

Cabinet Mission of 1946 and its Implications on the Muslim-Sikh Politics

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Abstract

The Shiromani Akali Dal diverted its strategy from the Azad Punjab scheme to the call for an independent Sikh state, an idea which it had aired from time to time. The All-India Muslim League went for Pakistan while the Hindu groups continued fighting for united India. The arrival of the Cabinet Mission on 23 March 1946 was an important milestone on the road to Indian independence. The mission tremendously affected Indian politics and definitely Punjab was no exception in this regard. It reflected in many ways the acceptance of the standpoints of the major stakeholders which the British had been trying so far. The plan decreased the traditional interaction between the Muslims and Sikhs and increased communal tension throughout the region. Many consider the acceptance of the plan by Quaid-i-Azam M. A. Jinnah as a reversal from the creed of Pakistan but actually it was a strategic step by the League leadership which proved the fact that the Hindu leadership was always reluctant to come to any compromise with the Muslims. The Sikhs supported the Indian National Congress and went further away from the League. The British divided India into Groups fulfilling the desires of the local leadership but even then this plan could not satisfy the major political parties. Voluminous work has been produced on the subject but the British decision making regarding this plan and its impact on the Muslim-Sikh relations have hardly been taken up. This article aims to see how the British government initiated the idea of sending the Cabinet Mission and what was the contingency plan to be used in case of Indian recalcitrance. The study declares the stands taken by the Indian leaders of the major communities to the constitutional suggestions as justifiable; the Sikh responses, however, added ill-will and uncertainty in the Punjab.

The British departure from India resulted in the establishment of a Muslim homeland of Pakistan, despite the resistance to this both from the colonial rulers and the Hindus and Sikhs. The utmost endeavour of the British was to hand over a 'united India' to the majority community albeit with the 'consent of the minorities' which could ensure an

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‘honourable return’ to Britain. The British introduced numerous democratic reforms in India including emergence of political parties and an awareness to demand rights. During the closing years of British rule, three major communities, the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh came up with a spirited struggle. The Muslims were clear about their destination; Hindus were united on the Congress demands while Sikh leadership was disunited and confused. The contradictory suggestions on the boundaries of the Sikh state before the Cabinet Mission made the basis of the Sikh demand very weak. Master Tara Singh, President of Shiromani Akali Dal, vaguely expressed the areas of the proposed state; Giani Kartar Singh known as the brain of Akalis, asked for Sikhistan consisting of Lahore, Karnal, Simla, Montgomery and Lyallpur districts along with the Sikh areas whereas Sardar Baldev Singh, a minister in the Punjab provincial cabinet, suggested the areas of three divisions of Lahore, Jullundur and Ambala.¹ While addressing the Sikh Students’ Federation at Gujranwala on 30 March 1946 he also demanded a Sikh state.²

British homework

Although the British government decided to send the Cabinet Delegation to India without specific provisions, nevertheless, a variety of contingencies had been discussed before its departure. The British always adopted a well-worked out policy before engaging the Indian leaders in negotiations. Therefore, they exerted a lot to secure the input from their own politicians on the very issue so that the British delegation might have an agreed direction along with necessary tools shared by the British politicians to cope with any expected and unexpected situation. The delegation was thus well-equipped to deal with any political direction before its departure to India. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy also expressed his opinion through a letter to the Secretary of State for India, on 7 February 1946,³ that in case of inevitability, he could recommend the Muslim majority areas in the Punjab i.e. Rawalpindi, Multan and

¹ Tan Yong Tai and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.111-12.

² Punjab Police Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, Lahore, 1946, file S-414, para. 213.

³ The British also sent a British parliamentary delegation consisting of Prof. Robert Richards, Arthur Bottomley, Woodrow Wyatt, Reginald Sorensen and Mrs. Muriel Nichol who reported to the Prime Minister in February 1946 that they would have to accept the demand for Pakistan. Notes by Members of the Parliamentary Delegation, 13 February 1946, No. 426, TP, VI, pp.947-51 in Z. H. Zaidi (ed.), *Jinnah Papers*, Vol. XIII (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam Papers Wing, Cultural Division, 2006), p.X.

