

Why Federalism is Punjab's Foremost Agenda!

Jaspal Singh Sidhu

Abstract: *What would the history of modern South Asia look like if it was to be written from the perspective of a Sikh in Punjab? What are the fault lines along which the modern Indian nation has been carved out and at what costs? How should the emerging issues between the central government and the people of eastern Punjab be put in perspective? This article raises those questions and answers them by focusing on Punjab and the interests of its people. It does so by invoking historical mis-judgements, interests of the Hindu governing classes of India and their impact on the larger populace consisting of linguistic, communitarian, religious, and regional multiplicities.*

First of all, I don't call India a country. I call it a subcontinent—South Asia. In history, India has never been one country. (Jawaharlal) Nehru said it was a 5000-year-old civilization; then people talk about the Vedic civilization. I don't subscribe to that. If we go with how recorded history interprets things then first it was the Mauryan empire—even though that did not cover the entire subcontinent, some parts were beyond the control of that empire also. Then came the Gupta empire, the second, from which the RSS people are getting inspiration, was much smaller than the Mauryan empire. Then later came the Mughals. Mughals again could not conquer the whole subcontinent, so that was also a smaller area, not the entire South Asia. After the Mughals, the British came. They covered the entire subcontinent, including Sri Lanka, Burma, and adjoining areas.



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What we see is that all the four empires followed different religions. Mauryans were Buddhists, Guptas were Hindu imperialists, Mughals were Muslims, and the British were Christian. That's why we can't say that there was unity—cultural unity. This is beyond comprehension, for most people. It was all nationalism that (Jawaharlal) Nehru wanted to build up, Congress wanted to build up. They had a long-term plan. That's why Nehru wrote a history; you know history is an important subject! Nehru wrote 'Discovery of India' eulogizing the civilization, 5000-6000 years old Indian civilization, always tending to unite, and so many other eulogizing expressions he has written. At the same time, one thing is very glaring that it dismissed Ranjit Singh's rule, totally dismissed in a few paragraphs. It looks like he had some sort of scheme in his own mind. This is how I look at things, you know.

After the British left, Congress wanted the British to still be a part of our self-rule. The British had a different perception. They never wanted direct rule, because they had the experience of 1857—the mutiny, or some people call it the first war of independence. During that period, the British got a lot of support from the local princes, and they realized that the local rulers could be allies of the British empire. And they were! All through they had been allies of the British empire and they supported the British empire. One thing is very clear—the Indian troops captured the whole subcontinent for the British. They never came to India with more than 10,000 soldiers. All their military expeditions were funded by the local seths, local bankers, we can call them local Hindu bankers, particularly Jagat Seths of Bengal. The British got the funds and troops from here to capture the whole country. This is also the evidence that India has never been a country but now we are forced to think about that. India has been a combination of different nationalities or groups of people which have different histories, different languages, different ways of life and all that.

One thing I would like to include here. The Leftists, even in the case of Punjab, among others, supported New Delhi for retaining its control so as to build the unity and integrity of this country. In 1946, the British prepared a document known as the Adhikari's document (Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari); that document is still available. They wrote down in black and white, that India, after its independence in 1947, should be divided into 17 different units, according to the cultures. They have an elaborate document on that.

First, we can go to the independence movement. When Gandhi came on the scene during the independence movement, things totally changed. I want to clearly say: he Hinduized the whole thing, he introduced the Hindu idioms—fasting, ashram, and so many other things. He made a lot of mobilization of the people, no doubt, but at the same time it created some sort of bad blood with the Muslims. What we ultimately had was the partition of India and it's because of Gandhi. If we quote him, he said "Hindu religion matters to me more than politics." He believed in Jain-infected Hindu orthodoxy, reverence for cow and he was for the caste system. He said that India has been one unit because of the caste system, that it's a better social arrangement. We all know this. Hindu

imagery and symbolism—fast, ashram, penance, satyagraha, non-violence, prayers—all of this totally turned the movement into a Hindu ethos dominated Indian independence movement. That created the whole problem. At the same time, he was favouring the capitalists. He openly said that in India we want no political strikes, no discord between the landlords and tenants, and advised the tenants to suffer rather than fight, in the cause of preserving national unity; all these were his words long back in 1930. What he created in the whole movement was a drift. We can't say this movement was for the independence of the whole country.

