Chapter II

PUNJAB – A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The first important date in the history of the Sikhs is 1469 A.D. The birth of Guru Nanak gradually led to the formation of a new religion by his successors – Sikhism. His religion became a popular movement than that preached by the earlier reformers like Ramanand and Kabir because Guru Nanak adapted his teachings to the daily needs of human beings. He believed that 'a religion, if it is to be a living force, must be a practical religion, one that teaches mankind, not how to escape from the world, but how to live worthily in it; not how evil is to be avoided, but how it is to be met and overcome'.

The Sikhs under the successors of Guru Nanak evolved from a mere religious brotherhood to a strong power which was militarily well-armed. The process of arming oneself was initiated by Guru Hargobind who girded two swords, one symbolizing his spiritual authority and the other his temporal power. Bhai Gurdas “justifies the new measures of Guru Hargobind with the argument that an orchard needs the protective hedge of the hardy and thorny kikar (acacia) trees. In other words, the Panth of Guru Nanak needed physical force for its protection.”

The increasing number of the rivals of the followers of Sikhism led to dissent within Sikhism. It was the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh who set out to put his followers in order. ‘His aim was to obviate external interference with the use of physical force. And to achieve this he wanted to instill a new zeal into his followers, give a distinct identity to his Sikhs which would distinguish them from Hindus and ‘instill into them a spirit of nationality.’ For this on Baisakhi day, April 13, 1699, he founded the Panth which led to adoption of Unity and equality and initiated an internal tussle between those who accepted the new order and others who did not.

2 Quoted in J. S. Grewal, The Sikhs of the Punjab, New Delhi, Foundation, 1995, p. 65
3 Ibid., p. 77.
4 Payne, op. cit., n. 1, p. 34
In the 18th century new powers like the British and the Marathas rose because of the decline of the Mughal Empire. The Singhs of Guru Gobind Singh too became a power to reckon with. The combination of religious piety and disciplined worldliness that was evolved by Guru Nanak and elaborated by his successors was extended to the realm of politics by Guru Gobind Singh. The rise of Banda Bahadur saw him become the master of nearly the whole region lying between the Sutlej and the Jamuna and having his own administrative arrangement.

Banda Bahadur's successive defeats and subsequently his death saw the killings of Sikhs in large numbers. To protect themselves they divided themselves into bands under different commanders, all ready to come together in case of necessity. The Sikhs were nearer to nationality than they had ever been. The Singhs had one element running like a common thread amongst them i.e. not to submit to the Mughal Empire or to the might of the Mughals. The preservation of the Sikh faith and promotion of the good of the Khalsa (the Pure) were the two causes which united them. The Sikhs were divided into a federation of clans each under a Sardar or a military chief. The clans were of different size but all were equal in status as preached by the Tenth Guru. The four institutions which helped the Sikhs annex territories were Rakhi (protection), Gurmata (consensus), Dal Khalsa (group of the Pure), and the Misls (bands). The Sikhs were one people but each clan was independent of the other. As they could not tolerate interference from the others so they could not tolerate interference in the administration of their respective domains. Misls were usually based on Kinship and many Misls combined to form the Dal Khalsa. Based on democracy, being a member of a Misl meant conferring political, social, religious equality and freedom. All decisions were taken by Gurmata (resolution of the Guru). The fruits of a conquest were divided equally by the Sardar amongst those who had participated in the campaign. A man was at liberty to leave one Misl and join another if he was dissatisfied with his position. Besides the 12 Misls there was one other association which was a band of religious devotees who were treated as guardians of the Golden Temple. Employed for the most dangerous services they were known for their bravery. Known by the name of Akalis (the

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5 Crewal, op. cit., n. 2, p. 82.
6 Payne, op. cit., n. 1, p. 47.
immortals) they wore the blue robes and steel bracelets as ordained by the Tenth Guru.

