Chapter-VI

CONCLUSION

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhik Committee (hereafter SGPC) was constituted in the midst of the religious 'reform movement, having strong political moorings, popularly known as the 'Gurdwara Reform Movement' in the history of the Sikhs as well as of the Punjab. Initially SGPC was constituted for the avowed purpose of superintendence and also the control of the Sikh gurdwars which had been under the domination of the mahants who had been enjoying the support of the British, since very long time.

The Gurdwara Reform movement in fact, mass agitation. It was started by the Sikhs against the mahants, supported by the British Government, for the liberation of the religious places i.e. gurdwaras. The mass movement which was started to liberate the religious institutions of the Sikh community soon mingled with the 'Akali Movement'. A Hukamnama was issued from the Akal Takht summoning a general assembly of the Sikhs which met on 15th November, 1920 at Akal Takht for the purpose of electing a representative committee of the Panth to control the Golden Temple as well as all other gurdwaras.

But two days before the meeting was held the government hastened to appoint a Managing Committee with the help of loyalist Sikhs, consisting of 36 members. As already announced a meeting a held on 15th and 16th November. Which resolved to constituted a committee known as 'Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhik Committee' (SGPC) with the object of 'controlling the Sikh Gurdwara or religious institutions. It was also to provide the policy as other norms for their management on the lines acceptable to the Sikh Panth. Initially it had 175 members including 36 members of the provisional committee constituted by the government.
Some members were also elected to represent the Sikh states and the Sikh bodies in Burma, Malaya, China and America. Sardar Sundar Singh Majithia, Harbans Singh Attari and Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia were appointed President, Vice President and Secretary respectively, in December 1920. With the establishment of SGPC, a month later, i.e. December 14th, 1920 a new organization known as Shiromani Akali al (SAD) came into existence. It was also to liberate gurdwara from the control of the mahants.

The Gurdwara Reform Movement continued for five years. the British who earlier against the movement and made all possible efforts to suppress it, had to concede to its demand of handling over the management of the gurdwara's to Sikhs. An Act known as Sikh Gurdwara Act 1925 was passed by the Punjab Legislative Council with this the SGPC became a legal institution of the Sikhs for managing the Sikh Gurdwaras in the Punjab. It became the supreme body of the Sikhs which was directly elected by the Sikhs to manage their religious affairs for themselves. It came to be appropriately and rightly as a government within the government or a mini parliament of the Sikhs.

It's working achievement and contribution of the last sixty years clearly display that the SGPC has played a significant role in the affairs of the Sikhs as well as in the politics of Punjab. In the course of time, with its huge economic resources (its income depends primarily on religious offerings) and large menagerie staff, this body was gradually but strategy assumed greater significance in the Sikh affairs than before.

The SGPC generally supported the national leaders and also their programmes, it actively participated in the freedom struggle as it stood determined with the nationalists for the cause of India's liberation. When the Simon Commission visited India in 1927, to determine the next
installment of constitutional reforms which could be granted to the Indians, 18% representation given to the Sikhs recommended that was by the aforesaid commission was denounced by Baba Kharak Singh the President of the SGPC because they had demanded 30% representation. But it was denied by the ruling masters.

The Nehru Report came out in August 1928. It purported to provide a framework of a Swaraj Constitution. It too recommended that there would be no communal representation in Punjab and Bengal. At this the SGPC passed a resolution stating that the Sikhs should be considered as an important minority, so they should be given the same consideration in Punjab. The SGPC stood for a non-communal government and for complete independence of the country.

Ramsay MacDonald, the Prime Minister of England on behalf of His Majesty's government, announced the Communal Award, on August 16, 1932. It retained separate electorates. The Muslims thus secured a statutory majority (51.42%), whereas the Sikhs gained nothing by this Award. Sardar Bhag Singh, on the behalf of SGPC, came out with a statement that the Khalsa would firmly resist to the last man any attempt to establish a communal Raj in the Punjab.

The Act of 1935 of which the communal award was a part meant the translation of statutory majority of the Muslims in the Punjab into a functional reality. Obviously the Sikhs felt very much upset over the prospects of their existence after the introduction of the Provincial Autonomy in the Punjab. They were not satisfied with the provisions about the protection of minorities in the Act. They had bitter experience in the form of communal riots which, they realized would increase because of the dominant position of the Muslims. It would further make them to disregard the minorities and create problems for them. The SGPC had several
problems relating to issue of Shahid Ganj, their socio religious position such as Status of Gurmukhi language in the Punjab, their representation in-service, question of religious holidays and the opening of Jhatka meat. The new position of the Muslims further increased an anxiety of the SGPC in connection with the position and status of the Sikhs.