This had some sort of reflection, some sort of impact on Punjab also. At that time, it was a bigger Punjab, including the current Pakistan Punjab, more than 60% has gone to that side. At that time, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and this Punjab now—the Smaller Punjab—was all one. Punjab never gave a place to the Congress. In Punjab it was taken as a Hindu party. Punjab was having a Unionist Party. No doubt the Unionist party was propped up by the landlords, by the British empire at that time. But they didn't allow the Congress to come into Punjab, they did not allow even the Muslim League to come into Punjab until 1946.

In 1937 elections Congress party won 8 out of 11 provinces, but it is a recorded thing that the administration or ruling of the Congress was not different from the British empire. That was the main thing that created bad blood between Muslims and Hindus at that time. The deadlock between the Congress and the (Muslim) League continued. Otherwise, the country would have been one, both parties would have accepted Cripps Mission Plan. At the same time, they accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan, of a confederation, not a division. It would have been accepted, had that 1937 election not created that kind of problem between the two main parties in British India. What is clear is that at the time, this nationalism they attempted to build was Hindu nationalism. Most of the contribution was made by the Bengalis at that time, during the latter part of the 19th century. They created some sort of Bharat Mata, the figure and imagery, that clicked much among most of the people in the vast India. We know that Congress itself accepted the partition, passing a party resolution for partition by the votes of 153 to 19, overwhelmingly supporting the scheme of division. You see that they were in a hurry to come to the throne, to become the ruling party. That's why Nehru, and even (Vallabhbhai) Patel, were ready to go for anything that Mountbatten or the British wanted at that time. In 1930, Congress adopted a resolution for complete independence from the British. But at that time, they were ready to form an Interim government with dominion status for India. They went for dominion status, leaving the old resolution which they adopted 17 years earlier, just to grab the power, get the transfer of power to them.

Another thing the Congress did wrong at that time was to not accommodate the Muslim League in the scheme of things. At that time, Muslims were fearing that the sort of arrangement this democratic setup is coming to, we will permanently be under the control of the Hindus. Muslims were only 1/4th of the population, that's why they were having such fears, that's why they wanted a separate country. They also had bitter experience of 1937 Congress rule in 8 provinces in British

India. At the same time, the Congress also created some myths, which we are carrying till today. One of the myths is that Patel as a Home Minister, the iron man, he totally created the unity of the country. He forced the 560 princes, the potentates, to accept the merger plan, to merge with India and leave their thrones. But actually, this is a myth, because most of the princes, 550 of them, leaving aside 10 princes, were all Hindu princes, and they were ruling the majority Hindu population. That's why it was easy. Menon has already written overwhelmingly on that. They were promised that all their wealth and positions would be kept intact and in turn they were ready to accept to merge into India. Already they were under the protectorate of the British empire, now they were under the protectorate of the Congress government in New Delhi. So, they had no problem. That's why it is a myth deliberately doled out that something bigger has been done by Patel. Out of the 550 potentates only 10 were Muslims, out of them only 3 revolted. Nizam of Hyderabad said he will not join, he will be independent, Junagadh also opted for Pakistan, and so did Bhopal. Only Bhopal was a Muslim state, but that Nawab also was encircled by most of the Hindu rulers, that's why he came under pressure.

Congress always claimed itself to be a party which can claim representation of the whole country and that they could speak for the Muslim population also because they have Muslim members in the party. But how many Muslim members? Only 3%. Never did the Muslim membership in the Congress party exceed 3%, at any stage.

