CHAPTER IV
FIRST GENERAL ELECTIONS
AKALIS JOIN OPPOSITION

Elections and the Akalis

The Communal Award continued to be the central theme of Indian politics. The Muslims felt reassured by the special rights and concessions it afforded them. The Hindus were naturally hostile, but the Congress, in view of the divergence of opinion between the two communities, adopted an attitude of discreet neutrality. In a meeting in Bombay in October 1931 it declared that it neither accepted nor rejected the Award. The Sikhs considered the Award a means to their existence. They were its bitterest opponents and did not slacken the vigorous campaign against it. But they were numerically too few to have their protest heeded. The British Parliament set its seal of approval on the Award by passing the Government of India Act of 1935.

The provincial elections held under the Act gave birth to several new parties. Before the elections, there were only two prominent parties among the Sikhs -- the Shiromani Akali Dal, and the Chief Khalsa Diwan, an organisation of landed aristocracy. But with the advent of provincial autonomy, the Diwan changed its label and fought elections under the name of the Khalsa National Party. It was organised by Sir Sunder Singh Majithia and Sir Jogindra Singh. They collected around themselves all anti-Akali and pro-British elements, constituting a separate election board. The Khalsa National
Party had no faith in slogans like complete independence, but adopted the other items of the programme of the Akali Party with slight modifications. It was willing to work out the new constitution and also accept office. Sir Jogindra Singh was authorised to issue a detailed manifesto. Explaining the creed and programme of his party, Sir Jogindra Singh said at Ferozepore on August 7 that the Khalsa National Party stood for Swarajya in the true sense of the term and was determined to work ceaselessly towards its attainment by all constitutional means. Despite many imperfections in the new constitution, the party was willing to work to remove these. It would also devote its energies to uniting the communities and work for abolition of the Communal Award.

Referring to connections with Britain, Sir Jogindra Singh remarked: "What is wrong with India's connections with Britain? I am aware of our subordination, economic drain and other limitations, but we cannot ignore the fact that England stands sentinel at the gates of India, on land, sea and air, guaranteeing peace within and protection from invasions, thus permitting us to grow out of our communal conflicts and learn to govern ourselves." He also outlined the party's social aims of raising the standard of living of every man, woman and child, thus creating a new demand, both for raw

1. The Tribune, 16-6-1936
2. The Tribune, 13-8-1936
3. The Tribune, 13-8-1936
produce and manufactured articles, and providing new markets, work and employment.  

The Khalsa National party was not in favour of dividing rural and urban interests. In services, it stood for safeguarding the interests of the Sikhs by securing a fixed proportion in recruitment based on an All-India settlement.  

In a subsequent interview with "The Tribune", Sir Jogindra Singh said that the Khalsa National Party, unlike other parties, was not merely concerned with elections. It had a higher ambition to organise the Sikh community, to work steadfastly in every village and town and unite the community to work out a constructive policy. Its objective was to effect an inner change to prepare the ground for communal concord, realisation of nationality and its fruit - self-government. The party was also pledged to abolition of the Communal Award, not by edict but by agreed settlement.  

A meeting of the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Khalsa Durbar was held in Amritsar in June 1936 under the presidency of Nanak Singh, M.L.A. About 100 prominent leaders attended. There was prolonged discussion to set up a joint election board on behalf of all Sikh parties. But it was not favoured by the majority, and

4. The Tribune, 13-8-1936  
5. The Tribune, 13-8-1936  
7. The Tribune, 16-6-1936  

eventually it was decided to set up a joint parliamentary board of the two main parties only, namely, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Khalsa Durbar. The decision of the board was to be final in the choice of candidates. A 20-point election manifesto was drawn up. The manifesto inter alia said that the party "will fight for complete independence and co-operate with those politically advanced parties whose programmes and ideals approximate those of its own; will offer strong opposition to the Communal Award; will oppose the formation of a Ministry by those parties which do not agree to amend the Communal Award and replace it by a joint and national solution; and will work for abrogation of the constitution embodied in the Government of India Act, 1935, and for its replacement by a new constitution acceptable to the people of India." The Akali Dal and the Khalsa Durbar conveyed their unwillingness to co-operate with the Chief Khalsa Diwan.

