



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### OPINION OF PUNJABI PRESS TOWARDS SAPRU PROPOSALS: FROM A SIKH PERSPECTIVE

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#### ABSTRACT

The Sapru Committee was formed under the patronage of Gandhi, but it failed to get support from all three parties in the political game: the British, Congress, and the League. The Congress initially supported the committee under the influence of Gandhi, but when the Sapru Committee introduced suggestions for Hindu-Muslim parity, the Congress also rejected the report of the committee. The Committee opposed the idea of Pakistan on the basis of language, race, religion, and the impossibility of segregating Hindu and Muslim communities. It also rejected the two-nation theory. The Committee argued that the idea of Pakistan or the division of India cannot satisfy the problem of minorities. In other words, these proposals rejected the Muslim demand for separate electorates and, most importantly, the partition of India, which at that time was advocated by both Jinnah and the League. Therefore, the League also strongly rejected the proposals of the Committee and considered them a conspiracy against the demand for Pakistan. This article analyses the Sapru proposals in the context of the demand for Pakistan and the opinion of the Punjabi press towards the Sapru Proposals from the Sikhs' view point.

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## INTRODUCTION

To solve the problems of India, Tej Bahadur Sapru decided to form a neutral committee. It was mainly to listen to all parties. After due consideration, it would prepare a draft for the future structure of the government in India. Sapru declared that it was decided to include retired judges and some Europeans in this committee.<sup>i</sup> Those who accepted to become members of the conciliation committee were five ex-ministers of the Executive Council, a retired judge of the Federal Court, three ex-judges of the High Court, three vice chancellors of universities, two editors of reputed newspapers, and three members of the Central Assembly. The conciliation committee issued a questionnaire to various parties, soliciting their views on fundamental rights, representation of communities in the services, the Pakistan issue, territorial adjustment, and alternatives to Pakistan.<sup>ii</sup> The Hindus and the Sikhs of Punjab sent a memorandum to the Sapru Committee. Fifteen representatives of the Hindus submitted a memorandum to the Sapru Committee, which stated that all citizens should be equal before law, irrespective of religion, caste, creed, colour, or sex; every citizen should have freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of expression through the press; and that the joint electorates were essential for the development of a spirit of a united nationhood. For framing a new constitution, they suggested the formation of a Constituent Assembly composed of representatives of provincial legislatures, one for every ten members, on the basis of proportional representation with a single transferable vote.<sup>iii</sup>

On February 2, 1945, prominent Sikh leaders like Master Tara Singh, S. Surjit Singh Majithia, S.B. Sardar Jodh Singh, Principal of Khalsa College, Amritsar, Giani Kartar Singh, S. Kartar Singh Cambellpuri, and S. Ishar Singh Majhail assembled at the residence of S.B. Sardar Ujjal Singh, M.L.A. They discussed the questionnaires circulated by the coordination committee and prepared a memorandum.<sup>iv</sup>

The Akali in its editorial (Shortcomings of the Sapru Committee) writes that in their memorandum to the Sapru Committee, the Sikhs reiterated that if Pakistan were to be conceded, the Sikhs would insist on the creation of a state with a substantial Sikh population and provision for the transfer of population and property.<sup>v</sup> This memorandum was handed over to Tej Bahadur Sapru by Master Tara Singh on February 22, 1945, at Lahore. The Sikhs had never before shown unanimity of opinion, as in this case. It was also learned that the Muslim claim for Pakistan had been examined in detail, and for the first time, they had attempted to establish with facts and figures that the Punjab was the homeland of the Sikhs and not of the Muslims, as claimed by the Muslim League in their Lahore Resolution of 1940. The memorandum had been signed, besides public men of different schools of thought, by as many as 18 members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly.<sup>vi</sup> Later on, a memorandum was submitted to the Sapru Conciliation Committee in reply to their questionnaire by fifteen Hindu Sabha representatives of the Punjab. It was asserted that 'we are opposed to the establishment of an

independent Pakistan state or states as envisaged in the resolution of the All India Muslim League in 1940.' A memorandum submitted by the Punjab Provincial Hindu Sabha to the Conciliation Committee stated that it should be for the 'Pakistanists' to convince the country and the world that nothing but Pakistan could solve the Indian political and communal problems. The Sabha felt that it was the imperative need of the hour that the impasse that had been facing the country for the last two or three years be resolved. The Congress assumed office in the Hindu-majority provinces, displacing the ministries that were already functioning. The resignation of these ministries ushered in an era of bureaucratic rule in those provinces. The Hindus who constituted the majority in these provinces had been deprived of even those benefits, however small they might be, which their Muslim brethren were enjoying in the Muslim majority provinces.<sup>vii</sup>