The Shahid Ganj Gurdwara issue produced a lot of tension and bad blood between the government and SGPC in 1935-40. Their relations became bitter. The SGPC decided to repair the Shahid Ganj Gurdwara which was at that time in a dilapidated condition. On June 29th, 1935 a crowd of local Muslims attacked the Sikhs in their temple and took forcible possessions of the building. By the end of November 1937, eighteen Sikhs had been killed. The SGPC expressed deep grief and agony at the murder of innocent Sikhs. It started a morcha for the liberation of Shahid Ganj. The Sikhs suffered some losses including human lives but they retained their hold on Shahid Ganj. The Shahid Ganj issue gave birth to Kirpan problem which was the most important for the Sikhs from religious point of view. When the Shahid Ganj morcha was going on the government put a restriction on the sporting of big Kirpans by the Sikhs. Restriction was imposed on small Kirpan also. The Kirpan was the most important symbol of the identity of the Sikhs as a community. The SGPC passed a resolution requesting the British government to remove restrictions on the Kirpan. On December 30, 1935 the SGPC launched another morcha for Kirpan; the morcha lasted till January 3, 1936 when the ban on big Kirpan was lifted or finally lapsed. Three hundred ninety sikhs including seventy six women courted arrest during this period.

Immediately after passing of the Lahore Resolution the Sikhs politics also moved towards the idea of Sikh homeland. The Atari conference of the SGPC and Akali Dal in March 1940 passed a resolution
stating its opposition to the demand of Pakistan "tooth and nail". It further emphasized that the power should be transferred to one central authority. In case the demand of the Muslim league for separate state was acceded, the SGPC stressed upon the establishment of the separate home land for the Sikhs. It was on the basis of this, the Sikhs 'bluntly rejected the proposal and regarded that the Sikhs were not treated at par with the Muslims under the proposals of the Cabinet Mission.

The SGPC urged the Punjab Government to reserve three seats from the Sikh seats in Punjab legislature for those individuals of scheduled castes who had embraced Sikh religion. The SGPC reserved 12 seats for Scheduled Castes through Gurdwara Amendment Bill 1944 for giving them social and religious equality and strictly declared that none should call them 'Harijans'. Thus 13 men from this class- 12 elected, and one nominated had become members of the SGPC since then.

Due to the disruption caused by the partition of Punjab in 1947 and the migration of lakhs of families from one side to another the general condition of the country became disturbed. Naturally, internal administration in every field had been rather poor. The SGPC too could not remain unaffected by these developments. Many important historical gurdwaras controlled by it fell in Pakistan. Consequently, the total property of these gurdwaras worth over rupees 12 crores yielding annual income of over rupees 25 lakhs had been left behind. Apart from this loss of income and property, the SGPC was hard pressed to look after the refugees who had left behind households and properties moveable and immovable. At that time since, it was the main Sikh organization actively participating in the welfare activities, every Sikh and non Sikh expected to be at least temporarily relieved of the worries and burden of food and shelter on coming under its supervision. Due to its involvement in the problems of
providing food and shelter to the refugees from West Punjab, the whole staff of the SGPC remained busy.

Punjab, immediately after the partition was faced with a number of problems. The SGPC extended its whole hearted support to the Congress in all political matters. In fact Master Tara Singh gave a rebuff to the Pakistan, propaganda that there was a demand for a Sikh state in the following words. "The bogey of the Sikhs state in the East Punjab is being conjured up by the Pakistan propaganda machine in order to create ill will and dissensions between the Hindus and the Sikhs. The Hindus and the Sikhs will rise and fall together. Their fates are inextricably linked". He further observed, "Our culture is Gurmukhi culture and our literature is also in the Gurmukhi script. We want to have a province where we can safeguard our culture and our traditions."

In October 1955 SGPC opposed the states' reorganization commission's report' and appealed to the center government to make the Punjab suba as soon as possible. Master Tara Singh contested the SGPC elections in 1960 on the Punjab Suba, issue Shiromani Akali Dal secured 132 seats out of 139 and Master Tara Singh was elected President of the SGPC. The SGPC boycotted the 26 members committee appointed by the Indian Government to consider the language issue.