Congress-Akali Concord

In the initial stages of the election campaign the Akalis were against joining hands with the Congress. Master Tara Singh, President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee was opposed to any Sikh candidate standing on the Congress ticket. He regarded religion as supreme, the service of the country being only a part of religion. He felt that the Congress could not be trusted if it hesitated in upholding Sikh rights in a matter like the Shahid Ganj dispute. It was his fear that the Congress would keep aloof even if the Muslims...
attacked the Golden Temple and would not condemn the murder of Sikhs by Muslims. He asserted: "I am a traitor to such a Congress which is under the influence of the Muslims. I shall continue to be such so long as it does not turn to the right path of true service to the country by avoiding the Muslim influence." However, he promised to be in the front-line if the Congress engaged itself in a struggle against the Government. He was denounced as "our Aurangzeb" by Hira Singh Dard, a staunch nationalist.

The opposition to the Congress by the Shiromani Akali Dal now became open. Master Tara Singh did not like the Sikhs to contest the elections on the Congress ticket as they would, then, have to remain neutral under Congress whip on important matters like jhatka, and Shabid Gaj and this would amount to treachery to the Panth.

The Sikh candidates, contesting on the Shiromani Akali Dal and Khalsa Durbar ticket, signed a pledge to work in the legislature under the instructions of the Joint Selection Board and not to co-operate with the Unionist Party under any circumstances.

The uncompromising attitude of some of the Akali leaders towards the Congress caused a rift in Akali ranks. Mengal Singh, President of the Khalsa Durbar, resigned from the Board as he felt that the

10. The Tribune, 5-7-1936
11. The Tribune, 5-7-1936
11a. The Unionist Party (1923) was a party of landlords. Though predominantly a Muslim organisation, it included among its members Hindus and Sikhs landholders and agriculturists as well. The landowners feared extinction in competition with the commercial class. So they had united to form a party to defend their privileges.

The 7-1936 Pledge of Sikh candidates.
Board should not oppose Congress candidates, particularly prominent partymen, since the Sikh Congress Party had declared openly that it would oppose the Communal Award and protect the legitimate interests of the Sikhs. He also felt that the Board should not set up candidates whose political antecedents were unsatisfactory from the nationalist point of view.  

Harcharan Singh Bajwa, General Secretary, Central Khalsa Youth League, resigned from the Board on similar grounds.

In October 1936 Congressite Sikhs met and after a long and heated discussion resolved to form a compromise board with a view to conferring with other progressive parties of Sikhs and making adjustments on Sikh seats.

However, before long efforts at conciliation between the Congress and the Akalis were made. Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava, Punjab Congress chief, announced that the Akali Party had decided to join hands with the Congress and to wholeheartedly co-operate with the Congress Parliamentary Board in combating "reactionary forces in this official-ridden province." Thereafter, an agreed list of candidates for the Sikh constituencies was drawn up. The Akalis were to contest 14 of the 24 seats, 10 being left to Congressite Sikhs. The Akali list included names of Baldev Singh, Swaran Singh, Man Singh.

13. *The Tribune, 27-10-1936; also Manjil Singh's letter to the present author dated 31-3-1966
It was also agreed that the Akali Party candidates returned to the legislature would form part of the Congress Legislature Party and would be amenable to its discipline.

In April 1937, probably the most important meeting of Akali workers during the past 15 years was held behind closed doors. Only the invitees were admitted. Due care was taken to scrutinise identity cards. The meeting passed a resolution expressing its full confidence in Master Tara Singh. To enable Akali workers to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the work of mass contact, it was decided that no member of the working committee should remain on the executive committee of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee or any other gurdwara committee. It was also decided to help the Congress in striving for freedom of the country.

