



THE SIKH MINORITY AND THE PARTITION OF THE PUNJAB 1920-1947

Chhanda Chatterjee



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Guru Nanak had gifted the Sikhs with an ideology. Guru Angad had given them the Gurmukhi script. Guru Arjan Dev coalesced the hymns authored or collected by the Gurus and made them a people of the book. Guru Govind Rai created the *Khalsa* identity with its five symbols (*Panj Kakke*). Maharaja Ranjit Singh's conquests gave them the pride of race. British insistence on recruiting only *keshdhari* Sikhs encouraged the *Khalsa* to assert their distinct identity. The trend accelerated since the revolt of 1857, when John Lawrence reversed the initial successes of the rebels with the recovery of Delhi with forces from the Punjab. Sikhs were co-opted by the British with the clever broadcast of the Guru Tegh Bahadur myth that the Sikhs would be able to avenge the martyrdom of the Guru in Delhi with the help of a white race. Since then the Sikhs formed the backbone of the British Indian army and all their political influence flowed out of this military connection.

The unexpected Congress concession of weightage to the Muslims in the Lucknow Pact of 1916 awakened the Sikhs to the necessity of the defence of *Khalsa* interests. Their vociferations compelled the British to concede a 19 per cent weightage for the Sikhs in the Montagu-Chelmsford Act of 1919. Gandhi appreciated the indispensable nature of Sikh support for the success of the British military machine. His attempt to subsume the Akali movement under the umbrella of the Non-Cooperation movement in the 1920s against the British and again his attempt to win over the Sikhs for his Civil Disobedience movement during the Lahore Congress in 1929 reflected this shrewd political sense. Sikhs continued to wrench concessions both from the British and the Congress as long as the *Pax Britannica* had any chance of survival. But as the negotiations for decolonization quickened after the end of the Second World War, the magic of Sikh arms could no longer work miracles for their slender numbers. While British statesmen from Cripps to Attlee – all burnt gallons of midnight oil thinking of an acceptable settlement of the Hindu-Muslim impasse, no one paid much attention to the pathetic quest of Sikh leaders since 1940 to work out an acceptable formula for readjusting the borders of the Punjab to accommodate the birthplace of the Gurus or the canal colonies, worked through long years of Sikh toil.

Chhanda Chatterjee used to teach History and acted as the Director, Centre for Guru Nanak Dev Studies in Visva-Bharati, Shantiniketan. She was educated in Presidency College, Kolkata and Calcutta University. She was elected president of the Modern India section of the Punjab History Conference, Patiala in 2006. She is currently the President's nominee to the Central Universities of Manipur and Tripura.



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The Sikh Minority and the Partition of the Punjab 1920-1947

CHHANDA CHATTERJEE

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Preface

THIS WORK WAS started long ago when I visited Cambridge with a scholarship from the University of Cambridge in 1994. I came in touch with Dr. Lionel Carter in the Centre for South Asian Studies in Cambridge and he showed me some private papers of officers, who had served in the Punjab districts, which gave me some insight into the militancy of the Sikhs on the eve of the partition of Punjab. Later I went to work in the India Office Library with a Foreign Travel Grant from the ICHR and Mr. Bingley introduced me to the papers related to partition. The long drawn out work of data collection in the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, the National Archives of India, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan all located in New Delhi took me a long time. The Vice-Chancellor's unassigned grant from Visva-Bharati made it possible to visit New Delhi every year from 1997 to 2002 and continue the work. But the secondary literature related to this work was also quite vast and I had to visit Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha Library in Patiala to get hold of some books. I continued to share my findings with experts on Punjab politics like Dr. Kirpal Singh, Dr. Mohinder Singh and Prof. K.L.Tuteja in the various sessions of the Indian History Congress. Professor Ian Talbot of Coventry University, UK very kindly sent me some of the chapters from one of his books even before the book was published. Discussions with Prof. Preetam Singh of Oxford Brookes University were also very fruitful. Sharing the memories of the partition with some refugee Sikh intellectuals like Sardar Saran Singh, editor, *Sikh Review* and Manohar Singh Batra, former Deputy Director General, All India Radio, also gave me an insight into the mood of the times. Prof. Indu Banga of Panjab University, Chandigarh helped me with some of her own findings and corrected me at every stage of my work. However, my greatest debt is to Late Prof. Parthasarathi Gupta, who virtually rescued me from the impossible goal of working on three provinces of Punjab, Awadh and the Central Provinces simultaneously. I can never forget Prof. Gupta's numerous labours of love for my understanding and progress. I wish I could present him with the fruit

of his affection for me, but now I can only cherish his memory in gratitude.

