

The Partitions of Punjab

The acceptance of the Punjabi Suba demand in 1966 led to the formation of the states of Punjab and Haryana on November 1, 1966, besides the Union Territory of Chandigarh, and the merger of the hill regions with the Union Territory of Himachal. This marked a complete departure from the recommendations of the SRC. While this column will cover the period from Partition till the acceptance of the demand for the unilingual state of Punjab, the next two articles will cover the politics of the Congress, the Akali Dal, the Communists, the Jan Sangh and the Dalits of Punjab besides formation of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.

Post World War II, nowhere across the globe, have two decades been as turbulent, as violent, as brutal and as disruptive of the extant boundaries as the British province of Punjab –for in these twenty years this area, including the princely states clubbed under the broad head of Punjab states became West Punjab, Islamabad capital territory (in Pakistan), East Punjab, PEPSU, Himachal (as UT, and then as state) National Capital territory of Delhi, Haryana, UT of Chandigarh and of course Punjab. As if the violence during Partition was not enough (between one to two million deaths and ten million displacements), the forms of protest, and the state response thereof continued on similar lines: *Morchas* and counter *Morchas* for Punjabi Suba, Maha Punjab and Save Hindi became familiar tropes in political discourse.

Punjab and Bengal were the two Muslim majority provinces where the Hindu minority was as keen on Partition as the Muslims of United Provinces and Bihar. Punjab was a prosperous province, the canal colonies had ushered in unprecedented prosperity and the Unionist party representing the land owners, *and with explicit patronage of the government*, exercised greater salience in public polity than the Congress or the Muslim League in the limited franchise then available. All the princely states – from the Muslim majority Bahawalpur to the Sikh kingdoms of Patiala and the Hindu Kingdoms of Punjab Hills states – were pro- British and Punjab continued to be preferred recruitment base for the British troops in both the Wars, though by the late thirties, Pathans got preference over the Sikhs .

However , Punjab also had its share of agrarian unrest, the Ghadar movement amongst expats and the revolutionary stream under the HSRA of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru which had fired public imagination like never before . These movements brought the three major communities together, though not in equal measure but these were put down with a heavy hand. All the three communities had contributed to the growth of Lahore – the Paris of the East- and like the contested city of Jerusalem; it was much more than a piece of land.

Unlike other parts of the country, there had been no major communal clashes in the Punjab till 1946. However , the simmering tensions between the three communities found an assertion in their preferred language : for the Muslims it was Urdu, which like Arabic was written from right to left , for the Sikhs , it was the Gurmukhi script which was given to them by Guru Angad Dev, and for the Hindus, it was the language of the gods (Devanagari) .

When it became clear by the end of 1946 that partition was inevitable, the lava burst. While the Muslims of Punjab did not want Pakistan,

they were not opposed to it, but for the Hindus of Lahore , and the Sikhs of the Canal colonies the thought of having to uproot themselves from tracts which they had made fertile with their sweat and blood, as well as Nankana Sahib, was absolutely unthinkable. The Sikhs had been loyal to the British (Master Tara Singh had supported the War effort, even as Congress had given the Quit India call) but they had been abandoned by the British, tolerated by the Congress, taunted by the Muslim League and, above all frustrated by the failures of their own political leadership. And when East Punjab was constituted, they found that they were again in a minority, and were keen to establish a place where they could exercise unbridled political authority. Towards this end , a delegation of Sikh leaders, Harcharan Singh Bajwa, Bhupender Singh Mann and Giani Kartar Singh – met Dr Ambedkar in January 1948 who advised them to ask for a linguistic, rather than a Sikh state. In the aftermath of Partition , the Sikhs were in a majority in the contiguous districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Ferozepur, Kapurthala, Jullundur (as it was then called), Ludhiana, , Bhatinda , and ,Patiala, and in substantial parts of Ambala and Sangrur, the rest of the province was dominated by the Hindus, whose numbers had swelled up on account of the incoming refugee population. The Akali Dal made a strong plea for the Punjabi Suba to the SRC by seeking the merger of PEPSU with contiguous Punjabi speaking districts, and by detaching the Pahadi speaking areas to Himachal and Hindi speaking areas to Delhi/Haryana(as it was then called). While Pepsu was merged with Punjab, the Hindi speaking areas were not detached, and it continued to be a bi-lingual state for another decade!

