

Punjab: Democracy Under Siege?

How rulers are playing again with their favourite ghost of Khalistan

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We were getting distress signals from writings of friends in Punjab and those outside Punjab but are well connected with events there. Internet suspension for days, police raids and arrests, even taking journalists to 'custody', imposition of Section-144, and even NIA and paramilitaries all were there apparently in search of one Amritpal who is said to be pro-Khalistan, who 'mysteriously' escaped arrest attempts, but all these created an atmosphere of fear. National media was not concerned with peoples' loss of democratic space; they filled air about pro-Khalistan 'influence' in Punjab, machinations from abroad, particularly Pakistan, recovery of weapons and all such news-garbage. Renowned writer Amandeep Sandhu wittily wrote in his great piece on recent Punjab in Frontline magazine: "If militancy plunged Punjab into a crisis, after militancy, politicians of all hues — traditionally Congress and Akali Dal, and now the new Aam Aadmi Party — have displayed apathy and unwillingness to untie Punjab's knots and give it the healing it needs. A former Chief Minister kept talking about security threats from across the border but never answered why Pakistan viewed the State as ready for the picking and if his own government had assuaged Punjab's woes. The Centre deployed the Border Security Force in half of Punjab, along the India-Pakistan border, yet ironically, the drugs everyone talks about proliferates in this very belt."
[1]

But the issue is not just concerns of individuals now, for example, in a statement issued by Amarjit Singh, the Jamhuri Adhikar Sabha Punjab (Association For Democratic Rights, Punjab) declared about observing Anti Black Law protests on April 7 at Barnala, Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union (PKMU) secretary Lachman Sewewala issued protest statement on behalf of workers and working people, to mention just a few. Twitter handles of hundreds of persons were suppressed.

As the govt and the media are now seen to be keen in prolonging the Apritpal Singh -

Khalistan – Foreign hand etc ‘Serial’ readers may find why the govt find it so convenient to resume new episodes and why many people outside Punjab often fall prey to the propaganda. And it is also imperative to know some ground reality about Punjab which are connected with this. Though this article might seem superfluous after getting analyses from many renowned and knowledgeable persons, but some points need to be mentioned which secular intelligentsia may find provocative or embarrassing. This article wants to visit a few such points: (1) Why Delhi Rulers and Media Can Often Portray Punjab’s Movements as Sikh’s movement (i.e., with religious connotation) OR Why Punjab’s Movements Often Look Like Sikh Movement! (2) Some Incidents During Farmers Long Protest Movement Around Delhi (3) Some Recent Events: Twist & Turn?

Why Delhi Rulers and Media Can Often Portray Punjab’s Movements As Sikh’s movement (i.e., with religious connotation) OR Why Punjab’s Movements Often Look Like Sikh Movement!

First point: It happened historically, or it is indeed a historical fact arising from Punjab’s Hindus’ abnegation of their Punjabi identity starting just after India’s independence: In the 1951 and 1961 census there were concerted efforts by Punjabi Hindus to record their language as Hindi and not Punjabi. It created the basis of further division of Punjab – into Haryana (a state and Chandigarh, an UT), after ceding places including Shimla, Punjab’s capital, to Himachal. There are so many records of this, including illuminating books by Paul. R. Brass and writings of many researchers. This did not happen spontaneously, the Arya Samaj and RSS acted with full strength to make this successful. Haryana was born on 1966.

Second point: The repeatedly wounded and amputated state of Punjab then started its own movement for the interest of Punjab, and naturally Punjabis against rulers higher-up – but take it with caution, as a “nation’s” or nationality’s interest, except in case of liberation war against imperialism, does mean the interest of the influential classes and strata of that nation or nationality, while other lower-down sections may think that to be in their interest too, or they can be made to think so, or, in worst case scenario, they may stay aloof/neutralised in conflict (of course, there could be chances of some trickling down of benefits in case that nation’s interest to some extent could be appropriated). Here came the Anandpur Sahib resolution of 1973. Though in some points it did have some religious overtones (and that is not artificial and by some legal/constitutional provision of some article, Sikhism could/can be portrayed as a sect of Hinduism) the resolution was actually addressing concern of a rising class of entrepreneurs in agriculture and also small industries who were facing heavy difficulties. It was not uncommon in India – states were reorganised and founded on linguistic-cultural, national basis and the respective nations fought for their ‘proper’ share – for example, we have long standing water dispute problems among states in the South.