I must also thank Mrs. Jaya Ravindran and Mr. Prabir Roy of the National Archives of India, New Delhi, Mrs. Alka Bali of Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi, Dr. Jyotsna Arora and Noor Aziz of ICHR Library, the numerous staff of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi, India International Centre Library, New Delhi, Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha Library, Punjabi University, Patiala, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata and Central Library, Visva-Bharati for their sincere help at every stage of my work. I had applied to the ICHR in 2006 for a Project Grant to complete my work. An inordinate delay in releasing the Grant till 2009 created some difficulties. My responsibilities in Visva-Bharati first as Head of the Department of History and then as Director, Centre for Guru Nanak Dev Studies came in the way of completing the manuscript. Prof. Y. Sudershan Rao, the present Chairman, ICHR, very kindly allowed me to complete the Project which was long overdue. Dr. Rajesh Kumar, Deputy Director (Research) in the ICHR was also very helpful at various stages of the work. My thanks are also due to Mr. Ramesh Jain of Manohar for accepting the manuscript for publication.

My family members, my daughter Anupurba Roy and my husband Arun Roy, were extremely cooperative and patient throughout the long period of presenting papers on the subject away from home in Punjab and Delhi. My daughter helped me with the final version of the manuscript even after she had left for her studies in the UK. My colleagues in Visva-Bharati had always been very kind and helpful. It will be sheer ingratitude if I forget to mention my husband's secretary, Mr. Sreedharan Nair, who helped me with the printing, binding and finalizing the manuscript. In spite of all their kindness my failings remain.

CHHANDA CHATTERJEE

Director

Centre for Guru Nanak Dev Studies

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

Introduction

THE PARTITION OF India is such a traumatic experience in the history of the subcontinent that historians are never satisfied with the interpretation of the events leading to this calamity from various academic prisms. Its effects were even more heart-rending in the eastern and western parts, where the dividing lines fell across territories which had once constituted a single province. Bengal in the eastern part and Punjab on the western part of the subcontinent were the two accursed provinces, where the dividing lines of Partition ran across two territories inhabited by people originating from a common racial stock, speaking the same language and sharing a common culture.

However, the communal scene in the Punjab differed from other Indian provinces in the sense that this was a province which, apart from the Hindu Muslim binary, was marked by the presence of a third force – the Sikhs. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate how in the Punjab it was this third force which proved to be the catalyst for the partition of the province. The study of the Sikh initiative in the politics of this province thus gets intertwined with the larger question of how the Sikhs were gradually separating out from the Hindus in the province and how they were striving to create a distinct identity for themselves. The birth of such new identities was not something unique to the Sikhs. It was almost universal in the case of most ethnic entities taking their cue from nineteenth century reform movements and the consequent spread of a new consciousness laying stress on the re-fashioning of new identities based on an imagined past tailored to suit the needs and demands of the present. Such was the emergence of a new Jat identity between 1886 and 1930 around the new ideological influences of the Arya Samaj;¹ the jostling of two rival myths related to the origins of Kashmir, one spawned by Hindu Kashmiri Pandits and the other by the *tazkiras* of religious divines of the Sufi shrines and orders, who had taken an active part in naturalizing Islam in Kashmir;² the carving out of an aggressive Tamil identity (*Tamilttay*) around the Tamil language, taking it to be ‘a tangible, material possession of its speakers’ under

the spell of the 'patrimonial imagination' coming in the wake of colonial modernity;³ or say the forging of an unique Assamese identity based on a mythical past traced in the old chronicles or *Buranjis*.⁴ The instances are endless and daily emerging in new incarnations in different parts of the subcontinent.