The SGPC strongly urged the government of Patiala and the East Punjab State Union that Punjabi should be promptly implemented as the official language in the courts of Patiala and the East Punjab State Union. It sincerely realized that after the partition, large number of Punjabis especially Sikhs had got settled in many states like Delhi, Jammu-Kashmir, Rajasthan and some areas of U.P. They had contributed substantially to the development of these states. However, sadly enough nothing worthwhile had been done by these states to recognize Punjabi language, literature or
culture. Consequently, the wards of Punjabi families were facing great difficulties in the field of education and felt alienated from the roots of their culture. The SGPC firmly urged the governments of those states to recognize and accept Punjabi language in Gurmukhi script so that the Punjabis settled there could get school and college education in their mother tongue as per their liking and choice.

The SGPC strongly demanded the government jobs for the Sikhs. This body felt convinced that if the Sikhs were given their due their social position and status would be enhanced in the eyes of all communities not only in Punjab but also in other states of the country.

The Shiromani Akali Dal launched struggle for the attainment of Punjabi Suba and against the intervention of government in the Sikh religious affairs. The overwhelming majority being Akalis, the SGPC also championed the cause of Punjabi Suba and extended whole hearted support to the demand for Punjabi Suba in 1966. The reorganization of Punjab into two states i.e. Haryana and Punjabi Suba was the triumph for Akali Dal, and also the SGPC as the latter was not only looking after the administration of the Gurdwara rather it was also interested in the politics of the state.

The SGPC fully realized the significance of the education of the Sikh masses; it had therefore, started taking been interest in the development and spread of education. It established several institutions in various regions to provide education on modern lines. The SGPC set up "Shahid Sikh Missionary College" at Amritsar in 1927 for education of granthis, ragis and missionaries for the propagation of Sikhism. The Khalsa College in Bombay was established in the year 1937 for higher education. The SGPC gave Rupees 10,000 to Sikh Education Society Lahore for free education of Khalsa Biradari students from 1929 onwards.
annually. The SGPC also expressed its concern in the field of primary education giving grants to about thirty seven schools in different areas of Punjab from 1935 onwards. The amount of these grants ranged from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 50,000/- annually. It is significant to mention that the SGPC set rupees 86,000 for education in its budget of 1945-46, which was increased to Rs. 8,61,000 in 1980. It increased more than 10%. The SGPC, doubtlessly, has made a significant contribution in the field of education during the period of the present study. By the 1980s the schools run by SGPC numbered, school-11 (Punjab 8, Haryana1, UP2), College-15, Missionary College-3 (Punjab 1, UP 2).

The SGPC soon after its inception made it clear to the Sikh community that the Sikhs of the Gurus living all over the world were expected to provide food to the hungry, rest to the tired ones, treatment to those who were ailing, direction to those gone astray, courage to the dispirited ones and freedom from wrong to the anxious soul so that the motto: "Desh Tegh Fateh" of "Guru Nanak- Guru Gobind Singh" Panth could be achieved and the bewildered humanity could find roots in truth, contentment, compassion, religion and natural response. In fact the SGPC wanted to see the Sikh community quite responsible and also answerable to the Sikh Panth and the Gurus' ideology.

The SGPC resolved that all work of the committee be carried out in Punjabi, dates as per Khalsa year should be used in the committee works of every kind, a monthly newspaper to be published by the SGPC known as "Gurudwara Gazette."

This way the SGPC could keep intact the socio-economic position as well as religious identity of the Sikhs. The SGPC was seriously concerned with the publication of the religious literature of the Sikhs by the private unauthorized agencies. It though that if this kind of publication was
allowed and not checked at once the pious nature and character of the religious literature on Sikhism would loose its sanctity and soon lapse. Besides, this would also destroy the religious sanctity of the Sikh community. Therefore, it was decided and resolved that total religious and spiritual Sikh literature, for instance, Sri Granth Sahib, Pothians, Gutkas, etc. should be published by the SGPC only. It should be sold at low price so that it becomes popular with the masses naturally prestige of Sikhism would be enhanced and kept intact.

