sikh representatives. It also condemned the Sikhs who had participated in the Punjab Hindu Conference of Lyallpur. Responding to this, Sardar Sant Singh argued that Master Tara Singh himself had participated in many Hindu Mahasabha conferences and invited Hindu leaders to the Akali conferences. Therefore, he had no reason to question his participation in the Hindu Sabha Conference.<sup>85</sup> Sardar Sant Singh accused that Azad Punjab Scheme was in fact initiated by Mr. Amery (the Secretary of State for India 1940-45). Master Tara Singh responded that this scheme was first introduced at the Delhi

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84 FR 246, June 1943.

85 *The Eastern Times*, 10 June 1943.

residence of Sardar Sant Singh in 1931 when the Sikhs from all schools of thought gathered to formulate demands 'to be presented to Gandhi on the occasion of Gandhi-Irwin Pact.'<sup>86</sup> In an editorial of the *Eastern Times*, it was admitted that Sikhs had developed separate identity during the last few decades. Therefore, they were a separate community from the Hindus but Hindus still considered them as co-religionists. This situation emerged due to the unquestioned allegiance of the Sikhs to the Hindu leaders. The paper wrote that some Sikhs actually had been victim of the Indian nationalism as some Muslims also claimed to be nationalists:

...the Sikhs have usually played the second fiddle in the Hindu orchestra become easy victims of Hindu exploitation and let themselves be made tools of Hindu Communal politics, the same as the aforesaid Muslims let themselves be exploited by the Hindus. This exploitation of the Sikhs by the Hindus is likely to continue until the Sikhs do develop a strong Sikh consciousness.<sup>87</sup>

The paper had already commented that the Hindus were using the Sikhs in Punjab for their own political interests. Sikhs could only resist this by asserting a separate communal identity.<sup>88</sup> The Hindu Mahasabha had launched a strong campaign against the prospect of Akalis' cooperation with the League by maintaining its traditional stance that the Sikhs were Hindus. This propaganda was abandoned and neutrality was ensured towards the Azad Punjab Scheme in return for withdrawal of the Akali Ministers from the Punjab and NWFP Provincial governments. In return, Master Tara Singh consented to resist any possibility of formation of a League Ministry in the Punjab and progress of the Pakistan Movement on the Assembly floor in the NWFP. Both issued a press statement in which the Sikhs were advised to strengthen the Sikh-Hindu unity to plan better against the Pakistan scheme. Master Tara Singh was of the opinion that the Azad Punjab Scheme presented the best solution to the current communal deadlock.<sup>89</sup>

The Akali leadership as a result of this agreement got relief from the Hindu propaganda. Now they could focus on the

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86 CMG 11 June 1943.

87 Editorial, "Are the Sikhs Hindus?" *The Eastern Times*, 19 June 1943.

88 *The Eastern Times*, 15 May 1943.

89 FR July, 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

important issues pertaining to the Sikh-Muslim question in the region. Nevertheless, the Azad Punjab Scheme and handling of the political affairs by the Akali leadership continued to cause dissension within Sikh circles. Though the supremacy of Master Tara Singh was not challenged but the cooperation with the Muslims and particularly the League created doubts in the Sikh minds. His Azad Punjab Scheme was the main issue between the Jats and non-Jats. Both the rival groups held conferences in the Campbellpur District (August 1943) which were likely to lead to a clash. The Sikhs living in the Muslim majority areas seemed averse to the Azad Punjab idea. According to them, they were being pushed permanently under the Muslim domination at the cost of the advantages of the Sikhs of the Central and Eastern Punjab. Master Tara Singh in the personal meetings tried to convince them that the Azad Punjab idea was not 'anti-national.' It resembled the case of NWFP, Sind, Delhi and Orissa and it would safeguard the Sikh interests against Pakistan. But these arguments proved futile and convinced the Akali leadership not to pin their hopes in only the Azad Punjab Scheme. The Akali leaders despite the dissensions remained dominant within the community politics because of their control of the management and hence funding of the Sikh Gurdwaras.<sup>90</sup>

All the opposition narrowed to the leadership of Master Tara Singh. In February 1944, the Governor reported that opportunist policies of the communal Akalis and 'the unpopular Azad Punjab Scheme' caused rupture in the Akali fold and Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh lost the trust of a reasonable number of their followers.<sup>91</sup> Seth Jugal Kishore Birla appealed to the Sikhs for the postponement of the Azad Punjab Scheme till after the war. He was the man who along with KM Munshi of Hindu Mahasabha in Cawnpore on 30 December 1942 had suggested, 'Let the Mohammedans have Pakistan in those portions of the Punjab and Bengal where they are the majority.' He demanded separation of the Hindu and the Sikh majority areas to live their own lives.<sup>92</sup>

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90 *Ibid*, August 1943, L/PJ/5/246.

