

The Akali Dal Politics: Central Legislative Assembly Election (1945)

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Abstract

One of the most engaging aspects of democracy is the election process. Over the years, elections have become a major landmark in our political, social, economic life. For an ordinary man, election days are like celebration of a festival because the politics comes with promises and assurances. For politicians and political parties, elections mean days and nights of relentless campaigning, rushing from one place to other place, using varying means of transportation, addressing large gathering, mingle with the people. The right to vote was given on the basis of some conditions i.e. education, income tax, revenue, rather than on the basis of age. By 1945, about eleven per cent of the population was enfranchised in the British Punjab. For the Muslim League, it was the struggle for life and death, since the Punjab was considered the cornerstone of 'Pakistan'. The Congress party contested for the unity of India against the 'Pakistan' scheme. The Akali Dal had to prove like the Muslim League that it represented the Sikh community. One way or another election decided the fate of India. The present article attempts to delineate the Akali Dal politics during the Central Legislative Assembly election of 1945.

The Punjab was the only province in British India where besides Hindus and Muslims, the Sikhs were also in large numbers. The population of the Punjab as whole was 28.4 million in 1941: Muslims: 16,217,242, Hindus including Scheduled Castes 7,550,372; others included 3,757,401 and the Sikhs 4,651,205, total population of the Punjab being 28,418,819.¹ The Central Legislative Assembly elections were held in the Punjab in November 1945. These elections were significant in themselves because the election propaganda and slogans of various parties were different from previous and the post-partition elections. Along with the varied issues, the 'Pakistan' question was more highlighted by the Muslim League. The other political parties could not succeed in opposition to 'Pakistan' because there were many differences among themselves. The Central Legislative Assembly elections surcharged the political parties for the Provincial

Legislative Assembly election (1946) and the result of that election had also affected the provincial election results as well.

The Shiromani Akali Dal had been supporting the Indian National Congress on every matter, but they contested these elections separately. Akali leader Ganga Singh in his statement urged the people, 'Sikhs would exercise their right to vote carefully, as this time their representatives to legislatures had to shape their destiny'. He asked the Sikhs to pledge before the *Guru Granth Sahib* to vote merely the Akali candidates. But he cleared that as far as the struggle for freedom of the country was concerned the Sikhs were with the Congress.² However, the Congress wanted to put up their separate candidates for the Sikh seats. This meant the right of separate representation. It was felt that the Sikh representatives should exercise not for the betterment of the community but under the dictates of the party, which had no faith in *panthic* organization.³ The Akalis opposed M.A. Jinnah's Pakistan slogan but like the Congress they were failed to unit themselves. The Hindu Sabha had mostly lost its mass support. The end of the War found the Communist Party of India depressed and isolated.⁴ To see the party position and their stand towards the Pakistan majority of Sikh peasants shifted their loyalty towards the Akali Dal.

Though the Sikhs had gone to polls to register their opposition to Pakistan, yet the Akalis and the Nationalist Sikhs were divided into various factions. Primarily popular groups among the Akalis were known as Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh groups, and the Nationalists were known as the Nagoke and Kharak Singh groups.⁵ The Akali Dal contested these elections in co-operation with the Congress but on its own ticket and with its own election manifesto, which claimed *Khalistan* for the Sikhs in case 'Pakistan' was conceded to the Muslims. In these elections, an unsuccessful attempt was made by the Akali Dal to come to an understanding with the Muslim League. The effort was not sincere but the reaction of the failure of the Akali-Congress accord.⁶

The Akalis argued that the Sikh representatives in the provincial elections were only member representatives of the Sikhs and owing allegiance to the *panth*. While serving the interests of the country, they truly protected the interests of the *panth*.⁷ They

