

# Punjab: The Sikhs' Precious Gift to India

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## Author's Introduction:

*As a child of six years, I migrated to India from Rawalpindi (Now Islamabad).*

*Of late a question came to my mind that pertains entirely to history and its subjective interpretation. I understood from studies that the British acknowledged three entities as the rightful claimants to the British throne in India: The Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs. The Hindus, being the largest majority of the population; the Muslims, whose Mughal Empire they had won through their military victories and strategies; and the Sikhs, whose kingdom they had annexed - "to be administered in trust" until the rightful heir, Prince Duleep Singh was able to manage/control the affairs of the State (which, of course, was never allowed to happen). I understand this as a student of history, that this background resulted in the Sikhs being acknowledged - in 1947 - as one of the three rightful heirs to the British power, and hence the need arose for the Hindu and Muslim leaders to desperately court Master Tara Singh, to choose one side. No other region, province or community enjoyed this special status that Almighty God conferred on the Sikhs at that time. -*

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The various religious communities that populated India had joined together to drive out the British, which was achieved in August, 1947. However, all attempts by the major actors to hold India together failed. This was mainly because of the Muslim apprehensions, that they will be ruled by the Hindus who formed the majority. The British, on their part, appeased both the religious communities by offering their separate States - India and Pakistan. Sir Cyril Radcliffe was assigned the job of delineating two countries from one, i.e. Hindustan (land of the Hindus) and Pakistan ('land of the pure'). The partition of India and the creation of Pakistan have not been studied in one important aspect that concerns the Sikh community. The Sikhs, as an important religious minority were mainly concentrated in the region which now forms the Pakistani Punjab. The events leading to the partition made the Sikhs the main victims of circumstances. The tussle between the Congress and the Muslim League led both to follow their own paths, leading to 'non-cooperation' and 'direct action' respectively. (The chronology here has been sacrificed for coherence). The events leading to partition show that the Sikhs could not withstand the massive onslaught of religious fanaticism and separatism of the Muslim League, on the one hand, and the Congress tactics for early independence, on the other. Independence was achieved at a huge cost chiefly paid by the Sikhs of Punjab.

### **Power-brokers:**

To put the record straight, the Sikhs never pushed for a separate state since they considered themselves an integral part of India. The brokers of power, however, took full advantage of Sikhs' minority status. In the events leading to partition, it is pertinent to note that the Sikhs paid the bitterest price due to their 'opposition' of the Congress and the communal propaganda of the Muslim League. It is a well known fact that, without getting any political alternative, the Sikhs only got physical, religious and economic destabilization when the movement for the creation of Pakistan became unstoppable. A glimpse of the events leading to partition will amply demonstrate this bitter truth.

The contradictory aims of the Congress and the Muslim League put Sikhs in the most

awkward situation. One thing common with both the Hindus and the Muslims as such was that their leaders positioned themselves for power, whereas the Sikhs, inept in political skills, failed to protect their interests and their homeland. **During the negotiations they were fed with 'craftily worded' promises that were never honored.**

Although both Mahatma Gandhi and Mr. M.A. Jinnah were, apparently, working at cross purposes, it was the Mahatma who proposed a formula to Mr. Jinnah, that was basically clear acceptance of the partition and creation of Pakistan. In May 1944 Gandhi declared that at the end of the war (WW-II), a commission would be asked to demarcate the 'contiguous districts' in North West and East India having an absolute Muslim majority. In the areas thus demarcated a plebiscite of the adult population would be taken. *If the majority voted for separate sovereign state it would be given effect to, but border districts would have the option to join one of the new States.* In the event of separation, mutual agreements would be entered into for safeguarding defence, commerce and communications. These terms would be binding when the British transferred the full power to India.

#### **Hobson's Choice:**

Before independence the Sikhs, under the leadership of Master Tara Singh, could not pledge unconditional support either to the Congress or to the Muslim League as they could not rely on any one, and this was amply confirmed by the subsequent events. At the same time he was quite aware of the political advantages of being associated with India to maintain Sikhs' strong numerical representation in the army. It was quite apparent that neither of the two parties will extend any favors to the Sikhs, without some strings being attached. In fact the move for a separate homeland had been gaining ground ever since 'Moti Lal Nehru Report' came out, recommending a 30% quota (reservation) for the Sikhs in Punjab Provincial Legislature.

Mahatma Gandhi, in his own way, also approved the recommendations made in the Nehru Report, while also conceding that they had not done justice to the Sikhs. Congress, however, could not afford to lose the confidence of the Sikh community as a whole and then face the Muslim League's demands and the spread of communal virus. Accordingly, a formal resolution was adopted at the 1929 Congress Session at Lahore saying:

**"This Congress assures the Sikhs and the Muslims and other minorities that no solution thereof, in any future constitution will be accepted by the Congress that does not give full satisfaction to the parties concerned".**

Meanwhile, Mr. Jinnah had emerged as an astute and obdurate negotiator for the British. Events favoring the formation of Pakistan moved very fast. The Muslim League at its annual session held at Lahore in March 1940 finally showed their true colours in favour of a separate Sovereign State of Pakistan for the Muslims. This demand for Pakistan led all the Sikh leaders to unite on one platform to oppose the formation of Pakistan. They held an anti-Pakistan Conference at Lahore on December 01, 1940 in which a unanimous resolution was passed to oppose the formation of Pakistan.

The political situation in Punjab became more worrisome with the Muslim League adopting uncompromising communal overtones. This compelled the Sikhs to demand a partition of the united Punjab. Primary aim was to get some leverage for the Sikhs in the eastern portion of the Province.

It is in this context that the demand for 'Azad Punjab' was conceived, mainly in the spirit of countering the Muslim demand for Pakistan. Although the Akalis got unduly labelled as 'opportunists lacking any ideology', the fact remains that there were communal elements in all parties, and there was no reason to single out the Akali leadership for public lynching. The subsequent events proved beyond any doubt that the Sikhs were prepared to stake their all for the sake of their motherland.

**In the long and historic struggle for independence, the best gift the Sikhs gave to India was to save the Eastern half of Punjab, and make it the granary of India - at an incalculable loss not only in terms of territory but our most precious heritage - the holy shrines that mark the landscape upto the Khyber Pass and beyond.**

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