The Sapru Committee's proposals were issued on April 8, 1945. The main features of the Sapru Committee proposals were that a national government should replace the present Executive Council at the centre; that in the provinces the Congress ministries should resume office but with an admixture of non-Congress parties; that in the constitution-making body, representation of Hindus (excluding scheduled castes) and Muslims should be equal; that similar parties in the Central Assembly should be conditional on Muslims agreeing to joint electorates with reservation of seats instead of separate electorates; that decision of the constitution-making body should be valid unless it was supported by three-fourths of the members present voting; and this His Majesty's government, while accepting the decisions so made, requisite majority was not obtained. The Committee firmly rejected the Pakistan idea. In spite of the eminent and talented personalities of which it was composed, the committee failed in its efforts to advance the position. For one thing, the committee was handicapped by the absence of any top-ranking Muslims. Its rejection of the Pakistan idea and the recommendation of joint electorates made the Muslim League's attitude all the more hostile. There was disapproval, even from non-Congress Hindus, who were unable to acquiesce in the proposal for parity between Muslims and Hindus other than the Schedule Castes<sup>viii</sup>.

In an editorial, *The Tribune* stated that there was no doubt that these committees had a real and serious grievance, and as long as the communal basis of the constitution remained, the removal of this grievance was an imperative necessity. In these and other matters, the committee had made recommendations that deserved and would doubtless receive serious consideration both from the British Government and from Indian political parties and organizations.<sup>ix</sup> The Sapru proposals aroused keen parliamentary interest. The members of all parties welcomed them. Sorensen said that the Viceroy now must be considering possibilities that should be extorted within the Sapru recommendations.<sup>x</sup>

#### **The Sapru Committee sent a cable to Lord Wavell, in which he wrote the following**

- India should be freed after releasing the political prisoners.
- The Government should be set up at the centre.
- Under the Indian Penal Code 83 of the India Act 1935, the administration of these states, which were under the governor, should be handed over to state assemblies.<sup>xi</sup>

K.M. Munshi said on April 9, 1945, that the Sapru Committee's recommendations presented a highly workable solution to the Indian deadlock.<sup>xii</sup> Nine members of the Central Legislature, namely, A.C. Datta, President, Dr. P. Bannerjee, Leader of the Nationalist Party, Bhai Parmanand, Lal Chand Navalrai, G.V. Deshmukh, and Maharaj Kumar N.N. Sinha, S.K. Roy Choudhri, and N.K. Das supported Sapru's proposals. They appreciated the recommendations relating to the fundamental rights of all communities and special recommendations with regard to minorities and scheduled castes, joint electorates, and the view of the committee that Pakistan was neither practicable nor desirable.<sup>xiii</sup>

Tej Bahadur Sapru's proposals were strongly condemned by the Hindus and the Sikhs. M. Ganpathi, Secretary of the local Hindu Mahasabha, and 100 advocates of the Madras High Court strongly opposed the parity recommendation of the Sapru Committee in a joint statement.<sup>xiv</sup> The *Akali*, in its editorial ("Recommendations made by the Sapru Committee"), writes that "the Hindus were dissatisfied with the Sapru Proposals because, in their view, their population was about 26 crore whereas the Muslims were hardly 6 crore, but the rights given to both were equal. Besides being undemocratic and unjust, it was insulting to every Hindu, who would be reduced by a stroke of the pen to one fourth of a Muslim in political importance and political power. The Hindus should refuse to be discriminated against in their own motherland because they happen to be Hindus. This proposal was political blackmail and an attempt to destroy the Hindus politically."<sup>xv</sup>

The *Akali* in its editorial ("*The Proposals of Sapru Committee and the Sikhs*") is of the opinion that "the only effect that these proposals would have was that the English would find the material in them to complicate the issue with the Muslims, just as state proposals had initiated the Muslims. Its result would be that the government would accept the principle of equal representation for Hindus and Muslims and set aside the principle of mixed elections. In other words, the foundation of a Muslim state would be laid in India".<sup>xvi</sup>