appealed to all the Sikhs to lend their full support to the candidates selected by the *Pnthic* Board, “as the issues involved in this election are vital and, therefore, it is essential that the *panth* should speak with one voice and develop the maximum strength to cope with the problems that are to arise in the near future”.⁸ Sardar Santokh Singh stated that there was no reason why the right of the Sikhs be trampled underfoot. If there could be honourable compromise with the Congress, it would be welcomed, but if not the *panth* must fight elections to maintain its identity and existence, it was considered the duty of every Sikh to unite at critical moment and make stronger the *panth*. They thought that as long as separate electorates remain they had no option but to search for elections on *panthic* ticket. They would declare without equivocation they would oblige with any party that stands for a United India. They must not, therefore, disperse their potency to promote the educational and economic, agricultural and industrial development of the province.⁹ Inaugurating the Akali Dal’s election campaign in Amritsar Master Tara Singh had issued a lengthy statement to the Press felt that minority like the Sikhs had to take a great care because the new constitution for India would be framed by the elected representatives of the people. He stated, “freedom would be of little avail if British domination is to be replaced by either Muslim or Hindu domination. He does not believe in strengthening Muslim domination under the garb of freedom and then fighting against the communities”.¹⁰ He wanted to see the *panth* and country free and secondly, he paid attention on *panthic* well being on priority based.¹¹

On 29 September, 1945 at Gujranwala Akali leaders decided to contest the elections which were to form the basis of the projected constitution making body whose decisions were bound to have far-reaching effects on the future of the *panth*.¹² Master Tara Singh was authorized to constitute a Sikh Election Board in consultation with the leaders of all groups in the community. After an aborted attempt by the Nagoke group to have elections fought on the Akali Dal ticket, it was eventually decided that Sikh candidates would contest for elections on the Sikh tickets and would support the Congress where national subject was concerned.¹³ It was also decided that only such representative should be elected, who could effectively protect the interests of the community and fight for country’s freedom.¹⁴ At Gujranwala Master Tara Singh elected six (6) members of the Sikh Election Board. The Board was authorized to give tickets to

the candidates who were to contest the elections. Infact, all the six members were the Akalis or related to the Shiromani Akali Dal. They did not involve any other Sikh party member in the Board like the Central Akali Dal, Namdhari Darbar, Ramgrahia Central Federation, All India Lubana Sikh League, Sikh Youth League and Kisan Sabha.¹⁵ The *Panth* appealed to all Sikhs to lend their full support to the candidates selected by the Board, “as the issues involved in the election are vital and, therefore it is *panth* that would speak with one voice and develop the maximum strength to cope with problems that are to arise in the near future”.¹⁶ Babu Labh Singh claimed that the Akali Dal was only a single party who represented the Sikh community, “the Khalsa *Panth* was created by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. We can save this *panth*, the *Panth* of Guru Gobind Singh Ji and without Shiromani Akali Dal no other party could be considered as the *Panthic* Party”.¹⁷ Addressing an Akali Conference in village Gurusar Satlani, Jathedar Mohan Singh, President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandak Committee and some others leaders delivered vigorous speeches deliberating the significance of the *panthic* ticket. They asserted that the Sikhs, who had been given separate rights after such a great struggle, could not entrust their destiny to the other communities. The two resolutions were adopted urging the voters to vote the nominees of the *panth* and demanded lenient treatment to the Indian National Army.¹⁸ The Akalis gave the slogan *Panth Azad, Des Azad*. Through our separate existence we would transform it into the realism. So, elections would be fought only under the *panthic* banner. At this moment when the slogans of Moscow first, Wardha first and Pakistan first were raised, if Master Tara Singh didn't give *panthic* slogan, the coming generations would curse on us.¹⁹

The Akali Dal started its election campaign on 27 August 1945. A Conference was held at Guru Ka Bagh under the Presidentship of Sardar Hem Singh Thekadar. Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, MLA, and Sardar Kartar Singh Advocate delivered their exciting speeches. Kartar Singh said, “one thing which the Sikh community could never ignore that if the candidate would be elected in the Central Legislative Assembly who is in favour of non-Sikh communities then our existence would end and reservation we got would also be meaningless.... I only say to the Sikh brethren, they should go after beyond the emotions and see the truth and work only for *panthic* interests”.²⁰ However, Baba Kharak Singh in a press statement opposed such a