Since the beginning, they were building a nation, a nation-state based on the western norms. They wanted a strong nation, and for building a strong nation they only wanted to create a strong center in New Delhi, and they created that. Strong center means centralization of the power there. That's why Nehru walked away from the Cabinet Mission plan, and then Jinnah also followed, something they both had signed earlier. Why did he walk out? He has written about it in a number of places – “because we wanted a strong nation, because Delhi had never been strong, that is why invaders came and we were subjugated for so many centuries”.

So, it was a transfer of power. Actually, power was transferred because of the Second World War. The British never expected that the Second World War would create so much problem for them. During the war, the British had taken a loan from the USA and so many other countries, they were in debt, they didn't have the money, they didn't have the resources to keep their control over the colonies, including India. They left 16 countries within a short period. Had there not been a Second World War, India would have been a slave for a longer time. Even at that time, Nehru remarked somewhere that the British may rule the country till 1970s. They never expected that they would get power so soon.

So, power was transferred to them. It was a myth they propagated that they have earned independence. This propagation helped the Congress win 3-4 elections, continuously till the Emergency period.

At the same time, one thing they also did, they created a Constitution, not a constitution which we could say represents the people. First of all, there was no universal suffrage. All the Constituent Assembly members were elected just before the partition. After the partition, the same Constituent Assembly was kept intact, which was dominated by upper caste people, mostly Brahmins. If you see the names, most are upper caste people and that's why they gave a Hindu bias to the whole Constitution. That is the reason that two Sikh members of the Constituent Assembly, Hukum Singh and Putinder Singh Mann, didn't sign, they didn't append their signatures.

This is how the problem started—with the centralization of all powers. India's Constitution practically does not have a federal structure as such. Federal structure would have been there had the Cabinet Plan been adopted. It had been accepted by both the major parties, and the Federal system would have been restored to some extent in the Constitution, but nobody was there. Even the Constituent Assembly was not re-elected after the partition when 70-80 Muslim members left. The same remaining members drafted the constitution. And what was the Constitution? Out of the 395 articles, 250 have been picked up from the Indian Act of 1935 verbatim, without changing even a comma or full stop. It means that the same British administrative setup, same British state is still operating since India was declared a republic on January 26, 1950. So, the same Constitution is now continuing.

So, coming to Punjab, today's topic being why Punjab's immediate, foremost option is going for federalism? First of all, Punjab was never a part of India. It was merged with India by the British after the defeat of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1850. Earlier, it had been a part of Central Asia, part of Kabul, for some time part of the Iran empire, whatever we call it, practically it was the Lahore Durbar. We can't say which country, it has no nomenclature as such, but it was a Lahore Durbar, which for 300 years was ruled by the Mughals from New Delhi, and most of the time from the other (western) side by Afghans and others. The Mughal durbar before Ranjit Singh, it was always governed by governors who were either Afghan, Iranian, and for some time Turkish Muslims. Hari Ram Gupta, a historian, says that had the Sikhs not fought Zaman Shah (Durrani), grandson of Ahmed Shah Abdali, Punjab would have been a part of Afghanistan. When Ahmed Shah Abdali invaded Dilli or Punjab 17 times, he even demolished Golden Temple two times, in 1764. He was told that Sikhs are fighting against the invaders taking inspiration from the Golden Temple and Akal Takht. That's why he made it a point that it should be demolished, and it was demolished. After Ahmed Shah Abdali, his son was not capable, so he kept quiet for some time, then his grandson Zaman Shah came to Lahore with a big army. Ranjit Singh was a small warrior at that time, 15 years old, and he told the other Sardars that we should collectively oppose the invaders and they opposed it. That's how Ranjit Singh emerged victorious and he captured Lahore Durbar,

and he was in power practically for 50 years. Even before that, Sikhs were ruling Punjab up to Jamuna, a larger tract of Punjab, they were ruling in the shape of *misls*¹ at different places.