The *Akali*, in its editorial ("The Proposals of Sapru Committee and the Sikhs"), writes that "the Akali Sikhs accepted those proposals of the Sapru Committee, which rejected the Pakistan Scheme evolving division of Punjab".<sup>xvii</sup>

The *Fateh* in its editorial ("*Recommendations made by the Sapru Committee*") is of the opinion that "the first marked thing which the Sapru Committee has said in its proposals is open opposition to every scheme that divides the country. The Committee is of the opinion that the future of India can be largely secure if it is not divided in any way."<sup>xviii</sup> The Akali Sikhs also welcomed the formation of minority commissions whose members were to be elected by the minority members of the respective state assemblies alone. Moreover, the Akali Sikhs accepted the suggestion of the Sapru Committee, which recommended equal representation for Hindus and Muslims on the executive council and central assembly. However, the Akali Sikhs did not accept the Muslim majority in the Punjab State Assembly. At the same time, they expressed their strong reservations regarding the mode of election for minority representation.<sup>xix</sup> The *Akali*, in its editorial ("Declaration of Sapru Committee"), writes that the Sapru Proposals and Simla Conference tried to evolve a mechanism of sharing power structure but left the Sikhs to further bemoan their fate, which was being tied up to the Muslim Raj. The Sapru Committee

suggested a state structure that comprised the Executive Council, Central Assembly, and State Assemblies. The Central Assembly was to comprise two houses: the Union Assembly and the Council of State.<sup>xx</sup>

*The Tribune*, Lahore, April 12, 1945, pp. 4 reported that Master Tara Singh criticized the Sapru proposals. He said that he did not understand why the Sapru Committee did not consider it necessary to state that the statutory Muslim majority in the Punjab should be abolished and that the proportion of the three major communities should be such that no single community should dominate. If the Hindu majority in the Central Legislature could be done away with for the sake of the Muslims, why could the same thing not be done for the Sikhism in the Punjab? The Sapru Committee proposed a Minorities Commission, but what it gave on one hand, it took away with the other. It put the final decision on the recommendations of the minorities' commission in the hands of the Legislature, which in practice meant the majority community.<sup>xxi</sup>

The Akali in its article "***What is the need of tomfoolery of the Sapru Committee, Forceful Statement of Master Tara Singh?***" stated that Master Tara Singh strongly objected to the Sapru Proposals as they did not recognize a special and distinct position of the Sikhs. He argued that if the Muslims could be accommodated in the Central Assembly and Executive Council as equal partners of the Hindus, then why could the Sikhs not be accommodated in the same pattern in Punjab State Assembly?<sup>xxii</sup> If the position of the majority status of the Hindus could be sacrificed in the Central Assembly and the Executive Council, then the majority status of the Muslims in the Punjab State Assembly should also be sacrificed.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The Fateh in its editorial, *Recommendations of the Sapru Committee*, states it appeared that the Committee had given less consideration to the greatness of other minority communities, especially the Sikhs, than the Muslims equating Sikhs with Hindus or Indian Christians, was to close eyes to their glorious traditions and their prominent position in the Punjab.

The Akali in its article, "***What is the need of tomfoolery of the Sapru Committee, Forceful Statement of Master Tara Singh?***" stated that Master Tara Singh says that one did not understand why the Sapru Committee did not feel the need to say it in clear terms that the majority status of the Muslims should be erased and position of three communities should be the same so that no community might overpower the other.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The Akali, in an article, *Recommendations of the Sapru Committee* states that Master Tara Singh was of the viewpoint that the Sikhs constituted an important distinct community and should be given due representation in the 'Government of United India.'<sup>xxv</sup> If the position of the majority status of the Hindus could be sacrificed in the Central Assembly and Executive Council, then the majority status of the Muslims in the Punjab State Assembly should also be sacrificed.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Working Committee of the Delhi Provincial Hindu Sabha adopted a resolution condemning the proposal of the Sapru Conciliation Committee to reduce the Hindu community to a position of parity with the Muslims in the Central Legislature, Central Cabinet, and constitution-making body and warning the British Government to yield to the demands of the Muslims either to Balkanize the country or sacrifice any future