91 FR, February, 1944, L/PJ/5/247.

92 *CMG*, 27 March 1943.

The Sikhs were perturbed immensely while the Punjabi Hindus adopted the principle of “wait and see” because the Congress and League settlement could change the whole scenario of the national and regional politics. It could increase the number of the dissentient Muslim Unionists as well. As far as the separate Sikh State was concerned, the Hindu opinion was divided. Some considered it an escape from the tyranny of the Muslim domination while some were opposed to the partition of India in any form. By and large, the Hindus were depending on the Sikhs to reject Pakistan for them.<sup>93</sup> The Hindu Mahasabha was opposing the Akali demand of Azad Punjab zealously and advancing the Congress programme but the Akalis were clinging to them. The Sikh leaders gave warnings to the Hindus just to satisfy their followers and posed to be following an independent course in the politics. On the other hand, the Hindu leaders were presenting the Sikhs as Hindus. Disturbed enough by the propaganda, Master Tara Singh gave the last warning to the Hindu leaders who kept on saying that Sikhs were Hindus. In August 1944, the Sikh-Hindu relations remained bitter in the NWFP on the issue of ‘removal of the Granth Sahib from certain Mandirs.’<sup>94</sup>

The Akali Sikhs were attacking Gandhi and Jinnah which made both the Muslims and the Hindus furious. Their demands were a Sikh state or at least Azad Punjab under United India. The idea of a Sikh state was contrary to a United India. Azad Punjab was not acceptable to the other stakeholders and could not make the Sikhs a majority community. They were dependent on Hindus who were otherwise a target of their fury. In this entirely elusive situation, the Sikh leadership was not looking for alternative proposals. Giani Kartar Singh took a sane line to bargain with the Muslims who were a direct party in the Punjab political crisis so that they might obtain maximum package of rights but soon things changed without any serious effort and the Akali politics drifted ‘towards Congress with little opposition from Giani Kartar Singh.’<sup>95</sup> According to Mitra, Sardar Pritam Singh in his opening presidential address demanded a Sikh state on the basis of their

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93 FR, September 1944, L/PJ/5/247.

94 *The Eastern Times*, 9 August 1944.

95 FR, October 1944, L/PJ/5/247.

importance and the land being under the Sikh possession and Master Tara Singh declared the Muslim domination in the Punjab as “Aurangzebi Raj” even without the establishment of Pakistan.<sup>96</sup> Sangat Singh writes that the League had confused the Sikhs to the extent that despite the presence of an Akali Minister in the Punjab Government they were not sparing the allied Unionists.<sup>97</sup>

On 26-27 February, the Akali conference was held in Abohar, District Ferozepore which was attended by Master Tara Singh and Principal Ganga Singh. The speakers condemned the Sikh Communists and supported the Azad Punjab idea. Master Tara Singh said that the idea of partition was not new and Gandhi knew it well since the Round Table Conference. He also assured the anti-Muslim groups that the Sikandar-Baldev Pact was of a temporary nature which would strangle the Pakistan scheme.<sup>98</sup> The Akalis were playing a double game on the Sikh-Unionist question. Master Tara Singh asked the Akali branches of the Punjab to send the lists of cruelties perpetrated against them by the Unionists to Amritsar.<sup>99</sup> Like many issues he, on this very Pact, always showed a confused policy which damaged the Akali image among the other political stakeholders. In his autobiography he writes that Sir Sikandar Hayat never acted as promised in the Pact.<sup>100</sup>

The idea of Azad Punjab was not acceptable either to the Hindus or the Muslims, but even then the Muslims had been supporting the idea of Sikh state, sometimes motivating them to demand their homeland. The League believed in the principle of self-determination, therefore it favoured the Sikh state whereas it knew well that having no majority in any part of the Subcontinent the claim of the Sikhs would not be honoured. The League had not supported the Sikh state as a party on the numerical strength of the

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96 Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. II (1944), pp.218-20. One can observe the huge difference between the original proceedings and the Governor’s report of this conference. The Akali leader vividly castigated the Unionist government along with Pakistan scheme but the Governor euphemised it in his report which indicates his bias towards Sikhs.

97 Sangat Singh, *Sikhs in History*, p.221.

98 *Secret Police Abstract of Intelligence*, 1944, File No. S-412, Para, 103.

99 *Ibid.*, Para, 567.

100 Master Tara Singh, *Meri Yad* (Gurmukhi) (Amritsar: Sikh Religious Book Society, 1945), p.133.

Sikhs particularly in the Central Districts of the Punjab. The League could not commit suicide by supporting the Sikh homeland because such a state could deprive the Muslims of all the fertile areas which would be the sole feeding base for the rest of Pakistan.