Some important Congress-minded Akalis were, however, not satisfied with the way the Shiromani Akali Dal was working. They convened a separate meeting. The prime initiators of the move were Giani Karter Singh, Pratap Singh Kairon, Gursukh Singh Nusefir and Ishar Singh Majhail. The meeting decided to fora a Congress Akali Party to work among the Sikhs. Giani Karter Singh was elected president; Balwant Singh Sukhia, who was general secretary of the Shiromani Akali

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Also The Tribune, 20-11-1936, Copi Chand Bhargava’s arbitration in Sikh elections.

17. The Tribune, 20-11-1936

18. Akali Patrika, 7-4-1937 Akali Party to help Congress
Also The Tribune, 7-4-1937

Dal, was elected vice-president and Pratap Singh, general secretary. However, the new party was short-lived as the general body of the Akali Dal in June asked the Sikhs to join the Congress. 20

The 1937 elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly resulted in a clear-cut majority for the Unionist Party. 21 But despite the absolute majority, Sir Sikander Hyat Khan, now the leader of the Unionist Party, decided to seek co-operation of other parties like the National Progressive Party, including members elected on the Hindu Election Board ticket, some Hindu Independents, and the Khalsa National Party. In his coalition cabinet, Sir Sikander included Sir Manohar Lal of the National Progressive Party and Sir Sunder Singh Majithia of the Khalsa National Party. Both these parties stood for working the Constitution for what it was worth.

Explaining why he had accepted office, Sir Sunder Singh Majithia said that "the policy of his party was not "destructive." On the contrary it was prepared to co-operate with any party in the future government of the province provided it could do so on "an honourable understanding." That understanding had been reached with the Unionist

20. [Akali Patrika, 15-6-1937.]
Also The Tribune, 15-6-1937

21. After the death of Mian Fazl-i-Hussain in 1936, Sir Chottu Ram should have succeeded him as the leader but to appease the Musalim rank and file of the Unionist Party, Sir Sikander was persuaded to give up the job of Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India and come to Punjab to assume the party leadership. To the critics of the Unionist Party, this move provided a lever to prove the communal character of the party.
Party and the manner in which the new constitution was worked would show how the understanding was honoured by the Premier and the Cabinet. According to Sunder Singh, the Khalsa National Party was out to do solid constructive work and was opposed to self-advertisement and false propaganda. The destructive policy carried on by other groups (the reference was to the Akali party) during the past decade had caused disruption and chaos in the community, he insinuated.

**Sikander-Jinnah Pact**

Within one year of their coming in power, the Unionists came into the lap of the Muslim League. Since Jinnah was anxious to secure the support of a Muslim majority province he invited Sir Sikander Hyat Khan, the Punjab Premier, to the Lucknow session of the All-India Muslim League there. On October 15, 1937 Sir Sikander Hyat Khan held consultations with Jinnah. At the meeting a pact, known as the Sikander-Jinnah agreement, was reached.

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22. The Tribune, 11-3-1937, Khalsa National Party statement on why Sir Sunder Singh Majithia accepted Ministership

23. Khasa, G.D., _Starr Reckoning_, Bhawani & Sons, Delhi (1949), Pp. 312-313. The Sikander-Jinnah pact was drawn up at Lucknow on October 15, 1937. Its terms were:

(i) That on his return to the Punjab Sir Sikander Hyat will convene a special meeting of his party and advise all Muslim members of his party who are not members of the Muslim League already to sign its creed and join it. As such they will be subject to the rules and regulations of the Central and Provincial Boards of the All-India Muslim League. This will not affect the continuation of the present coalition and of the Unionist Party.

(ii) That in future elections and by-elections to the legislature the groups comprising the present Unionist Party will jointly support the candidates put up by the respective groups;

(iii) That the Muslim members of the legislatures who are elected on or accept the League ticket will constitute the Muslim League
announced to the Council of the All-India Muslim League and references were made to it repeatedly in responsible League quarters later without any repudiation by Jinnah or the League itself. The immediate effect of the agreement was to convert the Unionist Muslims into Muslim Leaguers and the Punjab Government a coalition of the Muslim League, Hindu agriculturists, Sikhs, depressed classes, Indian Christians and Europeans.