Third point: In case of Punjab the agricultural entrepreneuring strata in villages and some little entrepreneurs in town were Sikhs and businessmen class was overwhelmingly urban and Hindu – to the extent that, suppose, in 1981 Rural Punjab had more than 71% Sikhs whereas Urban Punjab had more than 64% Hindus! [2]

By the way: This is also a reason why Punjab’s farmers movement look like nearly an all-Sikh movement – it is based on a stubborn fact. Moreover, the division created during 1951-1961 and afterwards, included “hate propaganda” against Punjabi and created “lot of bitterness”, according to Dr J. S. Puar. Ex-VC, Punjabi University [3].

Second and third point together led to: Anandpur Sahib resolution of 1973 was formally taken as a party resolution of Shiromani Akali Dal in 1978. Strangely, in the case of Punjab the regional/national, or as some may call it, wrongly, sub-national, movement was taken up by a party which was connected in many ways with a particular religion or its institution, unlike, say DMK or Telugu Desham, or etc. We may remember the Sarkaria Commission which was constituted in 1983 to look after centre-state relation, demands of federalism against the strong unitary way of functioning of Govt of India forgetting that the 'State' in India was codified as The Union of India. Shiromani Akali Dal's movement for Punjab's interest (please remember the caution mentioned about a nation's or nationality's interest) ultimately resulted in launching "Dharam Yuddh Morcha" in alliance with Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in 1982. Of course, Akali Dal had a compulsion as its students wing, Sikh Students Federation was much under influence of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. No so-called 'secular' party' did (or could) take up the agenda or part set in Anandpur Sahib resolution and led the movement. The Akali Dal, after some time, came out of the alliance. But the movement was advancing. We know the rest of this episode of 1980s, there would be stories of 'foreign hands', 'international diaspora' and so on, and it would be forgotten who joined this movement and suffered — Bhindranwale's initial support base was poorer economically than that of Akali Dal, the movement gained more momentum in districts with higher inequalities and higher depeasantisation and etc, and also about the condition of people far below for who nobody bothered much, the Dalits, mainly landless, and labouring section, about a third of the population of the state.

As in Assam, so also in case of Punjab, after head of collisions with the state during Indira-regime, we would see one after one 'accords' during Rajiv-regime, Assam and Punjab got accords. Tamils of Sri Lanka too. Now we can take a little break in this historical journey, with a little reminder only: the agricultural practice enforced by the Indian Govt., the Green Revolution technology, started taking its toll on humans and nature which was much apparent by late 1980s, from presence of DDT in human breast milk to irrigation water shortage to emptying of groundwater layer and so on.

Fourth point: Just ten years ago a movement started spontaneously — Bandi Skh Rihai - and it got support from wide range of people in Punjab. Gurbax Singh Khalsa started a fast which lasted 44 days and compelled the govt. to commute death sentence of Balwant Singh, one of the imprisoned Sikhs, imprisoned for charges of terrorism. Bandi Sikh movement continued demanding release of Sikh prisoners who have already served their jail sentence but yet not released. Five years ago, 2018 on March 21, Gurbax Singh Khalsa, who was again of a fast to death with this demand, committed suicide [4].

By the few above mentioned points, we wished to express a curious fact: how Punjab's movement often turned out to be or seemed to be a Sikh movement, in general terms, to the outside world.

Some Strange Incidents During Farmers Long Protest Movement Around Delhi

Act 1: The January 26, 2021 Red Fort Event. While all major farmers unions, who were determined to continue their protest, decided for the Million Farmers March on the Ring Road as agreed with administration, some hundreds of protesters, or some parts of the march were seen to be marching towards Red Fort and they reached there. On one side there were some Quixotic movements of tractors, clash with police, etc, a large crowd was seen around the fort and a few climbed on to raise Sikh religious flag. TV channels started a

high-pitched propaganda campaign against farmers unions, their disloyalty to the 'country', their 'traitorous' nature and what not. Quickly, a 'Khalistan' link could be discovered by the lackey media. Whole of the farmers movement was portrayed by them as 'separatist', 'traitors' and supported by 'foreign hands'. The religious flag hoisting was done by some Nihang Sikhs and a renowned figure of Punjab, Deep Sidhu was one of the main architects behind this who appeared the scene in a car.