so called *Panthic* Board and openly supported the Congress candidates.²¹ Furthermore, Giani Kartar Singh pointed that out of 1565 elected members of provincial legislatures only 36 were the Sikhs. So the Sikhs would have only 4 members in the Constituent Assembly, which would be contained of 159 members. It was, therefore, essential that all the Sikh members should be elected on behalf of the Shiromani Akali Dal so that a joint demand against 'Pakistan' could be made. Udham Singh Nagoke argued that the Akali were tried soldiers both inside and outside the country. As such, the Congress should not have asked for any guarantee from them. He appealed the Congress party to leave them alone to contest the elections.²² Master Tara Singh regretted that though the Congress talked so much against communalism, yet by signing the Lucknow Pact (1916) it had accepted the principle of communal.²³ Ujjal Singh appealed to the Sikhs that "the coming elections have special importance in view of the fact that members of the proposed Constituent Assembly will be selected by the elected representatives of the communities in the various Assemblies. If the Sikhs have to maintain their position, they must send such candidates to the Assembly as may be expected to fight fearlessly for the *panth* and for the country."²⁴ Sardar Ishar Singh Majhail, Jathedar Udham Singh Nogoce, Jathedar Mohan Singh and some other leaders with-pro-Congress tendencies delivered speeches at village Pheloke, district Amritsar. They declared that they would not oppose the Congress for the cause of freedom. However, by safeguarding the religious rights of the community, they must maintain their separate entity and it was solely this reason, that the Shiromani Akali Dal contests the forthcoming elections.²⁵ The Akali Dal for the time being discarded its *Azad Punjab* scheme and entered the elections without any demand for a separate homeland, for safeguarding of the rights, language, culture and traditions of the Sikh people.²⁶ The Sikh leaders, similar to the Muslim League preferred to unite the Sikh masses under the *panthic* plank. Master Tara Singh appealed the people, "suppose I am not good and have done many mistakes but that is mine not of the Sikh *panth*. We are forgetful but *panth* is unforgettable".²⁷

The same fear was in the minds of the Muslim League leaders and masses that they had been ignored under the Congress regime and their rights would not be safe after the independence. Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din said, "after being in the Congress for two or three years, I was convinced that there was no place for the Muslims in the

organization....”²⁸ The Indian National Congress party was fully confident that it was the only national party which represented all communities. “Who dies, if the Congress lives and who lives if the Congress dies” asked S. Partap Singh, in course of a rejoinder to the statement of Master Tara Singh challenging the right of the Congress to contest the forthcoming elections from the Sikh constituencies. Referring to Master’s statement, he asserted that as result of separate rights given to the Sikhs their protection would not be annihilated if the Congress gets the Sikhs elected on its tickets. He blamed that Master Tara Singh was trying to be more royalist than the king. Imperialist England introduced separate communal representation in India after the failure of Lord Curzon’s policy of dividing Bengal for administrative purposes.²⁹ The Congress leaders fully hoped that they would win the two seats which were reserved for the Sikhs in the Central Legislative Assembly.³⁰ Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also criticized communal parties; Muslim League and the Akali Dal. He argued that they only paid lip sympathy to freedom but never suffered or made sacrifices. Certain Sikh leaders were misleading the Sikh masses. These leaders, when the Congress was engaged against the British, were engaged for minor gains, sometimes with the Unionists, sometimes with the Muslim League and some times with the Commander-in-Chief. The Sikhs would only be harming their own interests, if they let themselves go into communal channels.³¹ He assured the Sikhs and the Muslims, that there would be real power in the hands of the people without caste and creed in free India. “The time for knocking at the doors of the British Government is long past. In free India to come, there would be no Hindu *Raj*, nor a Muslim *Raj*, in fact, *Raj* of all Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and others with power resting in the hands of the people as a whole. It will not be the *raj* of a handful few, for this will make no more difference than will the replacement a few white officials by Indians. This *raj* will be a combined rule of all the elements that make India”.³² However, these appeals did not attract the ignorant masses which believed that their interests and rights would be safe only by those who belonged to their communities.