Lahore divisions less Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts into Pakistan. Amritsar on the religious basis while Gurdaspur with 51 per cent Muslim majority and due to the geographical reason would not go to the Muslim state. Though the land of Lahore district depended on the Upper Bari Doab canal with headworks at Gurdaspur district made it awkward to be given to India but the difficulties left no alternative solution. To him, the Sikh question would still remain complex because any version of Pakistan would not resolve the difficulties of the Sikh shrines, lands and populations. He furthered His Majesty Government's (H.M.G.) strategy towards the Muslims and Sikhs by suggesting negotiations on the boundaries in which the Sikh interests could be carefully considered; by this, the region could be saved from the Sikh violence.⁴ Commenting on the Sikh question, Major Short, a Sikh specialist wrote that the Sikhs would be better placed in Pakistan rather than in India. He said that first priority of Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh was united India, however, both were prepared to join Pakistan on reasonable terms.⁵ Regarding Pakistan, the British got a detailed report, 'Viability of Pakistan', which declared that the League's Pakistan scheme was unworkable due to economic, strategic, geographic, administrative, communication and defence reasons along with the presence of threats from China, Russia and Afghanistan.⁶ In this way, the British seemed reluctant to divide India into Muslim and Hindu countries but at the same time they wanted to fulfil their duty to accommodate the interests of all the communities because 'consensus' was deemed imperative to prove their 'just rule and fair play along with an honourable return' from India.

Although the Governor of the Punjab and the other British officials were negative in their attitudes towards the Muslim League, nevertheless, the Viceroy and many other British leaders had been well aware of the Indian situation and popularity of the League. On 3 March 1946, the Viceroy wrote to the Secretary of State for India that the Pakistan issue, being the most important, would definitely come first during the negotiations, therefore, the British government should determine a policy regarding this question because the British empire would have to face the biggest problem in this regard. To ensure the unity of India for peace and economy of India for progress the world

⁴ Letter from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India on 7 February 1946, IOR: L/PO/6/114.

⁵ Major Short's Comments on the Sikh question on 18 February 1946, IOR: Mss. Eur. F. 189/9, Major Short Collection.

⁶ 'Viability of Pakistan', Cabinet Directive, Chequers Meeting, Parliamentary Statements, Mission Objects, IOR: L/P&J/10/21 (Cabinet Mission Papers).

would convince him to save India from 'complete partition' but the Muslims could not be persuaded to accept a united India. On the other hand, if the Muslims were ignored, H.M.G. would have to face reaction from the other Muslim countries as well.⁷ As enunciated by the Viceroy, this tangible acceptance of the League's strength in the eyes of the Muslim countries testifies to its popularity from a local to an international level.

On 7 March 1946, the Secretary of State for India circulated a memorandum from the British Prime Minister as a direction to the Cabinet Delegation to India in which it was proposed that the delegation should have deliberations and explore all alternatives without concentrating on any rigid formula. The British government desired the Indian leaders to conclude an agreed constitutional package.⁸ The British Prime Minister expressed his views regarding Indian question, expectation from the delegation and the Indian leaders' response:

The temperature of 1946 is not the same as that of 1920, 1930, or even 1942.... So it is emphatically with the tide of nationalism in Asia and especially in India.... My colleagues are going to India with the intention of using their utmost endeavours to help her to attain that freedom as speedily and fully as possible.... We are conscious of having done a great work in India. We have united India, have given a sense of nationality which she formerly lacked. She has learnt from us principles of democracy and justice. When Indians attack our rule they base their attack not on Indian principles, but on the basis of standards derived from Britain.... Mindful as we are of the rights of minorities we cannot allow a minority to place a veto on the advance of the majority.... We are too well aware of the existence of Minorities in India. I think that Indian leaders are increasingly appreciative of the need for making due provision for them within the Constitution.⁹

The League resented the Prime Minister's comments relating to the minorities because the speech was more favourable to the Congress' point of view than that of the League. The Prime Minister implied that the Muslims should accept the wishes of the Hindu majority which were opposed to the Muslim League's aspirations for self-determination. The confident leadership of the League retaliated to remind the delegation

⁷ Letter from Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India on 3 March 1946, IOR: L/PO/6/114.

⁸ Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India on 7 March 1946, *ibid*.

⁹ Prime Minister's speech, *ibid*.

about the Muslim stature in India and outside. The British Foreign Office had already recognized the League's popularity in 1942 while writing to Washington on 5 March 1942 about the importance of the Muslims and the Muslim League¹⁰ therefore the speech was taken as a token to please the Hindus which the Muslim leadership could counter adequately.