rights of the majority community.<sup>xxvii</sup> The All India Sikh League criticized the Sapru proposals. The committee noted with satisfaction that the Sapru Committee had expressed themselves against Pakistan, but in the opinion of the committee, the proposals, on the whole, were not such as might be considered satisfactory and were too vague to inspire confidence in the Sikhs. Any scheme, to be acceptable to the Sikhs, must give them adequate weightage at the centre and in the other provinces. It should make it possible for any single community to rule over them in Punjab.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The Fateh in its editorial, *Recommendations of the Sapru Committee*, states that the solution to the Punjab problem could be found only with the support of the Sikhs, and its direct method was to work with full force to finish the majority status of the Muslims.<sup>xxix</sup> Stanley Rees told the United Press of India that there was no greater authority on constitutional matters than Tej Bahadur Sapru. However, he did not see his plan going through without amending the 1935 Constitutional Act.<sup>xxx</sup>

The Fateh in its editorial, "*Recommendations of the Sapru Committee*" states that "all the proposals of the Sapru Committee are crying hoarse that in a bid to please the Muslims, it has closed its eyes to even the just demands of the minority communities. The misfortune is that even the Muslims have stoutly opposed its proposals and recommendations. The Sapru committee has worked very hard. But what is the use of that labour, which was not admired by any section of the country?"<sup>xxxi</sup> During the period under review, the main topics of political interest in outward messages were the Sapru proposals, the possibility of a meeting between Lord Wavell and Mr. Gandhi, and Indian press reactions to the denunciation of the Russo-Japanese Pact. Buckley, in a message to Reuters in London, said that the only voice of violent protest raised against the Sapru proposals had been Mr. Jinnah's, while Congress and nationalist opinions had solidly supported them, and the government's attitude had been described by a high official source as benevolent neutrality. He went on to quote from editorials published in the Statesman, the Hindustan Times, and Dawn.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Salivati, in a message to the *Daily Herald*, referred to the Sapru Committee's recommendation, which he summarised, noting that the authors said their proposals gave Muslims the utmost that could be clarified. In another message, Salivati said that Mr. Rajagopalachari had welcomed Sapru's proposals because it was wholly wrong to keep the present absolutist government going and quoted him as saying that either an ad hoc government of representative leaders or a federal government according to the 1935 Act should be brought into existence at once, when, only, the demand for an agreed constitution made by British statesmen could pass as genuine, and which alone would compel reasonableness on the part of minorities. Mr. Rajagopalachari thought that without a popular government, effective steps towards the harmonious development of planned civil life in India would be impossible. He accused the forces of reaction and corruption of organizing pseudo-patriotic opposition to anything threatening private capital, asserted that India was entitled to lead Asia by every test except that of self-government, placed on Britain the moral responsibility of both putting things right in India and retiring in favour of a staple democracy, and stated that Indian reconciliation was not Britain's domestic concern but had entered the field of all allied nations foreign affairs.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Feng,

in a message to Chunking Central News Agency, reported on the political situation. He said that “hither India” was the question on the lips of every thinking man throughout the country, where there was a general belief that Lord Wavell would return with concrete proposals that would help to solve the political deadlock. According to the correspondent, even Congressmen who backed the 1942 “Quit India” resolution had now adopted a spirit of compromise, which seemed to have permeated the heart of India.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The message went on to say that the most threatening force for any effort at even an interim solution appeared to come from the Muslim League, whose President, Mr. Jinnah, had condemned the suggestions cabled to Lord Wavell by the Sapru Committee as calculated to torpedo Pakistan. The message further said that some quarters, however, did not take Jinnah’s opposition seriously. Though Jinnah had denied that he had knowledge of the Desai-Liaquat Pact, lobby circles confirmed that it actually existed and that Lord Wavell was fully acquainted with its contents. The fact of the pact showed the existence of a new phenomenon so far as the League went, and something can be done by responsible Muslims without first invoking Jinnah’s blessing; and as Hindu-Muslim cooperation was a condition precedent to any political settlement, time would show whether Jinnah could be temporarily shelved again.<sup>xxxv</sup>

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<sup>xiii</sup>*The Tribune*, 15 April 1945, p. 11.  
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