Practically, Sikhs ruled this region, but not as a majority people, they've never been more than 10% of the total population. Most of the historians are now enquiring into the question, what prompted the Sikhs to continue to fight against the invaders, while the local Muslims did not fight against the invaders, even the Hindus who were more than 30% at the time, did not fight. The small number of Sikhs fought because, I can say, they got a lot of inspiration from the Sikh philosophy, Sikh gurus, and a different way of life compared to other people. They got emancipated, they were the liberated people at that time, and those who fought at that time were morally upright people. Unless and until people are fighting on moral principles, for the egalitarian setup and social equality, one cannot fight for long. When that thing got missing, they lost the rule. During Ranjit Singh's rule, they lost that inspiration, that spirit of egalitarianism and social equality. Caste system entered there, social inequality entered there, Hindu way of life entered there, all the Hindu rites and traditions returned back to the Punjabi society at that time. Otherwise, how could he rule such a larger tract? At that time, in 1830, the total revenue collection from his state was much more than the entire British India. Why did the empire collapse? Sikhism took birth and arose against the caste system, for social equality, fight against inequality, fight against the Hindu way of life. When all this had gone from the scene during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, which was not according to Sikh philosophy, it had to collapse and it did.

Now, coming to the present thing, Punjab has a different mental makeup, different way of thinking. That is why Punjab is always upset, particularly the Sikhs. They are a small minority, but even then, they are a different type of people, much mobilizing, much emancipated, they didn't have social restriction as such by religion, custom, rites, that's why they have been a different type of people. They also fought against the British. Some people are very much of the opinion that the Sikhs always supported the Britishers. In the beginning, the Sikh Sardars who were the chiefs created by the empire, supported the British. The British were also a different type of rulers, we can say shrewd type of rulers. They identified that Sikhs could help them much more. Instead of disbanding the whole Khalsa army, they recruited them in their own army. At one time, during the first and second world war, soldiers from Punjab were one-third of the entire army of India, and most of them were Sikhs. The British recruited them and gave them employment. They also created one other thing that is the canal colonies, a number of canals, starting with one in the 1860s. Then, in western Punjab they created 3-4 more canals. They wanted soldiers from Punjab, they wanted grains from Punjab. Punjab was in surplus in grain production that time also. Grains were exported from Karachi port at that time. That's why one of the first railways was built from Lahore to Peshawar, for the transportation of grains. It was a granary for the British also. Even after the partition, Punjab has been a granary for the whole country, after the Green revolution. Now

¹ Misls refer to the sovereign states of the Sikh Confederacy which emerged in the 18th century.

Punjab's area is only 1.5% of the country, they are producing much more surplus wheat and rice, and contributing more than 70% to the central pool.

Coming back to the earlier thing, the Sikhs always thought they could not go with the Muslims. Muslim League's Jinnah tried to cultivate them but not wholeheartedly. Little bit of indications were given to them that they could come to the Pakistan side. But we can't say that any sort of hectic lobbying was done for that, or anyone sincerely did so from the Muslim League so as to take the Sikhs along with them. The Sikhs were mostly comfortable with the Congress people. Since the Nankana Sahib gurdwara incident in 1921, Gandhi especially visited the place. Even during the 1925 Jaito Morcha, Nehru went to them. They tried everything to keep the Sikhs to their side and the Congress succeeded in that. People even say that Congress co-opted the Sikh leaders, to some extent it is correct. Sikhs believed in them too much, but in politics this does not work. They never asked openly for anything. Some Sikh leaders started asking Nehru, Patel and other Congress leaders what they would get after independence. And the majority of the people said, 'Don't ask at this moment, Congress leaders will get offended.' So, they didn't ask. Otherwise, all promises should have been given in writing. Nothing was in writing. It was promised that they will be having a region, where they can promote their religion, all opportunities to promote their language, culture, religion and all that, everything will be given. Nothing happened at that time.