Negotiations with Indian politicians

On 23 March 1946, a delegation of three British politicians including Sir Pethick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, and A. V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty, arrived in India. The major objective of the delegation was to explore the opinion of the Indian politicians which could develop constitutional modalities to further the self-governance process. The Sikh and other leaders were engaged in ascertaining the best solution of the communal problem favourable for the community concerned. The Sikh leaders were still stuck in traditional politics. Having no better alternatives to their demands, Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia (1912-1995), MLA (Central), in a letter to Akali leadership in late March 1946, proposed that Sikh state as suggested by the Akalis was neither beneficial nor practicable. He was of the view that by demanding a state, the Sikhs would concede the right of Pakistan, which was outrageously a scheme of the vivisection of India. Secondly, the Muslims would never surrender the proposed areas to the Sikh state particularly when these areas were dominantly Muslim majority areas. The exchange of population would ruin the agricultural economy by losing their fertile lands which was about 40 per cent of the Punjab. Thirdly, as the Sikhs had no majority in the area and the Muslims could not be eliminated. Alternately, after detaching Jat Hindu and Muslim areas, the Sikhs would be able to obtain their state, which would be a 'tiny area' wherein they would never be able to protect themselves as an effective community. If a Sikh state was created the Sikhs would have to seek help either from the Muslims or Hindus. Majithia believed that all the Sikh problems could be resolved by the presence of joint electorates with reserved minority seats in Akhand Bharat.¹¹ Majithia diagnosed the genuine problems of the Sikh community but could not hit upon any new scheme beneficial for the Sikhs.

¹⁰ For detail see, Private Office Paper of Sir Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, FO/954/12A/0/427.

¹¹ *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 25 March 1946; see also IOR: L/P&J/10/33 (Cabinet Mission: Sikhs).

On 28 March 1946, the Governor of the Punjab, Sir Bertrand Glancy, in a meeting of the governors and the Cabinet Delegation discussed the provincial situation and said that although the League had won the elections, the League leaders were not sincere to the idea of Pakistan. The Governor briefed him that the Sikhs could not leave the newly formed Unionist-led coalition as it would be unlikely to think that they would shake hands with the League. During the elections, they had negotiated with the Muslims but this was just to increase their leverage in bargaining power with the Congress. He also expressed his views against Pakistan and in favour of united India and suggested that the Congress should offer maximum concessions to the League to persuade them to come to terms. He was optimistic that the League would come to some compromise ultimately.¹² The Governor presented an entirely contradictory report to what he had done previously regarding the League's strength. The report gave a wrong perception that some League leaders were against the Pakistan scheme. His suggestion that the Congress should change its policy towards the League and the assurance that the Sikhs would not compromise with the League show that the League's strong position had jeopardised the Unionists' position and made the Governor very upset. Why did he need a way to strengthen the coalition and Congress' position against the League if he expected a split in the League circles on the Pakistan issue? As a matter of fact, the government and political forces had become defensive morally by denying the largest party from the right to make ministry. This, therefore, started defaming the League. His report failed to honour the will of the voters who had supported the League's demand for Pakistan. This report clearly exposed the pro-Congress attitude of the Governor who seemed to be a Congress representative in the Punjab.

The delegation interviewed political leaders during the month of April brought out contradictory points of view on fundamental issues such as Congress' clamour for the single Indian federation and single constitution while the League's insistence on Pakistan with separate assembly to frame its own constitution.¹³ Gandhi in his meeting with the delegation on 3 April 1946 said that Jinnah himself was not clear about Pakistan and, in the discussion for 18 days (in conversation and writings)

¹² Secret Meeting between His Excellency the Viceroy, the Cabinet Delegation, and the Provincial Governors on 28 March 1946. IOR: L/P&J/10/25 (Cabinet Delegation, Interviews).

¹³ Ram Narayan Kumar and Georg Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle, Origin, Evolution and Present Phase* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1991), pp.139-40.

with him, the latter could not define Pakistan properly. Nonetheless, the reference of Pakistan in the Acharia formula and its acceptance by Gandhi as quoted by the delegation, upset Gandhi but he denied it abruptly; however, when the delegation 'produced his formula he was on his last legs and said that he accepted it'.¹⁴ Gandhi said that two-nation theory was dangerous and not acceptable because the Muslims were converts from Hinduism.¹⁵ Jinnah retaliated during his interview with the delegation that it was not appropriate to throw these converted people out of the mainstream of life.¹⁶ The directions taken by both the leaders highlight credibility and calibre of the Muslim and Hindu leadership. It also shows gulf between the political creeds of Gandhi and Quaid-i-Azam.

On 2 April, Nawab Mamdot was interviewed by the Delegation but he uttered nothing about the Sikhs, on the other hand, Sir Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah, a Sindhi politician, said that the 'Sikhs could have Sikhistan if they wanted it'.¹⁷ Baldev Singh told the delegation that in the past, the Unionists adopted tricky politics towards the Sikhs. He argued that the Sikh demands should be treated not on the basis of population but on their political importance. Cripps at this moment 'reminded' him about Khalistan and Baldev Singh replied that they could have the Punjab less the Rawalpindi and Multan divisions up to Chenab River as the boundary. He also demanded Lahore but again reverted to the demand of united India. To him, the best solution was the division of the Punjab between 'Pathanistan' and Sikhistan. He said that Jinnah was ready to award much to the Sikhs but the experience with the Unionist Muslims did not allow the Sikhs to trust them and revive the bitter experience. He further stressed that in the last elections every Muslim thought that he was about to be a Mughal king.¹⁸ Baldev's opinions highlight the Sikh detestation towards the Unionist Muslims and confused standing regarding the Sikh question. Division of Punjab between Pathanistan and Sikhistan would mean the revival of the Azad Punjab scheme which had already been turned down. His clamour for united India showed his lack of interest in Sikhistan and his