Taking advantage of this, the administration tried to attack the farmers protest sites and almost evicted the farmer-protesters in Gazipur border. TV crews merrily and victoriously beamed how police were clearing up protest sites, showing senior farmer leader Tikait in tears in almost deserted site.

It took efforts of big farmers unions of Haryana and Punjab to rush thousands of tractor-loads of activists to help that camp. Thousands of farmers from Tikait's place started marching to save the situation. And ultimately the farmers movement could be made more fortified. The unity grew farther. Some 'positive' lessons were learnt by farmers of western UP, and we saw the famous Lota-Nun Oath at Muzaffarpur on February 7, 2021 [5].

But how could a small part of the big farmers rally reach Red Fort when all roads towards that site were supposed to be closed at multiple points? How could Deep Sidhu and the Nihang group reach there and hoisted their flag and smoothly return by car?

Khair. Anyway, there are people who think Deep Sidhu did this courageous act and it was the correct protest, whereas all farmers unions compromised with the police and did not march to the Red Fort as was declared previously.

Act 2: October 15, 2021, the Singhu Border Event. On the early hours a dalit Sikh labourer, Lakhbir Singh from Cheema Khurd village of Tarn Taran district was found dead; he was killed by some Nihang at farmers' protest site at Singhu Border on the allegations of sacrilege of Holy Book. The govt and BJP and naturally the media started roaring again about 'violent farmers', 'anarchists', religious terrorists and etc blemishing the farmers protest which, by then, was near to complete one year of continuous protest.

Later, the govt constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) for this incident. By mid-November, The Caravan exposed how the incident was being 'planned' since months, how the victim was taken by a car from his village and many related facts [6]. On December 22, The News Click reported "Professor Sukhdev Singh Sohal, who specialises in the social and economic history of Punjab from Guru Nanak University, seconds Sekhon. "People know that nothing comes out of these investigations. ... What happened to the case of the man who killed a Nihang at the Singhu border? What about his past and his links? Apparently, something fishy is going on," he alleges. ... Recently, the BKU Ugrahan said that whenever people raise a voice for their demands, such incidents occur to divert attention from the real issues." [7]

We find from the above facts that there might be some design, some machination, from some quarters to bring a religious, a Khalistani hint, way back in 2021. What the BKU (Ugrahan) commented, 'whenever people raise a voice for their demands, such incidents occur to divert attention from the real issues', is really a big point in concern.

Moreover, the crisis ridden society does not only serve as a ground for increasing drug-menace, but also produces frustrated youth, a section of which may turn to some path

which may be viewed as 'uncalled-for' by many observers.

Some Recent Events: Twist & Turn?

Bandi Sikh movement gave rise to a Quami Insaaf Morcha which has been sitting in protest in Mohali in the beginning of this year.

Farmers organisation pledged support for this movement in early February this year. On February 1, Kisan Mazdoor Sangrash Committee members even took part in the dharna in Mohali and on February 4, Krantikari Kisan Union members joined the morcha at Chandigarh. On behalf of the biggest farmers union, BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) "Dr Navsharan Singh, ... said, "We are raising the demands for release of all prisoners be it Sikh, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims etc, who have completed their jail terms. Though we trust our judicial system but people who haven't been released from jail even after completing their terms raises a question mark.""; and "Sukhdev Singh Kokrikalan, general secretary of BKU Ugrahan, said, "We will be organising district-level protests on February 13 to raise the demand of release of all prisoners who have completed their jail terms." [8] BKU (Danduka) also came in support of the movement [9].

Later support poured from some other quarters: four Panthik Groups pledged their support for it on Feb 22 [10]. They started their march from Amritsar; two wheelers, cars, buses load of Panthic activists were scheduled to reach Mohali by evening.

In recent weeks, Indian Express reported: Carrying swords and sticks, the protesters, who were part of the Quami Insaaf Morcha, criticised the police for its action against the self-styled Sikh preacher and blocked a road near Gurdwara Singh Shaheedan in Mohali [photo caption]. Supporters of self-styled Sikh preacher Amritpal Singh Sunday (March 19) held a demonstration in Mohali in protest against the police crackdown against the radical leader. The protest was going on till filing of this report. The 'Quami Insaaf Morcha' too extended support to the protesters and condemned the police action. [11]

In lieu of conclusion

The author would like to appeal to readers who took pain to read this lengthy piece, to fight against the propaganda to malign Punjab and Punjabis.

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Notes

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