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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Shiromani Akali Dal During 1925-1937: Transition from Religious Reformist Movement to A Sikh Political Party**

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**ABSTRACT**

Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) began as a religious organisation during the Gurdwara Reform Movement (GRM) and gradually evolved into a leading political organisation, as its leadership played a significant role in Punjab politics. This article focuses on the response of the leadership of SAD in this transition and their active role to safeguard the religio-political interests of the Sikh community. This is a vast field of study within the Indian colonial political context. However, this study is mainly focused on the transition that occurred within the Akali Dal from a religious organisation to a political party to achieve its objectives, specifically, separate Sikh identity, and Sikhs' representation in the national politics of colonial India.

**KEYWORDS** Political Party, Punjab, Shiromani Akali Dal, Sikh, Transition

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**Introduction**

Gurdwara Reform Movement (GRM) played a pivotal role in redefining the Sikh identity. The Sikh community affirmed that they were a separate nation from Hindus through this movement and stressed on the Sikh Gurdwara reforms. During this movement different measures were taken to lessen dependency on the Congress in the future to protect Sikh interests. The Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925, introduced by the British government, was considered the climax of this movement. It was commonly believed that Akali Dal, as a task force of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), had achieved its goal and would now merge with the SGPC to oversee Gurdwaras. In contrast, Akali Dal's leadership took this achievement as an opportunity to lead the Sikh community in the political domain.

Time and political space proved decisive in transforming Shiromani Akali Dal into a political party after GRM ended in 1925. The British government was facing resistance from the Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Ghadar Movement when agitation for Gurdwara reforms began in 1920. Gandhi's noncooperation movement (1920-1922) further increased pressure on the British government to bring legislation about the demands of the Akali Dal. The introduction of the Gurdwara Reforms Act in 1925 gave Akali Dal popularity among the masses, which could have been a wise decision for Akali Dal to be used for political purposes. The democratic selection procedure for the SGPC also made it easier for the Akali Dal leadership to enter the political arena. Meanwhile, the British government announced reforms in India and asked Indian leadership to submit proposals for a new constitution for British India. The Sikh community decided

to actively participate in this crucial phase of Indian politics, and the SAD became the leading party to present the Sikh cause along with other political parties.

In 1927, the SAD began its work to protect the rights of the Sikh community by representing it at the Simon Commission. After it, SAD, remained the leading political party of the Sikh community, trying to protect their rights and highlighting the mistakes of the Sikh leadership in the reforms of 1909 and 1919. This work provides a fresh perspective on the history of the Shiromani Akali Dal, focusing on the transition from a religious organization to leading the Sikh political party from 1920 to 1937. This study also briefly sheds light on the background that caused the emergence of Shiromani Akali Dal as a political party. It explores its organizational structure, working style, political tactics, achievements, and failures.

### **Literature Review**

After gaining popular acceptance, the SAD's leadership decided to transform it into a political party. The confidence of its leadership was further strengthened when GRM achieved its objective in 1925 in the form of the Gurdwara Act. The SGPC and SAD emerged against the backdrop of a subcontinent-wide trend of socio-religious reform movements (Barrier, 1970; Chatterjee, 2019; Malhotra, 2004). The important scholarly literature includes; Chhanda Chatterjee (2019), G. K. Khurana (2019), and J. Singh (2009). Chhanda Chatterjee's book 'The Sikh Minority and The Partition of the Punjab, 1920-1947' is one of the important books in this category. It traces the history of the Sikh community in India, from the establishment of a distinct Sikh identity to their pre-independence political movement to secure their representation. Chatterjee especially highlights how the Congress and British Indian government used the Sikhs for their objectives, but SAD failed to convince these forces, for the materialization of her "Azad Punjab" scheme during and after World War II (Chatterjee, 2019). Whereas, Gurveen Kaur Khurana's doctoral research, 'Gaining Authority and Legitimacy: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Golden Temple, c. 1920-2000,' explains how SAD was established under the SGPC as a political wing. Initially, from 1920-1925, it mentioned that SAD limited itself to the liberation of Gurdwaras through a politics of nonviolence. But after this, it started representing the Sikh community in Indian national politics for the protection of their socioeconomic and political interests (Khurana, 2019). Another scholarly contribution is 'Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhik Committee Working and Achievements, 1925-1984' by J. Singh. This is yet another Ph.D. dissertation, but this time it is a very important work that explains in detail the role of SAD in Indian national politics from 1925 to 1947 through the lens of the SGPC (Singh, 2009). Though these works discuss the political role of SAD, in some cases in detail, during the colonial period but not specifically deal with the transition from a 'task force' under SGPC to a political party.