The Congress “wanted to know that the battle of the Punjab is tug of war. If they succeed in this battle, then they will easily lead to the Muslim League and other communal parties. For this, they need to be united themselves and compromised with other groups without any delay who are fighting for independence.”³³ The Akalis failed to

unite all Sikh groups under the *panthic* flag. Three prominent leaders of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, namely Hazara Singh, S. Satinder Singh and Bawa Kahan Singh Bedi, contradicted that with the so called *panthic* ticket the Akali party could not be considered truly *panthic* ticket, as on the so called Panthic Election Board, the Chief Khalsa Diwan and other Sikh parties were not represented.³⁴ Thus, the Central Akali Dal, Namdhari Darbar, the Congress Sikh Party, The Nationalist Sikh Workers' Party, and Malwa Khalsa Darbar supported the Congress candidates.³⁵

During the central elections, the Pakistan issue was highlighted by the Muslim League party. The Akalis and the Congress laid emphasis on the *panthic* interests and United India respectively. Except the Congress, the Muslim League and the Akali Dal fought on the communal lines. Mr. M.A Jinnah laid claim to the Punjab as the cornerstone of his 'Pakistan'.³⁶ He stated "Pakistan is a question of life and death for us. We shall live and die for Pakistan. The moon for Pakistan is shining and we shall reach it".³⁷ The Sikh leaders pointed out that the Sikh community stands unequivocally pledged to fight this scheme. "The Punjab is a homeland of Sikhs. The Sikh vote can and shall be thrown only on one side that is prepared to treat the Sikhs as equals".³⁸ 'The Sikh *Panth* will resist Pakistan to the last man'. This declaration was made by Sardar Ishar Singh Majhail. He exhorted the Sikhs to rally around the *Panthic* flag which was the emblem of sacrifice and freedom. He appealed to the Sikh voters to vote for only those Sikh candidates who would stand on the ticket of the *Panth*.³⁹ Sardar Baldev Singh declared that if the Muslim League promised to build houses of gold for the Sikhs, in Pakistan they would refuse to live in it. The Sikh *panth* had proclaimed to the world its opposition to Pakistan in unambiguous terms. The Sikhs would have nothing to do with the Muslim League, so long as it stuck to the Pakistan scheme. Appealing to the Sikhs to vote for the Akalis and against them every vote cast for the Communist would be a vote for a Pakistan and the Muslim League. He said that the Sikhs should have determined group of members in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, united by common purpose and ideology so that they could effectively serve both the country and community.⁴⁰

Baba Kharak Singh, in a public meeting in Kapurthala House grounds, emphasized that "to vote a candidate on the so called *panthic* ticket is to vote for

reactionary forces and against India's freedom movement and therefore, the teaching of the great tenth Guru Gobind Singh who stood against and preached against slavery of any kind". He further said, "so long as even one Sikh child is alive Pakistan will not be allowed to be established".⁴¹

The Akalis also did propaganda against the Communist party which supported the Pakistan demand. At Guru Ka Bagh, Sh. Harbans Singh Ahilkara delivered a speech and said that the Communists have deviated from religion and Sikhism. Sh. Atma Singh stated, "it is only the *panthic* party which makes the *Panth* successful in every field. So, the candidate who would contest from the Shiromani Akali Dal means the candidate of the *panth*. Hence, it is the duty of every Sikh to cast votes in favour of the *panthic* candidate".⁴² The Communists did open propaganda in favour of Pakistan. Master Tara Singh alleged that the Congress is ready to concede the Pakistan scheme of the Muslim League. The candidates selected from the Sikh tickets would mean that portion of the *panth* accepts the Pakistan scheme.⁴³ S. Baldev Singh appealed to the Sikhs to vote only to Akalis and any vote cast for the Communists would be a vote for Pakistan and the Muslim League.⁴⁴ Sardar Ishar Singh Majhail, Jathedar Udham Singh Nagoke and Jathedar Mohan Singh criticised the Communists and the Punjab ministry and discussed at length problems of the peasants. They declared that they would contest in the law courts the validity of the *Chahi* tax collected in some districts.⁴⁵

The importance of Central Legislative Assembly election becomes evident from the fact that Sardar Sohan Singh Rais, nephew of Sardar Balwant Singh, came there by air from Pehawar to vote for the Congress candidate.⁴⁶ A 125 year old *jat* came in a *tanga* and supported by volunteers entered the polling booth to cast his vote in favour of the Congress candidate in the Central Assembly election at village Pasrur in Sialkot district.⁴⁷ In many places, voters came out in the form of a group accompanied by brass band carrying flat in their hands and shouted loudly whom they polled their vote.⁴⁸ The wine (mostly country liquor) and money were freely used in the election to the Central Legislative Assembly was one of the allegations made in a report which Master Mota Singh, and other Sikh leaders had submitted to the provincial Congress Committee to be sent to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. These Sikh leaders had been touring all over the Punjab

in connection with the election. Master Mota Singh, in his report, alleged that at one polling station, voters were bought for Rs. 200 each and actually Rs. 3,000 was paid for buying 15 votes.⁴⁹

