



Dr. A. Kumar

The fate of Punjab & Punjab politics

by Dr. A. Kumar

In the year 2002, Sharad Joshi, the Founder of Shetkari Sanghatana has said, “Punjab is facing the tyranny of the elements, clumsiness in the Centre's policies and the misdirected forthrightness of the Chief Minister, who has decided to stop free power to farmers. Conceding that farmers get subsidies on account of power supply, Sharad Joshi thinks the Punjab move could have waited, and looks at the politics and economics of free electricity to farmers.”

Let us have a quick glance over Punjab’s history. In the early years after independence Congress's Partap Singh Kairon dominated Punjab as a C.M. He also did most of the infrastructure building that brought Punjab its prosperity as all the fabled irrigation system was in Pakistani Punjab. Early on the Akalis were not a force but with time they too became politically active. This brought religion into Punjab politics and the Central Congress party's attempts to counter this through Bhinderanwala caused the state to have religious militancy, caused by small section of Sikh separatists, through most of the decade of the 1980's. The Akalis had leaders who were ambivalent on the Khalistan issue but as a party recovered from the prolonged President's rule in Punjab in the 1980's by allying with the B.J.P .

Excluding agriculture other major industries include the manufacture of scientific instruments, electrical goods, machine tools, textiles, tourism, sewing machines, sports goods, starch, fertilizers, bicycles, and the processing of pine oil and sugar. Traditionally the Akali Dal and the Congress have been the two parties that have been in power in Punjab. Later on of course, a number of regional and national parties have been trying to make a stronghold in Punjab but were not very successful.

The present state of affairs is very bad in Punjab. It would not be out of place to mention that the economy, political situation and cultural and social values in Punjab are continuously on the decline for long. According to Sarabjit Pandher, “Politics in Punjab, which seems to be in a perpetual state of flux, has once again reached the crossroads. While the RSS has initiated a process to freeze the Sikh religion in history, the right-wing radicals have been successful in getting support from the Akal Takht to stress the need to institutionalize the process of evolution of the “world's youngest religion”.

“In the post-militancy phase the RSS realized that if it had to confront the radical politics in Punjab, it must own up Sikhism, which can be accepted as a hegemonistic approach.

But for the RSS it could also blunt the flak on being communally divisive, as was apparent from its stance regarding Christianity and Islam. The recent initiatives by its affiliate, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, especially in Punjab's countryside, seem to have been targeted to present the RSS as an "integrative force". Reacting to this, the right wing radicals in Sikh politics succeeded in roping in the support of the Jathedar of the Akal Takht, the supreme spiritual, religious and temporal seat of the community. The acting Jathedar, Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, on Monday last through an edict supported the exclusive and separate religious boundary for the Sikh community. "

Mr. Pandher further says, "It is clear that the Akal Takht chief has favoured the demand to institutionalise the process of evolution of the Sikh religion. So far it has been confined to the religious sphere and has never negated the cultural and linguistic commonality with Hindus and Muslims of the region. Giani Vedanti, while cautioning the community regarding the "sinister" designs of "anti-Panthic" forces to create confusion about the "unique and distinct" identity of the Sikhs, directed the leadership of the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) to represent the case in the Constitutional review panel. The situation is extraordinary as the Akali Dal is close to the RSS-BJP due to convergence of political and electoral exigencies, while the ideological positions seem to be untenable. The Akalis have always considered the Congress as their enemy number one as it is "anti-Sikh", especially in the backdrop of the events of 1984. But recent statements of the president of the Punjab PCC, Capt. Amrinder Singh, have echoed a significant point of view within the Akalis. He has supported the separate identity of the Sikhs. "

"In the series of developments falls the statement of the Union Home Minister, Mr. L. K. Advani, who has favoured the release of Sikh youths locked up in jails for involvement in militancy-related activity. Analysts believe it carried the potential to fracture the forces propagating the exclusive identity of the Sikhs. Perhaps with this in mind the Akal Takht Jathedar avoided naming the BJP or the RSS as being the "anti-Panthic" forces, they argue. "

"The developments have posed a difficult situation for the SAD president, Mr. Parkash Singh Badal, who as Chief Minister, has not been consistent in nurturing the development-driven agenda in politics and furthering the cause of the composite Punjabi identity. While it was being seen that Mr. Badal has aligned with the issue of Sikh identity, the urban Hindus and the liberal Sikhs began to drift away. Due to his manoeuvring the unceremonious removal of Mr. G. S. Tohra and Bhai Ranjit Singh, as president of the SGPC and Jathedar of the Akal Takht, respectively, Mr. Badal never enjoyed the acceptance from the radicals. "

"Mr. Badal, however, managed a major political recovery, depicted by the victory in the Nawanshahr assembly by-elections. But a major problem could be the stance adopted by the present SGPC president, Bibi Jagir Kaur, who during the crisis related to the implementation of the Nanakshahi calendar had sided with the forces favouring the exclusive identity of the Sikhs. "

“According to some thinkers, if Mr. Badal continues to support Bibi Jagir Kaur, the SAD may lose support from the BJP. Moreover, the new Jathedar, who was appointed by Bibi Jagir Kaur, through his stance has also weakened Mr. Badal's position. But, the ambivalence reflected by him during the removal of Giani Puran Singh, was indicative that Mr. Badal had realised it might strengthen the radical elements. Watchers of Sikhs affairs point out that in the present situation Mr. Badal should be feeling the absence of Mr. Tohra, in pursuing the “bridge politics” in the Akali conglomerate, especially under similar circumstances. “

However, at the same time it seems that the sanity will prevail in Punjab after the recent elections as the SAD has promised that the developmental projects in Punjab initiated by the previous government wont be culled. According to a report in a prominent English daily in Punjab, I was delighted to read the following : “In a sigh of relief to those involved in projects worth crores of Rupees initiated during Amarinder Singh regime, Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh has categorically said that his government would not withdraw any on-going project in the state.

”My instructions are clear that no ongoing projects (initiated during the previous regime) will be withdrawn, Badal, who is also leader of the house, assured the state assembly here. Badal was responding to the apprehension of leader of opposition Rajinder Kaur Bhatal (Cong) that the present Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)-bjp alliance government intended to stall developmental projects started during the previous congress regime. The developmental projects started during the previous congress rule should not be stopped, she pleaded on the floor of the house.

Accusing the present dispensation of targetting congress ranks and files in the state to settle scores, bhatal said her party would not tolerate selective vendetta against its programmes, policies and friends. However, Badal was on his foot to give explanation that the SAD-BJP combine would not be vindictive against its political opponents. There will be no vindictiveness, the chief minister assured the members in the house.

Punjabis all over the world are concerned about the fate of Punjab. Once the number one state of India, Punjab has no rankings in industrialization, education, economy, griculture and so on as compared to the booming economies of South and South western Indian states. The reasons are obvious, the political and religious power holders in Punjab are not concerned with the growth but their personal interests. It is still not too late. The people of Punjab must join hands, have clear perspective about what kind of Punjab they want and what their children should inherit in the times to come. Blaming merely the people in power wont get the general populace anywhere. Let we Punjabis awake and start building Punjab from the very scratch.

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