Immediately after the partition of British India, Punjab suffered a lot, and mostly the Sikhs suffered more than the others. Most of them were the landed people, they lost most of the land. In East Punjab, Muslims were having less land. They left a smaller chunk of the land than what the Sikhs left in West Punjab. So, anybody owning 100 acres in West Punjab, they got only fifty or less than fifty here. Besides that, there was a lot of suffering. The biggest casualty of the partition was human lives, the killing, the massacre, in which almost 1 million people lost their life, 8 million were uprooted, at least 3-4 lakhs women humiliated, taken away, abducted, and all that. After all that loss, when the Sikh leaders came to Nehru asking for what they can have now, he said that things are changed now, nothing, forget all that. Then they went to Mountbatten. Mountbatten told the Sikh leaders—and it is on record—that had the Sikhs joined Pakistan they could have enjoyed a little bit of freedom, they could have survived, preserved their culture and all that. Now in the Hindu land, in the bigger land, their survival may not be possible. Then they went to Babasaheb Ambedkar. Ambedkar said that you have missed the bus now, you didn't get any promise in writing or otherwise, now you have the one option to go for Punjabi Subah, Punjabi language-based state, ask for that. So, they demanded the Punjabi Subah, because Congress at that time already had some sort of resolution that they would re-demarcate the whole country on the basis of language and culture. Even that was done very reluctantly by Nehru in 1956, when some people died, some people went on hunger strike and all that. Then they went for this Punjabi Subah movement that continued for 16 years. And Nehru said, nothing doing, till he is alive he will not give the Punjabi Subah, he will not accept their demand, and it continued. A lot of bad blood at that time pervaded between the Hindus and Sikhs. Congress always cultivated Punjabi Hindus, and even asked them

to leave their language and record their mother tongue not as Punjabi but as Hindi. In the census of 1961, most of the leaders and people, not all of them, but a bigger chunk of the Punjabi Hindu population, recorded their mother tongue as Hindi.

Akali (Dal) leaders got Punjabi Subah only because of the India-Pakistan war of 1965. War was looming large at that time, so there was no option, then Lal Bahadur (Shastri) promised that Akali Dal should support, and as a border state they should support the Indian efforts in the war. They sided with India. So, after the war ended, Punjabi Subah was announced in 1966. Again, all acts of centralization didn't have much impact on the cow belt and the Hindi hinterland—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan— and Maharashtra and other states. There was much more impact on Punjab. Punjab was not feeling free to be what it likes to be. Most of the period, the Congress managed, because before Punjabi Subah, Punjab was a Hindu majority state and as a result Congress was winning elections all the time. They didn't bother about the Punjabi culture, religion, and all that. Sikhs have their own aspirations. Every culture has their own aspirations. For Sikhs, those aspirations were not met, rather they were rejected, cruelly rejected. That discrimination made the Sikhs, the Akali leaders go for the second agitation, which was started, as what we call a *Dharam Yudh* on 4 August, 1982. Then Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale came on to the scene.

One thing is very clear now, the latest book has come in the market, by a senior RAW officer. He was a secretary at that time—G.B.S. Sidhu. His book is titled 'The Khalistan Conspiracy.' The Khalistan issue was deliberately whipped up, I have no hitch in saying that. Some violence took place in the beginning in 1982-83; I was a reporter at that time in Amritsar. One incident in which a bus was hijacked, Hindu passengers were segregated, and killed. We don't know till today who killed them, who was behind that. Nishara Pannu was another village incident in which four Hindu passengers were killed and 3-4 more passengers were saved by a Nihang or some other Sikh.

These two, and some incidents like a reckless firing in bazaars, immediately gave an impression outside Punjab, that the Hindus were being killed in Punjab. This also gave an impression that it was at the instance of Pakistan and that they wanted to divide the country and the unity and integrity of the country must be intact at any cost. This feeling was given through the pliable and much obliging press. Press is always ready to oblige. At that time press was the only print media, at that time there was no other media. Print media, it was easy to control. It was controlled by the government. This was the impression given outside, in the country, we can see the evidence of that impression of demonizing the Sikhs, when they were subjected to the massacre, in the pogrom after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in November 1984. Innocent people who had nothing to do with politics, poor people who happened to have turbans, who were not political at all, who were the supporters of Congress half the time, before 1980, were killed.