A peculiar feature of these identity movements was that they were not born merely of an academic interest in the old tradition but often from the presentday compulsions of the people concerned. As Dipesh Chakravarty has pointed out in a recent essay⁵ 'presentism' was sometimes built into the rhetoric of experience and traditions were redefined to suit the political equations and social objectives of the people concerned. The Sikhs were also no exceptions in these respects. They too had started reinterpreting their past under Singh Sabha influences and suppressing their earlier closeness to Hindu beliefs and practices.⁶ They started outgrowing the influences of the Arya Samaj even as their aspirations began to clash with the Aryas.⁷ Until almost the height of the Gurdwara reform movement of the 1920s Sikh identity remained an object of controversy. The Sikh Gurus having been born as Hindus, there was always a debate whether the Sikhs were a militant sect of the Hindus or not. The Sikh Studies Chairs instituted by the dynamic and upcoming Sikh diaspora in Canada and North America had been contributing to this ongoing debate from many new perspectives. Several foreign scholars also got involved in these controversies and earned the wrath of the official custodians of the Sikh tradition (the SGPC).⁸ Although Sikhism had not felt the necessity to develop into a 'tidy cultural construct',⁹ yet Sikhism was different from Hinduism in both form and content. Just as Judaism, Christianity and Islam were all Semitic religions and even shared certain common anthologies and yet were distinct from each other, similarly Sikhism was also distinct from Hinduism. The Sikh struggles with the Mughal state stretched over several centuries and infused the Sikh psyche with a kind of martial ardour which was completely different in content from ancient Hinduism. While a Hindu child grew up on tales from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, a Sikh child always had some recent tale of sacrifice and heroism to initiate him to the ways of the world.¹⁰

British military recruitment policy gave a big boost to Khalsa Sikh identity by insisting on the recruitment of 'true Sikhs' by which they meant only *keshdhari* Sikhs. For the 'martial' Sikhs, whose very existence depended on fighting for the state, the disbandment of the

Khalsa army in 1849 had come as a big blow. The effects of this demobilization could only be alleviated by recruitment in large numbers in the East India Company's regiments and the prospective recruits from the countryside were only too anxious to conform to the Company's requirements to convince the recruiting agency of the genuineness of their calibre.¹¹ In a secret communication to C.R. Cleveland, the Director of Criminal Intelligence on 11 August 1911, David Petric, the Assistant Director of Criminal Intelligence reported:

At the present time one of the principal agencies for the preservation of the Sikh religion has been the practice of military officers commanding Sikh regiments to send Sikh recruits to receive baptism according to the rites prescribed by Guru Govind Singh. Sikh soldiers, too, are required to adhere rigidly to Sikh customs and ceremonial and every endeavour has been made to preserve them from the contagion of idolatry. Sikhs in the Indian army have been studiously 'nationalised' or encouraged to regard themselves as a totally distinct and separate nation; their national pride has been fostered by every available means and the *Granth Sahib* or Sikh scriptures are saluted by British officers of Sikh regiments.¹²

The census strategies of the British in the Punjab also tried to prop up the Sikhs as a separate group distinct from the Hindus. The first census of 1855 had not differentiated between Sikhs and Hindus. But the next census of 1868 tried to separate the Hindus from the Sikhs. The need to define and patrol the boundaries was thus brought home to the Sikhs. Singh Sabhas were particularly concerned about this communitarian identity and tried to inculcate in members of the Khalsa Panth a consciousness of their identity and tried to enforce the external symbols of this identity with a renewed vigour. The Chief Khalsa Diwan was established in 1883 as a central controlling agency embracing some 36 or 37 Singh Sabhas.¹³

By 1911 the Sikhs accounted for 20 per cent of the total number of Indians in military service¹⁴ and had acquired an importance which was quite disproportionate with their numbers. Major John McLoughlin Short who had an experience of the Sikh character in course of his service in the XIth Sikh Regiment was not wide off the mark when he remarked that the Sikhs rose to prominence in Indian national life chiefly through their contribution to the military service in the British Indian Army. 'We have put him in a commanding political position' he had written in a confidential note¹⁵ and this indeed was the reality. By linking political power with numbers, the electoral reforms since 1909 had revealed the weakness of the Sikh position.

Census figures for 1881 placed the Sikhs at only 8.22 per cent of Punjab's population as against 43.84 per cent Hindus and 47.56 per cent Muslims.¹⁶ The leading position occupied by the Sikhs in the armed forces of the British had undoubtedly helped them to achieve a dominance which was in marked contrast with their slender numbers.