The SGPC set up 'Dharmarth' branch on April 1st, 1945 with the object of Public Welfare. As the name indicated, education and Dharam Parchar were given the highest importance. A separate department under the name 'Dharam Parchar', was establishment to send parcharaks for dharam parchar within the country as well as abroad and to award scholarships to students of Gurmat study.

The SGPC expressed its deep appreciation for the scheme about widening and beautifying the parkarma and surroundings of Sri Darbar Sahib and also the roads lead to it. It appealed to the sangats to extend maximum help in this work. SGPC resolved that the Amrit of Khanda should be jointly dispensed to man and women. It meant that men and women equally shared the 'Bata', No Sikh organization had the right to dispense the Amrit of Khanda to men and that of Kirpan to women. On the contrary the person doing it was declared Tankaiyah by Akal Takht. In the time of natural calamities like, floods and earthquakes, the SGPC appealed to Sikh Sangats and local Gurdwara committees to contribute the relief fund set up by the SGPC. It thus assured its suffering brethren to make efforts to provide them maximum help.

The SGPC has remained busy in such works which could keep the identity of Sikhs and their religion intact and could give them direction to
consolidate their beliefs and traditions, particularly in the region to which they belonged. Regarding its socio-religious contribution especially the identity of the Sikh Community, tenets of the Sikh Gurus and their socio-cultural traditions, have been properly looked after by SGPC.

The SGPC on November 5, 1959 declared the Sri Damdama Sahib as fifth Takht. Another pertinent work done by the SGPC was to seek permission for pilgrimage Jathas to Sri Nankana Sahib, Pakistan to celebrate Guru Nanak Dev's Jaman Utsav and Dehra Sahib Lahore ever year. The SGPC has set up same Rauh Reet in all the Gurdwaras. A Printing Press has been set up by the SGPC for printing of Gurbani, Gurmat literature and Sikh historical books.

Above all the SGPC has also taken due interest in the various issues relating to the Sikhs living abroad in different countries. It has extended its help and played constructive role to its community abroad when ever the latter was in need of it. Whether it was a question of the use of turban, keeping of hair and Kirpan, in various countries such as Canada, America, England, France and Singapore, the SGPC extended required help to the Sikhs there. It also pleaded and pressurized the Indian Government to side with the demands of the Sikhs who live in the said countries.

S. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, President SGPC gave a five point's programme to the members of the SGPC in particular and the Sikhs in general to carry out for the emancipation/betterment of Sikhism. The Programme he gave to be carried out is as such: (i) To propagate Sikh religion, purity of Sikh ideology and to spread the principles of Sikhism among the Sikh masses; (ii) To protect and safeguard the political existence of the Sikhs; (iii) To strengthen the Sikh institutions and to see that their democratic character remain in tact; (iv) To get solve the various problems of the Sikhs living abroad (in various countries); and (v)
To reform the management of the Sikh gurdwaras. This programme was unanimously accepted in the general meeting of the SGPC.

In its interim committee held on 10.7.1984 the executive committee of the SGPC strongly condemned the army action on Akal Takha, Sri Darbar Sahib and other Gurdwaras. By doing so the government of India had not only tried to crush the spirit of the Sikhs but had also violated the fundamental rights of the Sikhs. It also demanded the immediate withdrawal of troops from the Darbar Sahib complex.

During the period of 1970-84 the SGPC emphasized on the following demands: the SGPC as the only supreme religious body of the Sikhs to be recognized; enactment of an 'All India Gurdwara Act; to declare Amritsar as Holy City of the Sikhs; remaining of a train after Harmandir Sahib installation of a transmitter at Harmandir Sahib, telecast of Gurbani, etc. Some of these demands were met in 1985, when Rajiv Longowal agreement was signed. Some of its political demands included the re-demarcating the boundaries of the Punjab in such a way as to incorporate contiguous Punjabi speaking areas of Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Chandigarh; more autonomy for states; setting up of more industries in Punjab; exclusive control over the water of Ravi, Satluj, Beas and Bakhra Dam and the like.

Its achievements and contribution made from time to time give special credit to this supreme body of the Sikhs. It worked for the identity as well as evolution of the institutions of the Sikh community and Sikhism. Though when constituted it was made clear that this body would manage the Sikh Gurdwaras, but it, soon after its formation, realized its duty towards its community, the province of Punjab and also to the country. Though it happens to be an institution in itself, yet it represents the whole Sikh community.