After 1980, whatever we are having now, the majoritarian rule, its seeds were sown by Indira Gandhi herself. At that time, this division was created only to target a small number of Sikhs, to consolidate the bigger Hindu society, and she succeeded in that. Whatever the Hindu Rashtra, or

whatever the Modi or RSS design, that people are openly talking about now, it was given birth by Indira Gandhi herself. That's why, Congress went for the centralization of powers and then for consolidating the Hindu *samaj*. When Indira Gandhi came to power for the second time, she changed her policy. Earlier, she fought the election along the lines of 'Garibi Hatao' (eradicate poverty) and also won it. But later, she was preparing herself for the 1985 elections on the policy of 'save the unity and integrity of the country.'

This had a clear message that minorities will be targeted. That minority targeting is continuing till today. Targeting of the Sikhs is over, it's no longer giving political dividends now, now the other minority—the Muslim minority—is there.

One thing I want to especially mention is that partition, centralization of power, communalization of the subcontinent even before the partition, majoritarian rule till today, it's all based on emotional or communal planks. They were deliberately whipped up, not to address the caste issue, repression against Dalits, or social equality issue. They are keeping all that whipped up deliberately. That also gives a lot of strength and control to the bigger Hindu society to the ruling elite—the upper caste people. This gives a chance to create and maintain a stronghold on the people, by whipping up such communal issues. And Pakistan is there, you know. Partition created a lot of problems and solved none. We can openly say that. We fought 3 battles already and still we are posturing with war like situations. Both countries are now nuclear powers. A lot of money on defense and other fighting armaments is being spent. Poor people spend so much money on other things. They wanted to divert the whole attention from other social issues, poverty and social inequality, and keep themselves in power, keep their control.

At the same time, one thing is very clear why this unity and integrity is more attractive for the ruling elite: because it allows a more capitalist form of government to proliferate, from where this corporate state has come. For the accumulation of capital, they need a bigger market. They don't want the division or balkanization or breaking up of the country. They wanted a big market. Whenever I have covered the Parliament sessions over these years, during the budget session (P.) Chidambaram would openly say, 'See India is a big market, it's a big economy.' He starts all the budget speeches from there, India is a big market! So, they are getting all support for revving up this communal frenzy, at the same time to keep this ruling elite intact, giving all the money etc. That's why we have the proliferation of Reliance, Adani and so many others.

Coming to the topic, why federalism is coming so easily for Punjab? Punjab, we can say, there is something unfortunate there. All people here should unite on Punjab's demands but Punjab has a demographic fault line. Only some sections of the Sikhs are fighting for the demands of Punjab; other people, a bigger section has always sided with New Delhi. That demographic fault line is creating a problem for total politics. That's why, it is easy to rake up, easy to whip up the communal thing. Now the farmer agitation is going on, and even in the communist controlled, farmer controlled, farmers' union, a lot of people are speaking that all these demands could be met only

if there is federalism, which means devolution of powers from the center. People will be saying, but at the center mischief is again on the card. They radicalize some Sikhs, the fringe among the Sikhs, who will mouth extreme slogans and create the problem, they will not allow the politics as such to take its course. Then the whole country will rally behind the Delhi rulers and again they will demonize the Sikhs, or the entire people of Punjab.

I think this demand for federalism should be there and we should support that, otherwise this radical demand, or radicalizing a fringe of people, through a lot of manipulations and resources at the command of the New Delhi rulers, things can go bad again.

Other states are also crying for federalism. Most of the Southern states, states in the North-East, Kashmir and some other states are also fighting for federalization. Centralization is fast turning into a fascist rule. It will create problems, not just for minorities, but also for the Dalits, other suppressed or underprivileged people.

With the above presented outlines of ideas, I can say federalism is easy to come to Punjab. Anantpur Parsad resolution was for federalism. But at that time, in 1980, when more power to the states was the main plank of the Akali Morcha or agitation, nobody understood it. But now after 35 years, most of the people are ready, they understand and comprehend what federalism means and how it could give a little bit of relief to them. And it should be there. For federalism's sake, most of the Punjab people are ready to unite with the other Indian peoples in a bigger struggle against the centralization of power. Thank you.

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