All decisions were taken by the Gurmata which was held twice a year at the Holy City, Amritsar. The tradition of Gurmata held the Sikhs together for a long time but the moment a threat from outside disappeared, the thread of unity broke. So thoroughly had the Sikhs become imbued with the militant spirit that to fight was the very breath of their being and rather than allow their swords to rust in their scabbards, they preferred to turn them against one another.\(^7\) The chiefs maintained their followers who got a share in the booty of war so on the slightest pretext the Sardars fought with each other in same spirit as they had shown in the fights against the Holkers or the Shah. The Misls were subjugated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh of the Shukarchakia misl in the 19\(^{th}\) century. With the rise in the population of the Sikhs during the 19\(^{th}\) century there developed social as well as ideological differentiation in the community. In the rural areas there was an increase in the number of peasants and in the urban areas there was an increase in the numbers of commercial class. Within ten years of Ranjit Singh’s death his empire was taken over by the Britishers. Infights between the nobility led to factions which led to the involvement of the Army. Though the Sardars were “Sikhs equally with the soldiers and that the ‘Khalsa’ was a word which could be used to unite the high and the low”\(^8\) they had got divided into three parties—the army, the court and the Sardars.

The British interference grew because of the growing instability in the region. The Sikhs in their defeat realized that the incompetence and treachery of their leaders had led to their defeat. After the annexation of the Punjab the Sikhs gradually realized that the British recognized their valour. They enrolled themselves in the regiments and thus found an outlet for their military zeal. They, thus, did not allow their absorption back into the Hindu community. The Sikhs loyally supported the British in suppressing the Mutiny of 1857. Singhs were recruited in large numbers and helped the British in all the major wars. In the wake of advent of Arya Samaj in Punjab the Sikhs set up their own Singh Sabhas. The Sri Guru Singh Sabha was founded in 1873. The Lahore Singh Sabha was founded in 1879. Then six Singh

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 66.

\(^8\) Grewal, op. cit., n. 2, p. 158.
Sabhas were added every year for the next twenty years. The Singh Sabha was regarded as a representative of the whole community of the area. To coordinate the activities of the Singh Sabhas the Khalsa Diwan was established in 1893. The Khalsa Diwan at Lahore was established in 1896.

In 1902, the Chief Khalsa Diwan was founded at Amritsar which gave general direction and control regarding religious matters. All Singh Sabhas, Khalsa Diwans were affiliated to it and they elected members to represent them in the Chief Khalsa Diwan. A representative and an elected body, its aim was to promote the study of the Granth Sahib, to further the moral, intellectual and social development of the Singhhs of the Khalsa and to provide solution to the grievances of the Khalsa. Concerned with religious reforms all these religious associations aimed at stopping conversions of Sikhs into Islam, Hinduism or Christianity. They put forward the demand that they be treated as a separate community and not as a part of Hinduism. The community braced itself and faced attacks from different quarters. For this they published a volume of literature regarding their distinct identity. The Chief Khalsa Diwan published in 1915 a comprehensive code regarding the Sikh ceremonies and rites - Gurmat Parkash Bhag Sanskar. ‘The idea of Guru-Panth became stronger with the increasing importance of Sikh identity. ‘

The first unrest among the rural people, especially the Jat Sikh peasantry arose because of the Colonization Bill in 1907. This bill apart from, ‘altering the earlier agreements made with the settlers about the ownership of the land under the Act of 1893 also provided for higher rates of land revenue and irrigation.’ This agrarian unrest was perhaps the first example in Punjab in which the rural masses showed discontent against the British policies. The authorities took stern measures against the agitators but realized the damage done to the Sikh soldiers who had families residing in the canal colonies. The Colonization Bill was repealed but the seeds of unrest had been sown.