The Sikhs did not get any berth in the Legislative Council of Punjab when the Morley-Minto reforms introduced the elective principle for the first time in the history of the province although separate electorates were introduced for the Muslims. The Chief Khalsa Diwan's representation was ignored. The Lieutenant Governor tried to intervene on their behalf but to no avail. Finally, Sikh presence on the Council had to be secured through Government nomination.¹⁷

The loyalist image of the Sikhs suffered serious reverses with the launching of the canal colonies agitation in 1907 in protest against the Government's sudden attempt to revise the terms and conditions of the settlement of canal colonies land. Congressmen like Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh led the agitation of the colonists in Montgomery and Lyallpur. The Congress leader, G.K. Gokhale received a warm ovation in Khalsa College, Amritsar at this time shattering the myth of 'the loyal Khalsa'.¹⁸ Agrarian disturbances pushed up the number of migrants to Canada and America in search of better pastures. But opportunities in those lands too began to shrink by 1910 and the rebuffed Khalsa began to respond to an international conspiracy called the *Ghadar* (which meant 'revolution' in Urdu as well as Punjabi) for dislodging the British from India with help from big powers like Germany and occasional patronage from Turkey. By 1915, however, the plot was discovered and foiled.¹⁹

The bonhomie between the Sikhs and Congress did not, however, last for long. The Congress often worked out its own bargains with its all-India interests in mind and did not think how such understandings were going to affect the interests of the Sikhs. In 1916 the Indian National Congress tried to win over the Muslim League to its side for pressurizing the British for further reforms. They held a joint session with the Muslim League in Lucknow and agreed on weightage for Muslims in all provinces where they were in a minority. In Punjab they agreed on a 50 per cent weightage for the Muslims. The Sikhs were never consulted by them as the organ of the Sikhs, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, was considered to be a loyalist association.²⁰

The weightage conceded to the Muslims in a province where they were already in a majority scandalized the Sikhs. They woke up to

the apathy of the Congress for their interests and understood that they would have to fend for themselves. They, therefore, led a deputation to the Secretary of State, Montagu, in the winter of 1917 when he visited India personally to assess the political climate in India and to discuss plans for further devolution of powers. This was the time when the British could appreciate the worth of the Sikhs as brave recruits to the armed forces engaged in the various fronts all over the world at the peak of the First World War. The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in 1919 therefore responded immediately to the deputation by conceding a 15 per cent reservation for the Sikhs. The Muslim leader Fazl-i-Husain insisted on a 50 per cent weightage for the Muslims in accordance with the terms of the Lucknow Pact. During the debate on the reforms in the Punjab Legislative Council, the Sikh member Gajjan Singh merely suggested an innocuous amendment 'subject to the just claims of the Sikhs'. But this could not be pushed through in the face of a united Hindu-Muslim opposition in the Council. Sikh representation was eventually pushed up to 19 per cent through Government nomination.²¹

The 1920s saw the Sikhs on warpath again for the control of the Gurdwaras, which was a symbol of their cultural and social life. The Khalsa needed the swelling Gurdwara revenues to relieve its persisting economic and agrarian problems. The reprehensible conduct of the *mahants* or custodians of these Gurdwaras was a blot on the entire community and required to be redressed. The Indian National Congress judged the moment opportune for linking up the non-cooperation movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 with this movement of the Sikhs. It was resolved in the Nagpur Congress (1920), which decided to go for non-cooperation, that 'their (the Sikhs') interests will receive the same protection in any scheme of Swarajya in India as is provided for Mohammedans and other minorities in provinces other than Punjab'.²² It set off alarm bells to the British and recruitment of Sikhs to the army had to be cut down drastically. However, this honeymoon with the Congress did not last long. Gandhi's sudden withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement left them to go at it alone. The Gurdwara movement was also an occasion for a redefinition of Sikh identity and the Sikhs had to make a full-throated declaration that they were distinct from the Hindus. This was also the time for a decisive purging of the last vestiges of Hindu rituals from the Khalsa way of life.²³