¹⁴ Note on Interview between the Cabinet Delegation and Mr. Gandhi on 3 April 1946, IOR:L/P&J/10/25 (Cabinet Delegation, Interviews).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ M. A. Jinnah, Interview with the delegation on 4 April 1946, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Meeting between Cabinet Delegation, Viceroy and Sir Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah on 4 April 1946, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Record of Meeting between Cabinet Delegation, Viceroy and Baldev Singh, Punjab Minister, 5 April 1946, *ibid.*

determination to please the Hindu leadership. This interview might have complicated the Sikh question.

In a meeting with the delegation, Sir Khizar Hayat Tiwana said that he might share his opinion if the delegation was ready to sideline the League and Congress. He suggested that the British should not seek any agreement between the two major parties but enforce what they perceived the best. He explained that the British should produce some solid solution in order to remove the impression that the British were unable to make any definite decision. He further reiterated that the Punjab should not be divided into pieces and Pakistan having regional nationalities like Pathan, Sindhi, Baloch, etc. would not be a practicable solution. To him, the Sikhs would face severe difficulties in Pakistan. He claimed that he 'believed in Pakistan' but the issue of re-demarcation would please and satisfy none of the parties concerned.¹⁹

Tiwana vaguely opposed Pakistan and Khalistan but supported Indian independence. He considered the Sikh resistance justified against the League's struggle. He also tried to convince the British to be assertive in their decisions without caring for the consent of the League and Congress to end the political deadlock. The undemocratic and feudal mentality of Tiwana gave no practical suggestion as the political conditions had entirely changed after the World War II. He had talks with the Viceroy on 3 May 1947 in which he warned that the poor economic conditions of the proposed Pakistan could drag it to communism. He also said that the Sikhs would never throw their lot in the favour of Pakistan. Talking about the political future of the Punjab he suggested that the province should be made an independent state with a defence agreement with Pakistan and Hindustan. The partition of the province would mean to invite a civil war.²⁰ The former premier made his last attempt to clinch the Punjab to the traditional landlords but the situation had become entirely unfavourable for such rewards.

Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar and Sardar Harnam Singh also concluded deliberations with the delegation. The Secretary of State for India put three questions to the Sikh leaders to ascertain their opinion:

¹⁹ Meeting between the Cabinet Delegation, H.E. the Viceroy and Hon'ble Lt. Col. Malik Sir Khizr Hyat Khan Tiwana, KCSI, OBE, Premier of the Punjab, at 4 pm on Friday, 5 April 1946, *ibid*: See also Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publication, 1999), pp.180-81.

²⁰ Meeting between Khizr Tiwana and the Viceroy on 3 May 1947, MB1/D260.

1. Whether the transfer of power be made to a single, two or more than two bodies?
2. In case of two which party the Sikhs would prefer to join?
3. Would the Sikhs demand an independent state?²¹

Master Tara Singh favoured united India but other leaders called for a Sikh state having the right to federate with any of the two countries. They explained that they had undergone a difficult time under the Unionist government until the war which relieved them from the Muslim tyranny. Sardar Harnam Singh demanded the central areas to be included in the Sikh state on the basis of land, revenue and tax. He also objected to as falsified the number of the Muslims in the census of 1941. Talking about the areas to be included in the Sikh state, Giani Kartar asked for Jullundur and Lahore Divisions along with Hissar, Karnal, Ambala, Simla (Ambala Division), Montgomery and Lyallpur districts.²² The Sikh leaders' support to united India was alarming and had painful effect on the Muslims who considered it a disastrous move in which the Sikh leadership intended to put 100 million Muslims under the ruthless Hindu Raj.²³ The Sikhs demanded an independent state but they desired to be federated either with India or Pakistan which shows that they could hardly survive alone. It was a confused situation for all as to what the Sikhs actually wanted. The Sikh state under any federation could be a sort of Azad Punjab, which had already been rejected by many of the Sikh groups.