The Shiromani Akali Dal reacted sharply to the new development. A meeting of its executive and Akali M.L.A.s resolved that Akali members of the Legislative Assembly should join the Congress party in the Assembly to strengthen the forces of nationalism. They considered the Sikandar-Jinnah Pact as a "definite move of the reactionaries to keep the waning power and influence of British imperialism, and to check the growth of nationalism in India." The Dal also decided to boycott the unity conference convened by the Unionist Party for communal concord and peace "in view of the repressive policy of the Unionist Government and its recent exposure through the Sikander-

Party within the legislature. It shall be open to the Muslim League Party so formed to maintain or enter into coalition or alliance with any other party consistently with the fundamental principles, policy and programme of the League. Such alliances may be evolved upon after the elections. The existing combination shall maintain its present name "The Unionist Party."


25. Ibid

26. Akali Patrika, 29-8-1937, Text of the Resolution passed by the Shiromani Akali Dal on October 28, 1937 at Amritsar. Also The Tribune, 29-8-1937
Jinnah fast, coupled with the resolutions passed at the Lucknow session of the Muslim League in October 1937. According to the Dal, these developments were "a negation of nationalism and calculated to thwart communal harmony, concord and amity." The meeting to leave the coalition government and join the nationalist ranks in view of the increasing communal tendency of the Unionists.

In November 1938 the Akalis held an all-India Akali conference at Rawalpindi under the presidentship of Baldev Singh. Akali and Congress flags were flown side by side. The conference expressed no-confidence in the Unionist Government because of its repressive measures and exhorted the Sikhs to join the Congress, the only representative political organisation in the country. By another resolution, it characterised the various agrarian measures passed by the Unionist Ministry as measures to contravene the rule of equality, and opposed

27. Akali Patrika, 29-8-1937, Text of the Resolution passed by the Shiromani Akali Dal on October 28, 1937 at Amritsar. Also The Tribune, 29-8-1937

28. Akali Patrika, 29-8-1937, Text of the Resolution passed by the Shiromani Akali Dal on October 28, 1937 at Amritsar. Also The Tribune, 29-8-1937

29. Baldev Singh (1902-1961), a jat of Chokar sub-caste of village Dumana (district Ambala), was the son of a wealthy steel magnate. He made his debut in Sikh politics in 1937, when he was elected to the Punjab Assembly. He financed many ventures of the Akali party, including the Sikh National College at Lahore. In June 1942 he entered with an agreement known as the "Sikander-Baldev Pact" with the Unionists, whereby the Akalis called off their agitation against Sikander-Ryat government. One of the terms of the agreement providing his replacing Dassunda Singh in the Punjab Cabinet. Baldev Singh was the Sikh representative in the negotiations for the transfer of power and became the first Defense Minister of Nehru's government. He remained at the helm of Sikh affairs till 1957, when he was replaced by Swaran Singh.
them on grounds of being quite expropriatory in character and "designed to strengthen the domination of the Unionists." 30

In his presidential address Baldev Singh said: "Next to my duty towards God and my great Gurus, I sincerely believe that it is my duty to obey the mandate of the Congress and I hold that the Congress mandate is binding upon me. This I do, not because of my personal considerations, but as I consider the Congress to be the trustee of our national honour and national self-respect and the only national organisation that has done more for the liberation of our mother country and the emancipation of the poor masses than any other organisation." 31

Henceforth the party aligned itself more closely with the Congress party in the assembly. It further asked its members to join the Congress with the result that many of its functionaries came to occupy high positions in the Congress organisation. Some critics however, said that the Akali Party had joined the Congress for its own purposes. Be that as it may, the Akali Party's policy first of co-operation and then of collaboration with the Congress continued till the Second World War broke out. 32

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30. Akali Patrika, 28-11-1936, Proceeding of the All-India Akali Conference, Nawalpindi. The Resolution was moved by Harnam Singh and seconded by Giani Karta Singh. Also The Tribune, 28-11-1936.