The Sikhs were initially hesitant to join the Muslim-dominated

Unionist Government carved out by Fazl-i-Husain in 1923 with the help of the rural magnates sent up by the rural electorates created through the heavy rural bias of the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms. But once it became clear that this venture enjoyed the blessings of the Government for keeping this ‘martial’ province free from Congress influence, the loyalist Chief Khalsa Diwan promptly sent its representative to this patchwork quilt Government.²⁴ The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1901 had not only helped peasants among Jats, Rajputs, Arains and Gujars in the eastern and central Punjab districts, it also favoured the Muslim religious elites – the Syeds, Shaikhs and Qureshis, tribal chiefs ruling over large holdings in the west of Punjab. The key to the pre-eminence of these tribal leaders lay in their close links with the *pirs* or *sajjada nashins*, commanding *baraka* (charisma) in rural society. These families were in the forefront of the Council elections. Some of them were winners in all the Council elections that took place in 1920, 1923, 1926 and 1930. The structure of this politics revolved ‘around the idiom of tribe, rather than of religious community’.²⁵

The Sikhs approached the Simon Commission deputed to review the working of the diarchy in 1927 with a request to grant them a weightage of 30 per cent by a corresponding reduction of the Hindu seats to 30 per cent and Muslims to 40 per cent of the total number of seats. The Congress had boycotted the Simon Commission as it had not included any Indian among its members. But Motilal Nehru took the initiative to form an all-parties committee to prepare a set of constitutional proposals for the perusal of the Government for the constitutional changes that it had been planning for the future. The Nehru Report repudiated weightage of any kind and proposed the introduction of general constituencies everywhere except in provinces where Muslims were in the minority. The report thus put a damper on Sikh demand for weightage and was an anathema to the Sikhs.²⁶

Sikh support was, however, indispensable to the Congress for the penetration of the rural areas of Punjab during the Civil Disobedience movement as Congress presence in the Punjab countryside was quite minimal. The 1929 Lahore Congress thus tried to assuage the injured feelings of the Sikhs by adopting the famous resolution that no future political settlement of India would be contemplated without first taking the Sikh interests into consideration.²⁷ Sikhs trusted Gandhi and suffered the maximum number of arrests, imprisonments and executions for the sake of the movement. Gandhi, however, in keeping

with his maverick character, ditched them half way and negotiated the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931 and went to negotiate the future government of India in the Second Round Table Conference.²⁸

The blueprint for constitutional reforms chalked out by the Congress Working Committee (7-12 July 1931) before the departure of Gandhi for the Round Table Conference did not hold much hopes for the Sikhs. It proposed joint electorates with reservation for the Sikhs in the Federal and Provincial Legislatures on the basis of population with the right to contest additional seats. This would mean a climb down from the concessions which the Sikhs had already bagged under the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. Master Tara Singh therefore confronted Gandhi with a list of 17 demands on behalf of the Sikhs before he started for the Round Table Conference. In 1930 the poet Iqbal had already mooted the proposal of a separate state for the Muslims on the north-west embracing Sindh, Baluchistan, Punjab and the North-West Frontier. Geoffrey Corbett, the Secretary to the Round Table Conference had lent him indirect support by proposing the detachment of the non-Muslim Ambala Division from the Punjab to constitute a predominantly Muslim area on the north-west. Among other demands the 17 demands of the Sikhs also included the readjustment of the boundaries of the Punjab through the transfer of the Muslim majority districts to the Frontier Province. When Ujjal Singh and Sampuran Singh, representing the Sikhs in the conference could not get the Sikh demand for a 30 per cent weightage accepted they started talking about Khalistan or a separate state for the Sikhs.²⁹

The statutory majority granted to the Muslims in the Communal Award of 1932 came as a major blow for the Sikhs. Henceforth they were seized by a fear of 'Muslim Raj'. The Congress did not seem to share their concern in this matter and maintained an ominous silence for fear of antagonizing their prospective Muslim voters and allies. Jawaharlal Nehru even reprimanded the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee leader Satyapal for having launched an agitation against the award on his own. The Sikhs had to carry on their lone struggle against the award and they formed a 17 member Council of Action on 26-7 September 1932 to organize a Shahidi Dal of 1,00,000 volunteers to continue to agitate for the repeal of the award.³⁰

Nor did the Congress come to the aid of the Sikhs during the Shahidganj Gurdwara agitation in Lahore. The Sikhs had been awarded the site claimed as a Gurdwara by a verdict of the Lahore