Cabinet Mission proposals

The mission suggested a grouping under a weak centre and made three groups of the total area. The Group B consisted of the Punjab, NWFP, Sindh and Balochistan with representation of Muslims 23, Hindus 9 and Sikhs 4 in the central legislature.²⁴ The Cabinet Mission proposals were a clever plan of the British to please the main political stakeholders in India. The plan retained territorial integrity of India and Punjab; it united the Muslim majority areas and rejected the Pakistan proposal of the Muslim League. It aimed to fulfil the demands of the Congress, League and Sikh groups but the main Sikh apprehension ignored by the plan was

²¹ Record of Meeting between Cabinet Delegation, Viceroy and Representatives of the Sikh community, 5 April 1946. IOR:L/P&J/10/25 (Cabinet Delegation, Interviews).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ 'The Problem of Sikhs', editorial, *The Eastern Times* (Lahore), 13 June 1946.

²⁴ IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

their fear of permanent Muslim domination in the provincial legislature. The Hindu Mahasabha rejected the plan on the same ground that the Punjab and Sikhs had been put under the Pakistanists.²⁵

All-India Muslim League Legislators' Convention was held from 7 to 9 April in which four Akali leaders including Giani Kartar Singh participated. Quaid-i-Azam expressed his conviction on the creed of Pakistan and reminded the people that India had never been a social and political unity rather the British had tried to do it with the help of police and army.²⁶ The League first accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan (6 June 1946) but the interview of the new Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru on 10 July convinced the League to revise its decision. Nehru who replaced Abul Kalam Azad as the Congress' President in July 1946 stated that the Congress would adopt an independent course of action on the Grouping and the Constituent Assembly. Nehru's statement was provocative and igniting enough.²⁷ Jinnah reminded the British that actually the Congress Working Committee on 24 June had turned down the plan, on the other hand the British dishonoured their own promise regarding Interim Government. Therefore, the League Council on 27 July reversed its decision and declared Pakistan its ultimate destination.²⁸

Sikh reaction to the plan

The Cabinet Mission Plan caused a considerable fury among the Sikhs. In protest against the Cabinet Mission proposals they started visiting the villages and persuading their co-religionists on loud speakers to join the Akali meetings. It was reported that the League leaders secretly approached the Sikh leadership and assured them that the League was ready to concede the additional weightage to them but the Sikhs would not agree to this offer.²⁹ According to Sardar Kapur Singh, the Cabinet Mission wanted to create a Sikh state in a specific area but the Sikhs did

²⁵ S. V. Desika Char (ed.), *The Constitutional History of India, 1757-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.96.

²⁶ Mr. M.A. Jinnah's Address to All-India Muslim League Legislators' Convention from 7 to 9 April 1946 at Delhi. See Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada (ed.), *Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents: 1906-1947*, Vol. II (Karachi: National Publishing House Ltd., 1970), pp.505-10.

²⁷ Leonard Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), p.28; also see, Michael Breacher, *Nehru- A Political Biography* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.316.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.545-48.

²⁹ Secret Police Abstract, 1946, para, pp.281, 297.

not accept it.³⁰ This claim does not stand true as the Cabinet Mission initiated no such plan for the Sikhs, as the delegation came to India without any definite proposals and raised this issue in the meetings with the Sikhs. A. S. Narang also supports this understanding when he writes that the Cabinet Mission paid no attention to the Azad Punjab scheme, Khalistan or Sikhistan.³¹ It was just to ascertain the Sikh opinion and to find out any possible alternative suggestions.

Master Tara Singh addressed the Sikhs at Gojar Khan (Rawalpindi) and then at a Rawalpindi meeting arranged by the Guru Singh Sabha (Sikh-Congress organisation). Giani Vir Singh said that the Sikhs would hoist the Sikh flag instead of the Union Jack on the Lahore Fort.³² Master Tara Singh wrote to Lord Pethick Lawrence that the Cabinet Mission had made the Sikhs dejected, cross and angry. By such recommendations, the Sikhs would be left at the mercy of the Muslims in Group B and with only 4 seats they could not expect any kind of justice from the proposed Central Assembly. He further declared that the Muslim demands against the Hindu domination had been accommodated while the Sikhs' had been ignored. He referred to section 15(2) and section 19(7) and sought if there was any possibility for amendments in the recommendations. Raising question about the situation in case of Sikh members' dissension with the proposed constitution in Group B, if there was a possibility to give them the same right which the Muslims and the Hindus are to enjoy under Section 15(2) & 19(7)?³³ Pethick Lawrence in reply consoled Master Tara Singh that they had picked up the best alternative for the Sikhs as compared to partition.³⁴ The Governor also reported that the Sikhs were expressing their dissatisfaction through all the political platforms and demonstrations. Direct action as threatened by them could destroy the stability of the Unionist government. Reminding of the Ravi pledge of 1929 the Sikhs sought help of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha because the Mahasabha had already declared the Cabinet Mission Plan as 'anti-

³⁰ Speech of Sardar Kapur Singh in the Lok Sabha on 6 September 1966 in Satya M. Rai, *Punjab Heroic Tradition, 1900-1947* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1978), p.171.