Meanwhile the All India Muslim League (AIML) was established in 1906 which aimed at safeguarding and advancing the interests of the Muslims at the provincial as well as the national level. The INC in the beginning was regarded as ‘a

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The Sikh Educational Conference established in 1908 tried to spread education. The Singh Sabha Movement opened a number of schools and colleges with the word Khalsa prefixed. The British tried to halt the growing feeling of nationalism by reconstituting the management of the Khalsa College, Amritsar. The College passed into the hands of the government. This led to leaders like, Master Sunder Singh, Sardar Kharak Singh, S. Sardul Singh Caveeshar to protest. They weakened the hold of Chief Khalsa Diwan and provided a nationalist tone to the Sikh politics. One of the main aims of the Chief Khalsa Diwan was to look after the political rights of the Sikhs. It was because of its efforts that the Montford report in 1917 ‘noted that the Sikhs had remained unrepresented in spite of their services to the empire’.  

The first serious conflict between the Sikhs and the government occurred on the issue of the wall of the Rikabganj Gurudwara. The government dismantled a part of the wall to construct a road to the Viceregal Lodge in 1913. The Sikhs were divided on the issue with the Chief Khalsa Diwan and Sunder Singh Majithia trying to accommodate the government. The Komagata Maru affair in July 1914 became one with the programme of the Ghadar Party. The Ghadarites started telling the people openly to rise against the government. They went around galvanizing the Sikh regiments. Fixing Feb. 21, 1915 as the date for rising against the British they called for a revolt. The leak of secrets by the pro-British landed interests among the Sikhs helped the British quell their revolt. Though their movement failed, they succeeded in creating 'a spirit of defiance of authority among the extremists in the Punjab which found expression in the form of Babbar (Lion) Akali Jathas (groups) during the Akali struggle for Gurudwara reform. ’ The difference between the Sikhs and the reformers was not indifference to faith but the former believed that 'to fight against tyranny' was the true duty of a true Sikh. The struggle for freedom of the Khalsa Panth was substituted by the love for the country. The end of the nineteenth century

\[12\] Grewal, op. cit., n. 2, p. 152.
\[14\] Grewal, op. cit., n. 2, p. 156.
saw the Sikhs facing a challenge from Christianity. Moreover it was felt that the respect for the Gurus was on the decline and a large number of Sikhs were following Brahanical practices. Thus, they launched the various religious reform movements. As Ruchi Ram Sahni wrote, ‘The closing decade of the last century was a period of intense searching of the heart in all communities in Panjab. The Sikhs were the last to awaken to a self –consciousness of their glorious heritage. It was a silent process. Slowly and most imperceptibly they felt the new impulse creeping through the younger members of the community. There was a strong stirring of their bones, a tingling sensation in their fibers which they could hardly explain themselves.’

The reformers also tried to save the separate identity of the Sikhs from the onslaught of the propaganda by the Arya Samaj. Kahan Singh, a Singh Sabha leader wrote a book titled, ‘Hum Hindu Nahin’ (We are not Hindus). During the First World War, the Sikhs especially the Chief Khalsa Diwan fully supported the government. But after the War the soldiers were demobilized without any rewards. This dissatisfaction along with economic hardships, i.e. rise in food prices led to discontentment among the community.

When Mahatma Gandhi announced the anti-Rowlatt Act movement in 1919, Panjab became one of the centers of agitation. Though the Sikhs participated in the agitation the number was small because the Chief Khalsa Diwan had decided to remain loyal to the government. Moreover the INC regarded the Chief Khalsa Diwan more as a religious organization than as a political one. Therefore, the Lucknow Pact in December 1916 which led to the reconciliation between the INC and the Muslim League ignored the interests of the Sikhs. Thus, the Sikh leadership, especially the educated Sikh middle class formed a new organization called Central Sikh League on December 29, 1919 in Bradlough Hall, Lahore. The main concern of the League was to protest against the inadequate Sikh representation in the Panjab Legislative Council under the Act of 1919. Though expressing its loyalty to the Crown it placed on record, ‘its conviction that in the interest of good government and to ensure an adequate improvement in the condition of the people of India, it is essential that the country should be placed on a footing of equality with the self-governing members of the Empire and the people be allowed to work out their political, economic,

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industrial and educational salvation under the aegis of the Crown. The Sikh League wanted that gun licenses should be given to the Sikhs except those who have doubtful character. They wanted the administration of the Gurudwaras especially that of the Golden Temple to be passed on to a representative body of the Sikhs.