In March 1945, Sardar Baldev Singh wrote a foreword of the Sikh memorandum presented to secure Sikh rights and observed that the second part consisted of the Sikh claims presented to the Sapru Conciliation Committee. The memorandum was signed by the Sikhs from all strata of political, public, social and religious life including 18 Members of the Provincial Legislature, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Shiromani Akali Dal, Central Sikh League and Chief Khalsa Diwan. The Sikh homeland was demanded due to the importance of the community who were determined that they would never consent to accept a theocratic Muslim state of Pakistan. They favoured a United India with their rights and privileges.<sup>101</sup> According to the Sikh memorandum, Dr. Shaukat Ullah Ansari analysed that without the central areas of the Punjab where the Sikhs were concentrated, the Pakistani Punjab would comprise barren and desert areas. After secession of the Central Punjab districts to the Azad Punjab or Sikh State, Pakistan would be deprived of the Muslim intelligentsia and the best soil of Indus region while the remaining areas would be the sandy tracts of Bahawalpur and Khairpur States, rocky Rawalpindi Division, the sandy stretch of the Multan Division and Sind. The mountainous and un-agricultural areas of the NWFP and Baluchistan could not serve the newly established state.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, the Pakistan scheme meant nothing without the central areas of the Punjab which the Akali Dal had claimed. Such a contradictory stand could only result in the worse and hostile nature of relationship between the Akalis and the Leaguers.

The arrival of Cabinet Mission was an important event of the history of the Muslim-Sikh relations in the British Punjab. The Akali Dal diverted its strategy from the Azad Punjab Scheme to the call for an independent Sikh State, an idea which it had aired from time to time. The contradictory suggestions on the boundaries

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101 FR, January 1945, L/PJ/5/248.

102 Harnam Singh, *Punjab the Homeland of the Sikhs*, p.46.

of the Sikh State made the roots of the Sikh demand very weak. Master Tara Singh vaguely expressed the areas of the independent state; Giani Kartar Singh asked for Sikhistan including Lahore, Karnal, Simla, Montgomery and Lyallpur districts whereas Sardar Baldev Singh suggested areas consisting of three divisions of Lahore, Jullundur and Ambala.<sup>103</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Sikh community of the Punjab was divided on *biraderi*, geographical and economic lines. It was thus difficult for the Akali leadership to develop a consensus on any political response including the Azad Punjab Scheme. The relationship between the Sikh and the Hindu communities further complicated the process of political mobilisation. This explains the incoherence in the Sikh politics which was further exacerbated by the factional rivalries within the community.

Although, Sikhs were defeated in the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1846 and 1849 and touched the bottom of their fate but soon their confidence was restored under the British patronage. The British support elevated them to a first class citizen status in the Indian society but they could not get rid of the side effects. The spontaneous results of the British policies uplifted the middle class and lower middle class in all the communities including Sikhs which resulted in the political fragmentation. Sikhs could be seen in the nationalist, separatist, communist, communalist and other factions. A tiny community could not afford such division because it had to face very mature leadership of the British, Muslim and Hindu communities. The very fact can be observed in the case of the Azad Punjab Scheme which exposed numerous weaknesses of the Akali leadership and the community as well. The scattered position of the Sikhs hampered their political struggle as they were not in majority in any district of the British Punjab. To counter the Muslim domination in the political arena, they had to depend upon the Hindus. All such handicaps left no leeway for the leadership. The Sikhs living in the north Punjab and NWFP not only protested against the Azad Punjab Scheme but also against Master Tara

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103 Tan Yong Tai and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.111-12.

Singh. His struggle for the Azad Punjab was considered as the Pakistan scheme and many declared him a traitor to the Sikh *panth*. Under such circumstances, this movement failed to achieve any worthwhile objective which affected their main cause in the main political happenings at the national as well as provincial levels.

The leadership crisis in the Sikh politics continued from bottom to top level during these years of the struggle and the provincial leadership proved no different from the regional one. The urge for securing some territory as a separate homeland for their community kept them busy in the struggle despite opposition from outside and within the community. The Akali leadership remained active to obtain Azad Punjab and suggested re-demarcation of the Punjab boundaries. Their standpoint was that the Muslim majority areas adjacent to the NWFP should be merged into this province while the rest of the areas should be declared as Azad Punjab with a balanced proportion of three communities. Although they tirelessly struggled for this scheme but, as a matter of fact, this suggestion had a big flaw and grave risk as it could enslave them forever in case of Hindu-Muslim unity in the Azad Punjab. The Azad Punjab was supposed to have 38 per cent Muslims, 45 per cent Hindus and 27 per cent Sikhs. Therefore, in case of Hindu-Muslim agreement, the Sikhs would be pestered under 73 per cent rather than 51 per cent Muslims in the existing arrangement. The Muslim-Hindu patch-up was likely to be reached at because both the communities had direct interaction at the national level and in other provinces. Therefore, the Azad Punjab Scheme was not the best option to redress the Sikh grievances and instead, they had to go for practicable alternatives beneficial to the Sikh posterity.