### **Material and Methods**

To understand the transition from a religious organization to a leading political, this article draws upon written historical documents. The primary documents used in this research include; newspapers daily Akali, the Tribune, Gurdwara Gazette, Gurmat Prakash, secret police (political) reports, available with the Punjab Archives. The analysis of these sources helped to understand what were the major objectives and issues for the establishment of SAD. Furthermore, it provided an answer to the main question that how a nonviolent organisation with a purely religious agenda transformed into a political organisation. To limit the biased information and opinions mentioned in the respective Sikh communal literature and British colonial record, the comparative technique is used and counterchecked with other contemporary sources.

## **Transitional Years of Akali Dal**

The first election of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was held on June 18, 1926, under the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925. The SGPC election was contested by various Sikh groups, including the Akali Dal, which was a key player in the Gurdwara Reform Movement that had led to the enactment of the Sikh Gurdwara Act. The faction of Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh came out on top against the Shiromani Akali Dal. The faction had the full support of the Punjab Government. The Maharaja Patiala, Bhupinder Singh, was also supporting Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh. There was another faction, the Reforms Committee, contesting the SGPC's election as a third party. Out of 120 seats, 85 were won by the members of the Shiromani Akali Dal, whereas Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh's faction secured 26 seats. Five candidates from the Reform Committee and four independents won. the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) emerged as the majority party.

The SAD's victory was a significant achievement for the party as it became the primary representative of the Sikh community's political aspirations. Along with the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, Akali Dal emerged as the third major political force in India. It aimed to safeguard the religious and political rights of the Sikh community and establish a separate Sikh identity. The party's political agenda revolved around securing political representation for Sikhs in colonial India's national politics. Unlike the Congress and the Muslim League, the Akali Dal had a narrow focus on Sikh issues and did not have a pan-India presence. The party's political tactics included agitation, protests, and legal challenges to the government's policies that were not in favor of Sikh interests.

## **Issue of Sikh Representation and Policy of Akali Dal**

The Indian Councils Act of 1909 was a significant milestone in India's struggle for representative governance under the British Raj. The Act introduced some limited electoral reforms that allowed for a small number of Indians to be appointed to the legislative councils at the provincial and central levels. It was the first time that the elected members were included in the Punjab Legislative Council. Though, some limited franchise was extended to certain classes of people which included wealthy property owners, graduates of universities, and some representatives of local bodies. However, the vast majority of the Indian population was still excluded from the right to vote or hold public office. Sikhs enjoyed some representation in the colonial administration and political structures, but their representation was not proportional to their population, and they still faced discrimination and marginalization. The struggle for greater political representation and rights was one of the key factors that led to the emergence of the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Gurdwara Reform Movement in the early 20th century. Maulana Muhammad Ali Juhar, Madan Mohan Malviya, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Moti Lal Nehru, and Gandhi all visited the Akali Dal's headquarters. They advised them to work peacefully, and Gandhi asked the Sikhs to leave violence during the Jaito Morcha in 1924 and in February 1925 when the sangat gathered at the Akal Takht (Mittal, 1977).