³¹ A. S. Narang, *Storm Over the Sutlej: The Akali Politics* (Lahore: Republican Books, 1987), p.69.

³² Secret Police Abstract 1946, para, p.297.

³³ Letter of Master Tara Singh to Pethick Lawrence on 25 May 1946, IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

³⁴ Letter of Pethick-Lawrence to Master Tara Singh on 1 June 1946, File 20, Cabinet Mission Papers in QAP.

national, undemocratic and unacceptable to Hindus'.³⁵ The repeated appeals to the Hindu political parties by the Akali leadership show their helplessness and inability to counter the rapidly changing political scenario of the country.

The British responded positively to the Sikhs and the Viceroy and the Cabinet Delegation discussed the Sikh position in an interview with Master Tara Singh and Baldev Singh on 6 June 1946. Master Tara Singh said that the Sikhs were very depressed over the statement of 16 May and particularly because they had just four seats out of a total 36 in the Group. The Viceroy responded that it was based on the population ratio and the allocation of additional seats also could not help the Sikhs change their minority status. He believed that the Sikh as an important minority could not be sidelined whereas he found Jinnah a sympathiser of the Sikhs. The Viceroy was sure that he did not intend to harm the Sikhs. Baldev Singh and Tara Singh referred to the election of the Mayor of the City Corporation Lahore in which the League Mayor had played a biased role with his casting vote.³⁶ On the query about walkout, the Viceroy warned that in case of boycott, the Group would proceed to make a constitution without the Sikhs and this would be a grave mistake on the part of the Sikhs. He drew their attention to the statement of 25 May in which H.M.G. expressed that it would observe the provisions especially to ensure minority protection. The Viceroy emphasised that through agitation the Sikhs would certainly lose sympathy. A. V. Alexander indicated that the Sikh representatives in the Constituent Assembly would be able to speak better for their rights, and they would also be represented in the Advisory Committee on Minorities whose report and recommendations could not be overlooked. Stafford Cripps emphasised that any trouble by the Sikhs would be fatal to their community interests. The Viceroy promised that he would certainly try to help them, but, at the same time, he also thought that their 'fears were exaggerated'. Sardar Baldev Singh was told that a complete veto on Sikh reservation in the Assembly could not be accepted.³⁷ Master Tara Singh expressed woeful feeling regarding Sikh future and the Viceroy advised them to assert their position as an important minority in the Punjab properly:

³⁵ Fortnightly Report, Punjab, second half of May 1946, L/PJ/5/249.

³⁶ See detail in *The Eastern Times*, 19-7 June 1946.

³⁷ Record of Interview of the Cabinet Delegation and HE the Viceroy with Master Tara Singh and Sardar Baldev Singh Representing the Sikh Community on 6 June 1946, IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

The Viceroy said that he would certainly do all he could to help the Sikhs whom he had known in the Army on and off for 40 years. He thought their fears were exaggerated. They should rely rather on their quality than on numbers and he felt sure that no one could neglect the position of the Sikhs in the Punjab in framing a constitution for that Province.³⁸

The Sikh leaders were not exploring alternatives to their existing demands instead they remained busy in countering the League's standpoint. Therefore, Pethick Lawrence wrote to Master Tara Singh on 1 June 1946 that after careful consideration it was felt that the Cabinet Mission proposal was the best solution to the Sikh problem. The proposals ensured the Sikhs to have undivided India and the Punjab and they would be able to maintain their population undivided³⁹ and keep their sacred places with them. Pethick Lawrence also assured Baldev Singh that the Sikhs would enjoy the best position in the united Punjab and the plan would be the best mechanism to ensure their integrity and rights.⁴⁰ In this sensitive situation, the Muslims as reported by the Governor were not pursuing the Sikhs properly for a compromise except an advice 'to rely on Muslim generosity',⁴¹ while the anti-Cabinet Mission Plan reaction testified that the Sikhs would never come to an understanding with the Muslims.⁴² The Muslims were keen to have understanding with the Sikhs but it was not taken up enthusiastically as required according to the situation.

The Sikhs ignored the Viceroy's advice and rejected the plan on 10 June 1946. At a conference in Amritsar, on 10 June 1946, they decided to launch 'direct action' against the Cabinet Mission's recommendations and fixed 23 June as the 'prayer day'. It was also decided that the struggle would continue till the Cabinet Award was modified according to the Sikh demands. The Council of Action under the Indian National Army (INA) leader, Col. Niranjana Singh Gill, was empowered to launch protests in this regard. They expressed concern over the recognition of the Muslim demands by the delegation.⁴³ The

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Letter from Pethick Lawrence to Master Tara Singh on 1 June 1946, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Letter from Pethick Lawrence to Baldev Singh on 1 June 1946, *ibid.*

⁴¹ FR, June 1946, L/PJ/5/249.