The Sikh League supported the Non-Cooperation movement. In October 1920 the Golden Temple was placed under the management of a committee and the League called a meeting of the Sikhs in November. They elected 175 members for the committee which was to manage the affairs of the Gurudwaras. The name of the committee was Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee [SGPC] which aimed to liberate all the Gurudwaras and place them in the hands of the Panth. The management till that time had been in the hands of a manager who was appointed by the government and thus, worked for the interests of the Empire. For example, Arur Singh, the manager of the Golden Temple had announced that Akhand Path (continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib from cover to cover) would be held for victory of the British in the war. He had even condemned the Komagata Maru Sikhs through a commandment from the Akal Takht in 1915. After the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy he had even presented a Saropa to General Dyer in the Holy Shrine. The Gurudwaras had to be freed from the hands of such puppets. Some of the Gurudwaras were under the control of the Mahants who were even appointed, as honorary magistrates and members of municipalities. They squandered the earnings of the Gurudwaras by leading luxurious lives.

The Akali Dal [SAD] was formed on Dec. 1920 with the aim of bringing reforms in the Gurudwaras. A separate body, from the SGPC it resolved to work with the latter to liberate the Gurudwaras. The leadership of the SAD came from the educated middle class of the Sikhs but the vast illiterate Sikh masses became its force ready to fight in the name of religion. Thus, started the third Sikh War in which the Sikhs declared a peaceful war against the unjust and immoral laws that governed the management of the Gurudwaras and offered a challenge to the government to do its worst to maintain such laws. The government was not ready to leave the control of the Gurudwaras and yet not ready to come in direct conflict with the Sikhs. The Sikh

Mohinder Singh, op. cit., n. 10, p. 22
Tuteja, op. cit., n. 15, p. 30.
leadership decided to meet the challenge of the British by sending Jatha after Jatha to go and occupy Gurudwaras and face imprisonment and even death as long as the government did not yield to their demand of liberating Gurudwaras. Thus, started a more serious and a determined struggle between the govt. and the Sikh community. Some of the Mahants voluntarily gave up the control to the SGPC while some resisted. The govt. on the other hand silently encouraged the Mahants to resist the SGPC which led to bloodshed in many places. The first incident was the massacre of Akalis at Nankana Sahib during a direct confrontation with the Mahant of the Gurudwara. The Mahant of Nankana Sahib Gurudwara hired assassins who attacked, killed and burnt a hundred Akalis who had entered the Gurudwara without the intention of taking it over. The Akalis on hearing about the massacre reached Nankana Sahib in thousands and the authorities arrested the Mahants and his associates. The Gurudwara was handed over to a committee which was headed by Harbans Singh Atariwala.

The second episode occurred in October 1921 when the SGPC decided to support the non-cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi. The SGPC asked its secretary, S. Sunder Singh Ramgarhia who was also the government nominated Manager of the Golden Temple to hand over the 53 keys to Baba Kharak Singh, the President of SGPC. The Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar sent Lala Amar Nath to collect the keys from Ramgarhia. The latter handed over the keys to him. The SGPC decided to hold protests against this action. When the government arrested the leading leaders on flimsy charges of sedition, the Akalis held meetings everywhere to make the people aware about the ‘Keys Affair’. The protests on the part of the Sikhs and the strict measures by the government continued till Jan. 17, 1922 when all the workers were released unconditionally and the keys were delivered to Baba Kharak Singh in a specially arranged Diwan. Mahatma Gandhi’s telegraphic message to Baba Kharak Singh said, ‘first decisive-battle for India’s freedom won’.19