There were instances where the INC and the Akali Dal worked together on issues of mutual interest. For example, during the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920, the Akali Dal supported the INC's call for non-cooperation with the British government. The Akali Dal also supported the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, which was led by the INC. During the Non-Cooperation Movement SAD learned about nonviolence as a tool and applied this strategy in Gurdwara Reforms Movement. Meanwhile, Mian Fazal Hussain came in contact with Sir Chhotu Ram, who was known for advocating for the people of Punjab. In 1923, Mian Fazal Hussain and Sir Chhotu Ram jointly formed the

Unionist Party, whose main objective was to protect the interests of the farmers and common people of Punjab. The party had representation from all three major communities; Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh. The Sikhs were initially hesitant to join the Muslim-dominated Unionist government carved out by Fazl-i-Husain in 1923 after Montagu-Chelmsford reforms (Talbot, 1996). After The Gurdwara Act 1925, all Sikh Gurdwaras were placed under the administration of the SGPC. In other words, Akali Dal was not only controlling Gurdwaras and their revenue but also had the authority to appoint Gurdwara employees. The Akali Dal had used its power to establish itself as a significant force in Sikh politics. Many Sikh Diwans were held due to differences in the Gurdwara Act, and the Gurdwara Bill was criticized, but later approved due to the Akali Dal's efforts. This victory encouraged the Akali leadership to put pressure on the government to release their reform movement prisoners. Acceptance of this demand by the British government was another achievement that established it as a leading Sikh political party and opened the doors for its political career. Akali Dal was the organisation that brought the panthic agenda to the national level, forcing the government to include Sikhs as a third party in the negotiations.

The Simon Commission visited India the following year to observe any potential constitutional concessions for India. An all-party Sikh Conference met on January 30, 1928, in Amritsar, at the point when the Simon Commission from Britain visited India, to clarify the Sikh approach towards the Commission. The Conference, attended among others by such noticeable pioneers as Baba Kharak Singh and Sardar Mangal Singh, concluded that the Sikhs should not meet the Commission as prompted by the INC and engaged the Sikhs to join the lockdown on February 3, on the Simon Commission's arrival was in India (Tribune, 1928). The INC called upon an All-Party Conference in Delhi to draft a constitution for freedom, and Akali Dal, under the banner of the Central Sikh League, participated in it to explain the Sikh cause. They demonstrated their political conscience by declaring that Sikhs were "willing to accept representation on non-communal grounds, and this demonstrates that Sikhs are especially willing to make sacrifices for community welfare and social progress". (Singh, 1929).

After the boycott, Akali Dal decided to use this as an opportunity to highlight their demand for a separate Sikh state in Punjab and contacted the Simon Commission. Though they later retreated from this demand and focused on safeguarding the Sikh community's interests in any future constitutional reforms. The Simon Commission was boycotted by the Congress because it did not include any Indians among its members. However, the Nehru Report repudiated weightage of any kind and proposed the introduction of general constituencies everywhere except in provinces where Muslims were in the minority. The report was discouraging for Sikhs and they recognized that the INC was primarily focused on Hindu interests and that Sikhs needed to demand separate representation to protect their interests (Tuteja, 1984). Gandhi met with the Sikh leadership and convinced them to cooperate with INC for a good cause. When the Civil Disobedience Movement was launched by INC, the Sikh leadership once again teamed up with nationalist forces to guarantee the effectiveness of its appeal. On March 9, 1930, Akali Dal offered 5,000 volunteers for the agitation and urged all Sikhs to live up to their responsibilities and march behind Gandhi's leadership.

Master Tara Singh was nominated as a member of the 'War Council' to organise the Civil Disobedience Movement throughout the Punjab by the Provincial Congress Committee in response to the Akali leadership's gesture. Sikh support, on the other hand, was critical for the Congress's penetration of rural Punjab during the Civil Disobedience campaign, as the Congress's presence in the countryside was relatively limited. The 1929 Lahore session of Congress attempted to soothe the Sikhs' hurt feelings

by passing the famous resolution that no future political settlement of India would be considered without first considering Sikh concerns (Bhatita, 2001). In the spirit of friendship with INC, the Shiromani Akali Dal refused to be part of elections for assemblies on the call of INC. Gandhi has not consulted with the Sikhs on the communal award or issues concerning communal representation. As a result, Akali Dal claimed that, under the influence of the Muslims, INC was ignoring the interests of Sikhs.