High Court. They tried to take possession of the site and begin some construction in the place. But the place had long been used as a mosque by the Muslims and Sikh attempts to take the place over provoked protests by Muslims like Maulana Zafar Ali of the Majlis Ittehad-e-Millat. The Sikhs had to fight this battle all by themselves and the Congress remained a passive spectator all the while.³¹

During the elections of 1937 there were some seat adjustments and electoral understanding among the Akalis and the Congress as they had understood that the battle against the Unionists was going to get tough. This was made possible by the revision of the Congress stand on the Communal Award and its call for a withdrawal of the Award.³²

On 27 August 1936, the loyalist Chief Khalsa Diwan and the moderate wing of the Central Akali Dal led by Giani Sher Singh united to form the Khalsa National Party to fight the forthcoming elections. Their results were better than the Shiromani Akali Dal. The Unionists emerged victorious during these elections and the Khalsa National Party joined the Government formed by Sikander Hayat Khan. The interests of the Jat landowners of Rohtak and Hissar, that of the Sikhs dispersed all over the Punjab and the interests of the Muslim landowners, mostly concentrated in the west of Punjab converged to give rise to this Government.³³

Urban parties like the Muslim League and the Congress fared badly in the 1937 elections in the Punjab. The Congress could not stomach this discomfiture as it had scored victories everywhere except in the Muslim majority provinces. Therefore, it tried to galvanize the rural wings of the party with utmost vigour for engaging in a Muslim mass contact campaign. The Muslim League did not take this challenge lying down. They too started strengthening their rural wings through an appeal to Islam. The Punjab countryside had so far been kept free of the communal virus and the Unionists had been keeping their house together by playing up the rural and landowning interests. Sikander Hayat Khan had entered into an alliance with the Muslim League leader Jinnah in October 1937 (the so-called Sikander-Jinnah Pact) but this was merely to appoint him the spokesman for the province at the Centre and keep the province entirely free for his own brand of politics. The Congress attempt to break the Unionist monopoly of power suddenly disturbed the familiar rhythm of the province and began a rapid politicization and communalization unprecedented in the history of Punjab.³⁴

The onset of the Second World War in 1939 started new complications. The Congress blamed the Viceroy for having embroiled the country in the War without consulting the elected ministries in office. They demanded immediate independence and the launching of a Constituent Assembly for preparing a constitution for the country. The Government's promise to consider Dominion Status after the War did not satisfy them. All the Congress ministries resigned at once and started a programme of Civil Disobedience to force the hands of the Government. The Viceroy, however, was not to be deterred. He declared on 18 October 1939 that the Government would not decide on any constitutional plans without the consent of the Muslims. This gave a great boost to Jinnah, who had been looking for an opportunity to stage a comeback since his miserable performance at the hustings. He persuaded his ally Fazlul Haque, the Premier of Bengal, to move the Lahore Resolution, sometimes called the 'Pakistan Resolution' during the Lahore session of the League on 23 March 1940 hosted by the Unionist Premier, Sikander Hayat Khan.³⁵

The Akalis took great alarm at this resolution and Master Tara Singh declared in the U.P. Sikh Conference at Lucknow on 15 April 1940 that for attaining Pakistan the Muslims would have to cross 'an ocean of Sikh blood'.³⁶ There was, however, no immediate reaction from the Congress and the Ramgarh Session of the Congress made no mention of the Resolution.

The Sikhs too announced their plans for a 'Khalistan' or land of the Khalsa in May 1940. Dr V.S. Bhatti of Ludhiana in a 40 pages brochure had mooted a scheme for the amalgamation of the Sikh States and the Simla Hill States with the British ruled districts of Jalandhar, Ambala, Ferozepur, Lahore, Amritsar, Lyallpur, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Montgomery, Hissar, Rohtak, Karnal, Multan and Delhi. It was also to access the Gulf of Cutch through a small corridor cutting across Sindh, Bahawalpur and Rajputana. However, this had nothing to do with the later day demand for Khalistan so deftly discussed by Dipankar Gupta in his treatise on Sikh ethnicity.³⁷

