

## **Maha Punjab, Punjabi Suba and Haryana !**

The States Reorganization Committee Report was released on September 20, 1955, when Punjab was ravaged by rains and floods of unprecedented intensity. Master Tara Singh of the Akali Dal reacted violently : *a decree of Sikh annihilation has been passed by the SRC. We are face to face with a calamity greater than that of 1947... ..The report of the SRC wipes us out from the face of the world. With faith in God and our Gurus, we shall fight with our backs to the wall.*

This did not please the protagonists for Haryana Prant either , for at least two MPs and over dozen legislators of the Punjab and Delhi Assemblies urged the establishment of Haryana with the Hindi speaking areas of Pepsu, Punjab , Himachal , the Agra and Meerut divisions of UP and Bikaner from Rajasthan. The principal argument was that the Delhi Division of the **North-Western Provinces** was gifted to the **Punjab** only after 1857 as a reward for their loyalty to the British during the First War of Independence.

Likewise, the majority verdict of the SRC recommending the merger of the hill districts of Himachal with Punjab was received with grief and frustration, especially because as a Chief Commissioner's province from 1952, it had its own Legislative Assembly and Council of Ministers. However, it is important to note that the Chairman of the SRC gave his dissenting vote against the merger of Himachal with Punjab and wanted it to be retained under the Centre.

The main criticism of the SRC report was that the recommendations on Punjab were just a minor modification of the Maha Punjab demand by the Hindu organizations, notably the Jana Sangh, the RSS and the Arya Samaj. The Punjab Congress committee gave freedom to their members to give their own individual representations to the SRC, but the official position of Punjab government was more in alignment with

the views of the Hindu Congressmen and Jan Sangh which favored something akin to Maha Punjab.

This was also the view propagated by the Hindi Press of Jullundur (Veer Pratap and Punjab Kesari), and though it had received initial support from the Hindi speaking Hindus of Haryana, they were now more inclined towards a separate Haryana, for they felt that they were being dominated by the Punjabis . Speaking in the Parliament in December 1955, Thakur Das Bhargava showed that the representation from Haryana region was less than six percent in the higher echelons of the state's political, judicial and administrative set-up.

Just as it appeared that Punjab was on the brink, Pratap Singh Kairon, the prosperous and enterprising Jat Sikh, educated at Colnel Brown's school at Dehradun, Khalsa Colege Amritsar and at Michigan and Berkeley in the US took over as the Chief Minister of Punjab, and for the next eight years, ruled it with an iron fist. Under his leadership, the Regional Formula divided the bilingual state into two linguistic units (Hindi and Punjabi speaking), and regional committees, consisting of MLAs belonging to each region were constituted to deal with specific matters.

The Akali Dal accepted this proposition – for this was in many ways the implicit acceptance of the Punjabi Suba. Kairon also played on the Jat Sikh card, opened the membership of the Congress to the Akalis, and marginalized Master Tara Singh by propping up Sant Fateh Singh. While both sat on fasts -unto -death, the withdrawal of these fasts on 'general assurances of goodwill' did not enhance their reputations. The Master had led the movement for over three decades, but found that on account of his Khatri birth and urban background, the rural Jat Sikhs who now held sway in the Akali and SGPC referred to him derisively as a Bhapa Sikh- a rather sad commentary on the state of politics across party lines in the country. The Regional formula did not work, but Kairon's firm grip on the state ensured that all protest movements – from the Akali Morchas to the Save Hindi – were put down with an iron hand. That was not all. Kairon also laid the

foundations of the Green Revolution in the rural, and industrial estates in the urban areas – thereby building successful alliances with the vocal and dominant sections of both the communities.

While Sant Fateh Singh had started out as the Master's protégé, he soon understood that politics is about building bridges, and speaking the right thing at the right time to the right audience. He always spoke of Punjabi, rather than the Sikh Suba, and during the 1962 and 1965 Wars, he offered his unconditional support, leveraging the fact that Punjabis and Sikhs were very well represented in the army – both as soldiers and officers, and a Cabinet committee headed by Lok Sabha Speaker Hukam Singh, which included YB Chavan and Indira Gandhi was appointed to make a recommendation on Punjabi Suba. Given the popular mood and support from most sections, including the Hindu legislators from Haryana and Himachal, the Hukam Singh committee recommended that the Punjabi speaking region be reconstituted into a unilingual Punjabi state, Hindi speaking areas into the Haryana state, and the hill areas of erstwhile Punjab be merged into Himachal.

This was the triumph of Punjabi Suba over Maha Punjab. And of course, the state of Haryana!