Mohandas Gandhi abandoned the Akali Dal and Sikh communities halfway and began negotiations with the government that resulted in the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931. He was asking the Akali Dal to boycott any negotiations with the regime and lead a non-cooperation movement, but without consulting the Akali Dal, he went to negotiate with the British government and became part of the Second Round Table Conference in London. Akali Dal, along the lines of INC, has boycotted the First Round Table Conference in London, and people like Baba Khark Singh have asked the Sikh leadership to beware of the shrewdness of the INC leadership, which was not being taken seriously (Chatterjee, 2010).

Before Gandhi left for the Round Table Conference, the INC drafted a blueprint for constitutional reforms in July 1931, but the draft did not hold high hopes for the Sikhs. It suggested joint electors based on the basic principle of a population with the privilege to contest extra seats, with reservations for Sikhs in the federal and provincial legislative bodies. The Sikhs already protected by the Montagu Chelmsford Reforms would be forced to withdraw from their concessions. As a result, Akali Dal presented Gandhi with a list of seventeen demands for the Sikh community before launching the Round Table Conference. These demands of the Sikhs also encompassed an alteration of the Punjab borders by reassigning the majority Muslim districts of Punjab to N.W.F.P. (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). When Sampuran Singh and Ujjal Singh, speaking on behalf of the Sikhs, were unable to get approval of demands for the Sikhs, they began talking about a separate Sikh state. After returning from London and attending round table conferences, Gandhi was dissatisfied and wanted to restart the civil disobedience movement in India with the support of the Akali Dal.

The Communal Award was declared by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald after participants in the Round Table Conference failed to reach a consensus to the difficult communal issue. The Sikhs' initial reaction was natural, as the award accepted the All-India Muslim League's communal demands. Akali Dal decided to compete for the award and organised a group of 100,000 unpaid Sikh workers in Punjab to combat communalism. In 1932, the Communal Award granted the Muslims a separate electoral weighting system, which was a major setback to the Sikh community. This award put the fear of the 'Muslim Raj' into the Sikh minority in Punjab. In this regard, INC appeared to be silent and kept an ominous silence out of fear of alienating future Muslim voters and allies. The leader of the Punjab Provincial Congress committee, Satyapal, has even been scolded by Nehru for having started the campaign himself against the communal award. While Akali Dal tried to persuade the INC to reject the communal award, the British regime enforced the Government of India Act of 1935 and announced new elections in India under the framework of this act.

The Akali Dal believed that the Congress was making concessions to the growing Muslim communalism in Punjab. INC was not neutral about the communal award and remained out of position to support Akali Dal in the Gurdawara Shahid Ganj issue. In these contexts, it took much more diligence than forging an alliance with the INC in Punjab at elections (Singh, 1965). During the upcoming elections in 1937, the INC and Akali Dal were monitoring the election campaigns of unionists in Punjab, and they felt the need for collation in these elections to contest unionists in Punjab. The Akali Dal