⁴² Qalb-i-Abid, 'The Muslim-Sikh Relationship (1921-47): A Brief Survey', *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, July 1991, p.277.

⁴³ *Times of India* (Bombay), 12 June 1946; see also Text of Resolution passed by the Shiromani Akali Dal at its conference on 10 June 1946, MB1/D288 (1).

anti-League sentiments gradually permeated the rural areas due to the political developments in India which caused serious repercussions in the Punjab. The Sikhs from the rural areas were feeling that M. A. Jinnah was not treating their community properly. Kalwant Singh Virk from Phullarwan (Sheikhupura), a close friend of Giani Kartar, wrote to Jinnah that he considered him a sole leader of the minority rights but by accepting the British proposals he had 'strangled the Sikh aspirations' and 'created some doubts'. This was also testified by the speeches and statements he had made about the Sikhs.⁴⁴

The appointment of Col. Gill, a new man to the Council of Action, did not seem a wise step. Some of other Sikh leaders who had been in the mainstream of the politics could have been inducted because it was not a time to introduce or test new faces. Sikhs as a community were behaving in a strange way; when one group seemed ready for dialogue, other would decide to protest and the third to launch agitation. This damaged their position severely. The Sikhs went further in defying the British constitutional proposals when at Amritsar, on 22 June, the Sikh Panthic Board unanimously decided that Baldev Singh should decline the Viceroy's invitation to join the Interim Government. This was decided in the presence of Col. Gill, Baldev Singh, Master Tara Singh, 14 Panthic MLAs, 3 Sikh Congress MLAs of the Punjab and the Central MLAs.⁴⁵ The Punjab Governor had reported on 17 June to the Viceroy that Baldev Singh had assured him of the Sikh willingness to join the Interim Government and the elections to the Constituent Assembly.⁴⁶ Such an erratic and unreliable attitude might have caused a trust-deficit between Sikhs and the British personnel.

The Akalis had demanded inclusion of veto power in the Mission's proposals which the Mission refused. Stafford Cripps in his statement in the House of Commons on 12 December 1946 opposed veto power to the Sikhs with the justification that such a veto power should go to all the communities including Hindus in the Punjab. The two vetoes certainly would never allow the group to arrive at any decision. Sikh Unity had been saved and weightage would further reduce the Muslim votes. Cripps further said that Hindus and Muslims would actually be dependent on the Sikhs in the new arrangements which the Sikhs could cash in. He also expressed the view that a major Sikh demand for the

⁴⁴ Letter from Kalwant Singh Virk to Jinnah on 26 September 1946, File. 930, QAP.

⁴⁵ *Hindustan Time* (New Delhi), 23 June 1946.

⁴⁶ Telegram from Punjab Governor to Viceroy on 17 June 1946, IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

united Punjab had been ensured in the proposed arrangements.⁴⁷ Master Tara Singh criticised Cripps' statement in the House of Commons and alleged that he was wrong in his assertion. In fact, the Sikhs favoured the 'beneficial' partition of the Punjab. He said that the Cabinet Mission opposed the veto right which had never been offered by the British. He further maintained, 'Let us wait and see how Congress tries to get us out of this difficulty'.⁴⁸ Master Tara Singh repeated the confusion as he was not clear as to what claim could be beneficial for them. He presented no solid and impressive argument with regard to the veto power. Amazingly, he was again putting himself and the community at the mercy of the Congress and trying to satisfy the Sikhs by saying 'wait and see'. What did the Akali leadership stand for if the Sikhs had to depend on the Congress? In this way, the Akali leadership continued adding a new wave of depression to the Sikh community.

The confused and contradictory style of dealing with the political affairs by the Sikh leadership at this very critical juncture darkened the future of the Sikh community. The leaders negotiated with the British leaders with different temperaments, arguments and reactions which created an environment of a 'trust-deficit' between the key political players in Punjab politics. Although the delegation tried to make them realise about the pros and cons of their attitude but under the Congress influence the weak and confused Akali leadership could not rely on the 'alien' and put in their lot in favour of their traditional allies, the Hindus. Cabinet Mission Plan was a complex development which the leadership could hardly counter. Therefore, there was no change in the Sikh demands, strategy, and other mechanism which they had been employing since the British allowed the locals to raise their voice for their rights.