The Mahant of the Guru- Ka -Bagh Gurudwara who had fallen in line with the wishes of the SGPC was encouraged by the government authorities to work against the Akalis. He did so and declared five Akalis thieves who had cut wood for the langar from the land adjoining the Gurudwara. On the arrest of the men,

19 Ibid., p. 160
consecutive jathas reached Guru-Ka Bagh and got themselves arrested as any gathering at the Bagh, 'was declared to be an unlawful assembly.' After a arrest of nearly 5000 volunteers the Mahant sold the establishment to Sir Ganga Ram who handed it to the SGPC on Nov 17, 1922. The 5000 volunteers were released from the jails in March 1923 because of the impending Hindu-Muslim riots. The SGPC cooperated with the government to quell the riots and worked to restore peace and order.

The Maharaja of Nabha, Ripudaman Singh had to abdicate his throne in favour of his son because of the intrigues of the government officials who collaborated with the rulers of the neighboring state, Patiala. The latter were sworn enemies of the rulers of Nabha. When the Sikhs protested in favor of Ripudaman Singh and held peaceful meetings at Jaito Gurudwara they were disrupted. The Sikhs did not like the interference in their religious ceremonies. They asserted, 'their right of free worship' Volunteers of jathas were arrested and both the SGPC and the SAD were declared as unlawful bodies. The protests continued and 101 Akhand paths were completed on Aug. 6, 1925 and 'the right to free worship was firmly established'. Finally an Act (second Gurudwara Act) came into force on Nov. 1, 1925 which made the SGPC the legal authority to manage the Sikh Gurudwaras. The Gurudwara was opened to the Sikhs and the Akali jathas walked triumphantly to the temple.

The Babbar Akali Jatha was formed in August 1922 for to dual purpose - to gain independence and to protect the Sikh religion. Within a year they were declared an unlawful association and their members persecuted. According to Tuteja at this time the Sikhs were divided into three factions. The first faction consisted of a few urban educated leaders of the landed gentry. Described as 'moderates' leaders like Sunder Singh Majithia, Harbans Singh Atari they had derived benefits from the British. The second group consisted of nationalists who were from the urban educated middle class. If they were ready to fight for the Panth the freedom struggle

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20 Ibid.
21 Caveesha, op. cit., n. 18, p. 206.
22 Ibid.
24 Caveeshar, op. cit., n. 18, p. 209.
25 Tuteja, op. cit., n. 15, p. 36.
was of paramount importance to them. The prominent leaders were Master Tara Singh, Baba Kharak Singh and Sardul Singh Caveeshar. The third group consisted of leaders like Prof. Teja Singh, S. Bahadur Mehtab Singh who were religious reformers. Unlike the second group which gave priority to the nationalist objective they believed in keeping their religious movement distinct from the national movement. They gave more importance to their religious movement. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha formed in March 1926 was anti-British but socialist in nature. The Sabha supported the INC in 1928 in its protest against the Simon Commission. ‘Lord Irwin observed that the activities of the Sabha and the Congress in the Punjab had been identical’. 26

The Hindustan Socialist Republic Association also believed in independence but also believed in ‘restructuring of society on socialist principles’.27 Favouring militant nationalism the movement lost its charm after the execution of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru.

Till its dissolution in September 1934, Kirti Kisan Party worked for the workers and peasants. In opposition to the INC it believed in liberating the working class from the shackles of the bourgeois class.

The Nehru report of 1929 further eroded Sikh unity. Baba Kharak Singh refused to participate in the civil disobedience movement more because the Sikh colour was excluded from the national flag. But the SAD and the Central Sikh League decided to participate. The SGPC participated after the Sisgang Gurudwara firing in Delhi. The Sikh leaders opposed the ‘communal award’. They formed a Khalsa Darbar but after the first year the nationalist leaders like Baba Kharak Singh disassociated themselves from the Darbar. Before the elections of 1938 the Sikh leaders were divided into the SAD and the Sikhs who supported the Congress.