Out of twelve seats, four candidates were selected unopposed. Three were the Muslim League and one for the Congress candidates. For eight seats, there are only twenty two candidates. The Congress party captured all the three Non-Muhammdan seats; the Muslim League got six Muhammadan seats. The Akali Party got two Sikh seats. Only one independent candidate was elected on the Punjab Landholders' Constituency. Now at this time, the total 24,897 Sikh voters were for the Assembly voter list. Out of these votes, the *Panthic* candidates got 64.1 per cent; the Congress candidates got 35.8 per cent votes. The Muslims League got 83.09 per cent votes from the Muhammadan constituencies and the Khaksars got only 3.2 per cent. From the Non-Muhammadan constituencies, the Congress got 94.2 per cent and the Hindu Mahasabha got only 5.6 per cent votes.⁵⁰ In all contested constituencies in India, the Congress got 59.6 per cent, the Muslim League 27.7 per cent, Hindu Mahasabha 4.5 per cent and the Akali party polled 1.81 per cent of the total votes in the Central Legislative Assembly elections.⁵¹

The Central Legislative Assembly Election Results (1945)⁵²

Party	Unopposed	Contested	Total
Muslim League	3	3	6
Indian National Congress	1	2	3
The Akali Dal	0	2	2
Hindu Mahasabha	0	0	0
Khaksar	0	0	0
Independent	0	1	1
Total	4	8	12

So, it is clear from the above propaganda and results that the Muslim League represented the Muslims, the Congress the Hindus and the Akali Dal the Sikhs. The Hindu Mahasabha and the Khaksar had no hold on the masses. The Muslim League's

demand of Pakistan and the Sikhs' fear from Congress party and their stand against the Pakistan were very helpful for the Muslim League and the Akali Dal to attract the masses of their communities. The Congress failed to show that they are the party of all communities. With the help of the nationalist Sikhs, they fought on two Sikh seats but failed to get any. One point is also clear from the elections that every community wanted to save their community identity first from the freedom of the country. The main propaganda was going for the Sikh seats rather than the Muslims. The Muslim League had no strong opposition because the Unionists were not fighting this election. The election also cleared the picture for the provincial elections result which were to be held in February 1946. The elections were more important for the Muslim League because they were active to establish contact for the masses and propaganda, compared with the main opposition, the Unionist party, which had started it late. The *panthic* slogans of the Akalis were very helpful for them like if they did not contest on the Sikh *Panth*, their community and *panth* would not be safe. These elections surcharged all the political parties for the Punjab Legislative Assembly elections. All political parties contested the next elections on the same propaganda because in the first battle all the parties were successful in these slogans.

Both the Congress candidates had lost in the Central Assembly elections. The main reason of their defeat was that all the Government machinery and officers helped the Akali party. The officials sent letter to the *namardars*, *zaildars* and *supaidposhes* to help the *panthic* candidates. But all of these efforts failed to gain the support of the masses. So main reasons were that S. Partap Singh Kairon shared gossip with Profesor Ganga Singh and Jathedar Mohan Singh in the election day. The Communist workers who were bringing the voters had objection on his behaviour. He replied, we were sitting close together because we had many associations with them. S Darshan Singh who had brought only four votes by the party's car in all the day which were polled to the Akali candidate. Many Congress supporters and workers helped the Akali candidates. In Killa Didar Singh, Moga Singh had reached one hour late. He had a power of attorney to show this reason many voters were shifted and polled in favour of Akali candidate. S. Harnam Singh, Working Committee member of Punjab Congress Committee, was incharge where there was only a single voter. The Congress workers were not present at the polling

booths. At Raja Lang, Namdhari people commented on the Communists “there is no worker of Congress party, but you were seeing to be run”.⁵³ Thus, the Central Legislative Assembly elections surcharged the political atmosphere in the Punjab. It was a trial which unfolded its fury and momentum during the Provincial Legislative Assembly elections.

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