Conclusion

The acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan by the League is a much debated step. Some scholars view that by accepting the plan, the League had abandoned the Pakistan ideal. As a matter of fact, by accepting the plan, the League projected its reconciliatory character at the national and international levels. It obtained integrity of the Muslim areas including vast lands of the Punjab up to Delhi that could lead ultimately to Pakistan. It was quite possible that such arrangements could enable

⁴⁷ Sir Stafford Cripps' Statement in Debate in the House of Commons on 12 December 1946, IOR: L/P&J/10/33, Cabinet Mission: Sikhs.

⁴⁸ Statement of Master Tara Singh, Telegram No. A; 37800/1, Information Department, India Office, From the Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, dated 18 December 1946; see also Daily *Ranjit*, 18 December 1946.

Pakistan to secure more territory than it got in August 1947 as stated by Lord Mountbatten in 1977.⁴⁹ Another aspect of the debate is that in the beginning Nehru considered this plan a good omen but the Hindu press pointed out the points favourable to the Pakistan scheme which ultimately subverted this plan. It is a notable point that, if this plan was a surrender from the Pakistan scheme, why the Congress and other Hindu groups rejected it? They should have been glad that Pakistan ideal had been eliminated. But the rejection of the plan by the Hindus confirms that they believed League's decision was based on its plan to have Pakistan after ten years. Therefore, under the influence of conspiracy theory, many people doubt how Pakistan was achieved within a short span of seven years? It is unfair to deduce that the League had abandoned the ideal of Pakistan; rather the decision throws light on the sagacity and statesmanship of Quaid-i-Azam because, under peculiar circumstances, a leadership has to take different positions during the course of a struggle. Advancing at some time and withdrawing at another may be a political strategy which depicts the wisdom of a leader. This also highlighted the case of the Indian Muslims' reconciliatory character before the main communities of the Punjab and disproves obstinacy of Quaid-i-Azam as alleged by many Hindus and Britishers. No genuine historian in future could blame the League leadership for political inflexibility. Moreover, Quaid-i-Azam was well aware of the mentality of the Hindu leadership who could hardly go for any pro-Muslim patch-up.

An important aspect of the Cabinet Mission may be the letter sent by the Viceroy in February 1946 in which the British pledged to maintain unity of India but at the same time they made their mind to award Gurdaspur and Amritsar to India in case of partition of India. This reveals that the boundaries of the two Punjabs had been decided 19 months before the formation of the Boundary Commission in 1947.

In 1977, Lord Mountbatten asserted that the territorial arrangements made under the plan were more favourable for the Muslims than the truncated Pakistan. But such analysis does not take into account the difference between 'independence' and 'servitude' under a cruel majority.

Jawaharlal Nehru is also criticised on his rejection of the plan which later on paved the way for Pakistan but as a matter of fact he with

⁴⁹ He opined that arrangements under the Cabinet Mission Plan were better than the truncated Pakistan for the Muslims. Letter from Mountbatten to J. S. Pratt (University of Warwick) on 14 November 1977, K-137A, Mountbatten Papers.

a futuristic vision turned down the Cabinet Mission proposals by keeping the question of territorial integrity of India in his mind. In fact, by conceding the proposals, India was going to be divided into three groups with a weak centre⁵⁰ which could result in more 'Pakistans' in future and the communal issue was still there as an unsolved question and the weak centre might face grave danger unable to resist further vivisection of India. By rejecting the Cabinet Mission proposals, the strong centre could successfully control over the rest of the Indian units. Therefore, the 'possibility' of further territorial split might have motivated him to reject the Cabinet Mission Plan.

Sikhs were the only community which was at the losing end. The grouping ensured the territorial integrity of the Punjab which was their major demand but the main portion of their grievances was Muslim domination that was totally ignored. The Sikh resentment was obvious but all this happened under the weak representation of the Sikh leadership who did not present any unified and agreed version of their demands along with their scattered strength and poor working. Thus the League and Congress seemed close to win their destinations while the Sikhs were to collapse as the losers as the Cabinet Mission parleys surfaced out the political scenario as well as the communal politics which demanded strategic planning to fight for the best choice for their respective community. Interestingly, the British had chalked out all the possibilities, the reactions and the ultimate decisions including expected areas and boundaries of Pakistan early in 1946.

The British were sure of the Sikh violence because no territorial formula agreed upon by other stakeholders could satisfy them and the reaction would move them to violent actions. The British passive response to the violent and even illegal activities of the Sikhs reveals that they were more interested in settling the all-India question rather than becoming entangled in the regional complexities. They had been sympathetic to the Sikhs but no workable plan was suggested to resolve the issue which might be compatible with their desire. Therefore, Cabinet Mission proposals proved a provoking and igniting event although it aimed to pacify the Indian communities.

⁵⁰ Nehru's Press Statement on 'India Wins Freedom', *The Tribune* (Ambala) 8 February 1959 as quoted in Kirpal Singh, *The Partition of the Punjab* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1972), p.27.