demanded a review of the INC's stance on the communal award, and as a result, the INC considered revising its stance on the communal award and calling for its withdrawal (all India parliamentary board manifesto, 1936). On August 27, 1936, the Khalsa National Party was formed from the merger of the Akali Dal and Chief Khalsa Diwan, who had come together to fight for the Sikh cause in the upcoming elections. It aimed at organising and uniting Sikh people in every town and village (The Tribune, 1936). Before the elections of 1937, the renowned political parties among the Sikhs were the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the later organisation of landed aristocrats. With the inception of provincial autonomy, the Diwan turned and fought elections as the Khalsa National Party (Home department, 1942). Akalis claimed to support the Congress concept of non-cooperation and were passionately opposed to the Community Award. As a result, they had not unified with the Congress. It is possible to comprehend the Akali's contempt for the Congress; however, it is puzzling as to why the Akali Dal has not joined the Unity Board, which is in desperate need of light. Because the Akalis initially feared that their association with the Chief Khalsa Diwan would cause them to become further isolated from the general Sikh population, they initially decided to "lend support to the Congressite Sikhs" (The Tribune, 1936).

Second, the success of the Akali Dal in the election for the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) also drew the attention of the Akalis. This victory gave the Akalis hope that they would win the assembly elections too (Home department, 1935). Following the elections, the Khalsa National Party joined Iskandar Hayat Khan of the Unionist Party to form the government in Punjab after the Akali Dal was divided and the INC had no clear vision on communal award. Sir Sikandar of the Unionist Party actually feared losing control of provincial politics because of this. He made an effort to stop it, and in the end, he sealed an alliance with Jinnah to close this gap. As a result, a deal known as the Sikandar-Jinnah Pact was reached at the All-India Muslim League's Lukhnow Session on October 13, 1937. Its provisions included Sikandar's promise to encourage all Muslims who were Unionist Party members to join the Muslim League (Talbot, 1996). This government was driven by the best interests of the Jat owners in Rohtak and Hissar, those in the region of Sikhs throughout Punjab, and the interests of Muslim landowners, focused mainly in the western part of Punjab (Effenberg, 1989). The Unionist Party, due to its effective agrarian programme, which promoted the welfare of the rural classes in opposition to the urban, was growing stronger (Singh, 1931).

Gopi Chand, a renowned Hindu leader from Punjab, made efforts for the reconciliation of the Akal Dal and INC that resulted in the reoccurrence of the Akali Dal in collation. The Akali Dal was to contest 14 of the 25 agreed-upon seats in the new scheme, with the remaining ten reserved for Sikhs from the INC. In rural areas in Punjab, communalism was not much stronger therefore the unionists kept its home together by securing the interests of the landowners. The efforts of the INC to break the stranglehold of the unionist government in Punjab abruptly disrupted its usual tempo and began a rapid politicisation and communalization that had never occurred in Punjab before. These developments further exposed the politics of the INC and divided the Akali Dal. The Muslim League's growing influence on the unionist leadership, as well as the signing of the Pact between Sikander and Jinnah, compelled Akali Dal to ask Akali MLAs to join the INC Party in Punjab to strengthen the INC against the AIML's growing influence on the unionist government.

### **'Separate Electorate' and Akali Dal's Response**

In 1909, separate electorates were granted to the Muslims in the Minto-Morley reforms by Viceroy Lord Minto. Chief Khalsa Dewan was a body representing the Sikh community at the time, and he had made a representation to the viceroy to seek a

separate electorate for the Sikh community, as Muslims had been assured. The Governor of Punjab was also convinced of the demand of Sikhs and supported the case of separate electorates for Sikhs, as he presented them as of great importance in Punjab (Misra, 1988). At that time, the Sikh community had no clear vision about the importance of separate electorates and became satisfied with representation through the nomination of a governor.