The Congress turned down the offer of the Viceroy (Linlithgow) in August 1940 (sometimes known as the August Offer) to expand his Executive Council to admit more members from important political parties and representatives from princely states to constitute a War Advisory Council for the supervision of war efforts on the plea that the members would not be answerable to the Legislature. Linlithgow had repudiated all attempts to form a government which

was not acceptable to 'large and powerful elements in India's national life'.³⁸ For the sake of consensus among all communities Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, a prominent Congressman, came up with a 'sporting offer' to have a national government with a Muslim head. This further incensed the Sikhs and the All India Sikh League called it an 'anti-national and anti-democratic' proposal.³⁹

Congress insensitivity to their problems gradually convinced the Sikhs that the Congress was trying to use them as a pawn in their political game and they decided to act independently. The Sikhs had become suspects in the eyes of the Government for their involvement with the Congress and military recruitment from among the Sikhs had declined. Major Short, who had been brought back from his retirement with the specific purpose of wooing the Sikhs and bring them on the right track, could finally persuade the Sikhs to come out of the orbit of the Congress. The deadlock was broken through the intervention of the Maharaja of Patiala in 1941 and the Khalsa Defence of India League was organized to begin a drive for the recruitment of Sikhs in the army in large numbers.⁴⁰

In the meanwhile Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons in Britain himself came down to India to confer with Indian politicians and seek their cooperation in the war efforts. This was the time when the Japanese were advancing rapidly towards India and it was imperative to close ranks against them. Gandhi, however, was adamant and he launched his Quit India movement, arguing that the presence of the British in India was making the country the target of attack for the Axis Powers and the good of the country required that the British should pack up and leave India. At this juncture, Cripps made his proposals pointing out that it was not possible for the British to leave the country to any one party when it was known that there were a substantial number of Muslims, anxious not to be dominated by the majority community. For them he devised the solution of secession from the main union if they so decided by a 60 per cent majority vote in the provincial legislature. This set the seal on the idea of Pakistan mooted by Jinnah.⁴¹

The Sikhs were also not slow to comprehend the significance of the Cripps Offer. Important Sikh leaders now wanted to take an independent stand regardless of what the Congress did. They met Cripps to make their disapproval clear. During this meeting they demanded that the trans-Jhelum districts of Jhang and Multan, which

were not part of the Sikh homeland but had been conquered by the Sikhs, be separated from Punjab and Sikhs be given a separate unit where nobody would dominate them.⁴²

The Government now understood the necessity of pacifying the Sikhs and keeping the flow of military recruitment from the province steady. They therefore advised Sikander Hayat Khan to bring the Akalis within the Unionist fold with the help of Major Short. The Lahore Resolution and the subsequent Islamization of politics had also begun to tell on the loyalty of Sikander's flock and more than 70 of his MLAs had tilted towards the Muslim League. Sikander resigned from the Working Committee of the League, began to organize harmony meetings to maintain communal amity in the province and appeared to be genuinely committed to the cause of provincial autonomy. This was possible only through an understanding with the other communities. The death of Sundar Singh Majithia provided an opportunity. A new United Sikh Party was launched in the Punjab Legislative Assembly in March 1942. Subsequently in March 1943 the Khalsa National Party merged with it in the Assembly. The new party was led by Baldev Singh, an Akali MLA and a wealthy Jat. He entered into a personal alliance with Sikander for various facilities which the Sikhs needed for maintaining their cultural autonomy and their economic position in the province, like adequate representation in central and provincial Government services, opportunities of teaching Gurmukhi in Government educational institutions, provisions for the sale of *jhatka* meat and right to have a say in the Assembly in matters affecting Sikh interests. The Akalis also needed Sikander's help to defeat Jagjit Singh Bedi's bill to stop the use of SGPC funds for political purpose. The result was the Sikander-Baldev Pact of June 1942 by which Baldev was made a Cabinet Minister. In July 1942 Jogendra Singh was also moved to the Viceroy's Executive Council. But Baldev Singh could not make much headway regarding the realization of the promises made by Sikander after his sudden demise. Declining Unionist fortunes during the unpopular premiership of his successor Khizr Tiwana made it difficult to press the claims of the Sikhs.⁴³