Baldev Singh, formed a new party under the name of United Punjab Sikh Party in March 1942. He joined hands with Sikander Hayat Khan. In the Quit India Movement of 1942 only a handful of Akalis took part.

When the II World War broke, leaders like Baba Kharak Singh formed the INC and opposed India’s participation in the war. Master Tara Singh parted from the congress and recruited Sikhs for the British army. Nationalist leaders like Baba

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27  Ibid.
Kharak Singh opposed the partition tooth and nail. He supported the formation and cause of Indian National Army [I. N. A.] of Subash Chander Bose along with the INC. He also appealed to the people to vote for the INC in the elections announced by Lord Wavell in 1946.

To protest against the communal board S. Joginder Singh, one of the leaders of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, proposed to form a unity board of all the Sikh political parties for the election to be held under the new constitution. But the SAD and the Khalsa Darbar refused to join the board. The Khalsa Darbar was initially constituted to work for the removal of the communal award. After sometime Giani Sher Singh’s group left the Khalsa Darbar alleging that Master Tara Singh had given the neutral Darbar party colour. With their exit Master Tara Singh consolidated his position in the Darbar and merged the Central Sikh League with it insisting that the aim of both the organisations were the same i. e. to protect the political rights of the Sikhs. The Akali leaders did not cooperate with the Chief Khalsa Diwan fearing alienation from the Sikh masses. The Chief Khalsa Diwan formed a new party known as the Khalsa National Party. This party decided to cooperate with the other parties to frame a new Constitution. All the anti-Akali elements joined this party. Sunder S. Majithia was one of the leaders. The Congress Sikh Party was formed to maintain contact with the Sikh masses. It decided to oppose the Communal Award and thus pacified the Sikh masses. The Akali party decided to join the INC to work for complete Independence and also to weaken the Khalsa National Party which had been formed, ‘with the object of getting back the influence which the Sikhs of the leading families in the province have lost’.

Sir Sikander Hayat Khan formed his ministry on April 1,1937. The Khalsa National Party joined the new government on the promise to safeguard the interests of the Sikhs. Describing them as traitors the Akalis sat in the opposition with the INC. Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh and Harnam Singh represented the case of the Sikhs to the Cabinet Mission. The Akali leaders later rejected the Mission’s proposal as they ‘could see nothing but their perpetual subjection to a Muslim majority in Punjab’. They formed a Panthic Pratinidhi Board to oppose the dreaded domination

29 Tuteja, op. cit., n. 15, p. 176.
of Pakistan. With the INC’s assurance to protect their interests the Board decided to send its representative to the Constituent Assembly and Baldev Singh joined the interim government as the defence Minister. Master Tara Singh declared that if the country was to be divided the Sikhs who were a nation should not be left at the mercy of either Pakistan or Hindustan.\textsuperscript{31} They placed their demand for a Sikh state. But the word ‘Azad’ led to opposition of the Sikhs and the Hindus of the western districts thought it excluded them. Master Tara Singh tried to clarify that in ‘Azad’ Punjab Hindus and Sikhs alike would get rid of the danger of Pakistan. The Akalis decided to fight till the last man if placed under Muslim domination. When Partition seemed inevitable the aim was to get maximum territory from the British province of the Punjab for the Indian Union. The ‘East Punjab’ became in a sense a gift of the Akalis to the Indian Union.\textsuperscript{32} But Partition made Punjab Hindu dominated. The Akalis feared for the preservation of their culture, heritage and preservation of their entity. They feared onslaught on their community from the Hindus who were in overwhelming majority not only in Punjab but also at the Center. Resurgence of Hinduism, revival of Sanskrit and assertiveness of the Punjabi Hindus further led to increasing insecurity and uneasiness among the minorities, especially the Sikh community. This led to the SAD raising the demand for a state based on language. This led to further agitations.

\textsuperscript{32} Grewal, op. cit., n. 2, p. 180.