A committee of the Indian National Congress met in Bombay in May 1927 to work for the settlement of communal issues as Muslims in all of India and Sikhs in Punjab were not satisfied with the demand of the INC for the implementation of democratic principles in India. It developed a procedure through mutual agreement that provided, "on the basis of population size, a joint electorate for all communities of India with reserve seats for minorities in the provinces, and in the central legislature. It also provided reciprocal concessions to all minorities, including Sikhs in Punjab, for their weight" (Singh and Singh, 1995). This resolution was taken by the Sikh community as a betrayal of INC. Master Tara Singh pleaded the Sikh case again in 1927 before the Nehru Report at the INC session in Madras and secured some concessions through an ambiguous modification of the earlier resolution. Sardar Mangal Singh and Master Tara Singh were travelling with Srinivas Iyengar, who was the President of the Congress, in 1927 to find a solution to the communal issue in India and Punjab. They placed the Sikh case before Srinivas Iyengar, and he was supposed to have guaranteed by them that the Sikh community would not claim separate electorates for Punjab and anywhere in India if INC introduced the joint electorates by reserving seats for minorities in all of India (Singh, 2018). But on September 19, 1928, a meeting was held of the representatives of the Sikh committee in Amritsar, and it discussed the Nehru Report and demanded separate electorates for the Sikh community. In this meeting, a resolution was passed to the conclusion that the Sikh community wanted separate electorates and it was wrong to take it the opposite way. The claim of the Sikh community for special protections in Punjab had been acknowledged by the British authorities in the Montague-Chelmsford Report of 1919, as the British authorities declared them a distinct community and a community of extraordinary importance in Punjab. electorates (Misra, 1988).

The Sikh leadership was influenced by the INC and failed to understand that the nomination to the Simon Commission was a matter of excessive standing to minorities who could obtain their rights guaranteed. But, like the INC, Akali Dal announced a boycott of the commission and called for agitation (Ali, 1986). After introduction of the Government of India Act 1935, Akali Dal leadership realized that increasing their number of seats in the provincial assembly was not a long-term solution to their problem. They would remain a buoyant minority in the assembly, relying on the mercy of Hindu members to pass legislation. In June 1936, a gathering of the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Khalsa Durbar took place in Amritsar, presided over by influential MLA Mangal Singh.

A hundred or so eminent Sikh leaders attended the gathering. Instead of creating a joint election board of all the Sikh parties, it was agreed to establish a joint parliamentary board of the two major parties, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Khalsa Darbar (The Tribune, 1936). The board's choice of the nominees was supposed to be the last word. To win over the Sikh masses, a nineteen-point election platform was created. The party will fight for total independence and work with politically progressive parties whose programmes and ideologies are similar to its own; it will offer strong opposition to the communal award; it will oppose the formation of a ministry by parties that do not agree to amend the communal award and replace it with a joint national solution; and it will work for the repeal of the constitution embodied in the Government of India Act,

1935, and for its re-enactment (The Tribune, 1936). As a minority, Sikhs had started demanding special safeguards but were never taken seriously and were turned down ingeniously under an intelligent strategy. But it wasn't just Hindu leaders to blame; there was also Akali leadership which remained silent and failed to identify the British government and the Muslim League, who believed that Sikhs were a separate nation. Akali Dal could not build public support for its demands, and at the meetings with INC, the British government, and AIML, its members did not affirm their individual identities. The Akali Dal's demands were in reaction to the demands of the Muslims and the Christians, rather than putting forward separate demands for Sikhs (Hunnam, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

Shiromani Akali Dal emerged as a successful Sikh organization from the Gurdwara Reform Movement after the introduction of the Sikh Gurdwara Act 1925 by the British government. It was the time when Non-Cooperation and the *Khilafat* movements were mounting pressure on the British government. The victory of Shiromani Akali Dal in GRM and its leading role along with the democratic structure of SGPC played an important role in transforming Shiromani Akali Dal into a political party. Its journey as political organization started with the agitation for release of prisoners of GRM and Sikh response to the Simon Commission. British had obliged the Muslims by giving them the status of important minority of India through grant of separate electorate. From Simon Commission to the Communal Award and then participation in the Indian provincial elections 1936-1937, Akali Dal emerged as a leading Sikh political party. It represented the Sikh community during this time vigorously for the protection of Sikh interests but failed to achieve its objectives due to lack of clear strategy. It was the outcome of multiple factors, specifically, influence of INC on Akali leadership, internal differences and reactionary policy to the AIML instead of realization of their own interests.



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