Master Tara Singh now revived his demand for a separate Sikh unit, which he had first spoken of in the 17 demands presented to Mahatma Gandhi on the eve of his departure for the Second Round Table Conference and which the Sikh leaders had presented to Sir Stafford Cripps in the face of his insistence on the right of non-

accession by provinces. This was now called the Azad Punjab scheme, where the Muslim districts west of Ravi would be separated from Punjab and a new province would be formed, where no one community would be predominant. These impracticable propositions were attacked by the Sikhs themselves as it threatened to divide the community and leave out Rawalpindi and important Sikh religious sites.⁴⁴

The premature death of the Unionist Premier of Punjab, Sikander Hayat Khan in December 1942 further aggravated matters for the Sikhs. Jinnah now became desperate to bring Punjab under his control. He started pressing the new Premier Khizr Hayat Tiwana to drop the name 'Unionist' from the Coalition and call it Muslim League Coalition Party. The tribal Muslim leaders were not slow to appreciate the changes that were coming over. This was the beginning of the exodus of Unionist Muslim leaders to the Muslim League.⁴⁵

In the meanwhile Congress was trying to come to terms with the Muslim League. Gandhi sent proposals to open a dialogue with Jinnah on the basis of the C.R. Formula, which was a revival of the Cripps' offer to let unwilling provinces opt out of the Indian Union if they so desired by a 60 per cent vote in the provincial Legislative Assemblies. However, the Jinnah-Gandhi talks from 9 to 27 September 1944 failed since Jinnah wanted self-determination only for Muslims. He would not concede the right of self-determination to the non-Muslim minorities in the concerned provinces.⁴⁶

It was about the same time that Sir Bhulabhai Desai, the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party in the Central Assembly tried to negotiate an agreement for parity (50 per cent of seats for the Muslim League) both in the Central and the Provincial Executive with Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, the Deputy Leader of the League Parliamentary Party. All these moves to work out a settlement on an all-India level led to great apprehensions in the Sikh camp regarding their own fate and the attitude of the Congress vis-à-vis the Sikhs. A section of the Sikhs like the Central Akali Dal, who had been holding conferences with the Hindu Mahasabha insisting on *Akhand Bharat* (indivisible India) even considered overtures from the Mahasabha leader Syama Prasad Mookerjee for a tie up.⁴⁷

When nothing came of these conciliatory moves Gandhi encouraged the efforts of the non-party man Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, who had been a Law Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council from 1920 to 1923 and commanded great prestige in government circles to

consult all political parties and prepare a proposal for the future constitution of the country. This created great enthusiasm in Sikh circles and all the various Akali groups cooperated to prepare a Memorandum signed by 30 eminent men summarizing all their demands and expectations. It revived the well-known Sikh points regarding their superior contributions to the economic life of the province judging by landownership and contributions to agriculture, industry and army. They were paying the highest amount of revenue and canal rates. Punjab was their homeland, where they were the rulers immediately before the British conquest. Yet they were neglected in Government appointments, representation in U.P. and Sindh, where they were a strong minority, and also representation in provincial and federal legislature.⁴⁸

The War, in the meanwhile, had been drawing to a close and the Viceroy was anxious for a settlement of the Indian problem. He invited 15 members from the major political parties for a talk in Simla in June 1945 to deliberate on the formation of an interim government and a Constituent Assembly. But the talks proved abortive as Jinnah insisted on sole right to represent the Muslims. Since Congress was unwilling to give up its right to represent the entire country, the conference had to wrap up.

It was then decided to send the various parties to seek a popular mandate and elections were held in the winter of 1945-6. The Muslim League captured 78 seats and also commanded the support of Indian Christians and Scheduled Castes in a house of 175. The Unionists were washed out and were soon reduced to a rump of 9 by further desertions. But they secured the backing of 51 Congressmen and 23 Akalis and succeeded in forming the Government with Khizr Tiwana as the Premier.

The Cabinet Mission arrived in March 1946 to devise ways for the formation of a Constituent Assembly. They divided the provinces into three groups, (A) with Hindu-majority provinces, (B) with Muslim-majority provinces in north-western India and (C) with Muslim-majority provinces in eastern India. The Sikhs were outraged at the prospect of becoming submerged among the Muslims. Gandhi had initially expressed his satisfaction. Jinnah too saw a means of realizing his dream for autonomy in the suggestions. But once the Muslim League sent its acceptance, Congress dithered, saying that it understood that the provinces were to act individually and not on a group basis. As this would frustrate Jinnah's scheme since Punjab