

Our Delhi Letter

Sikh Gurdwara Elections

The Gurdwara elections have given a rude shock to the Congress and to the Punjab Government.

Master Tara Singh's resounding victory means the revival of the agitation for a Punjabi Suba—a separate state for the Sikhs in effect.

The demand is couched in slightly different terms it is for a state for the Punjabi speaking people.

Having agreed to the break up of the Bombay State on linguistic basis, the Congress might find it more difficult than in the past to counter this demand.

More fearful is the prospect that the election results hold out of the movement faking an ugly form.

DESPITE protestations to the contrary, the results of the Gurdwara elections in Punjab which were held on January 17 have come as a great shock to Congress leaders both in Punjab and in New Delhi. The results can only be compared with the rout of the Muslim League in Last Pakistan some, years ago. The Non-Akali Sikhs who were ruling over the Gurdwaras have been reduced to complete, insignificance.

The figures speak for themselves. Of the 160 members of the Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the supreme body vested with the authority to manage the Sikh Gurdwaras, 140 seats are elective; fifteen are filled up by members co-opted to represent the various Sikh shrines; and the remaining five seats are for ex-officio members. Out of these 140 seats, there was a straight contest for 108 seats between the Shiromani Akali Dal, led by Master Tara Singh, and the Sadh Sangat Board-Desh Bhagat Party alliance; and four seats were uncontested.

The Akalis have secured 132 seats including two uncontested ones while the Sadh Sangat Board could secure only four seats. The party affiliation of the other two candidates who have got in uncontested is not known; one of the uncontested seats has gone to an Independent; and the result of the election for the other seat has not yet been announced.

The Akali Dal has got 7,80,000 votes out of a total valid poll of about 11,50,000 — in other words, they have secured 67.84 per cent of the votes compared with 59.3 per cent five years ago. The votes polled by the Sadh Sangat Board total 2,61,000 or 22.57 per cent of the aggregate votes as against 25.2 per cent captured by the Khalsa Dal, which was the main Opposition to the Akalis, in the earlier elections.

Master Tara Singh has expectedly lost no time in interpreting this resounding victory as an endorsement of his demand for a separate state for Punjab for the Punjabi-speaking people and the Akalis have launched a movement forthwith for a Punjabi Suba from January 24. The Congress has naturally been unwilling to accept this interpretation of the election results. The critics of the Punjabi Suba argue that the Gurdwara elections were fought and won on the issue of keeping religious institutions out of political interference and could by no means be taken as an endorsement of the demand for a Punjabi Suba which was a purely political matter.

Even assuming that a political interpretation is warranted, doubt has been raised about the proportion of the Sikhs who supported Tara Singh. For though the elections were fought on adult franchise, many of those entitled to vote were wrongly excluded from the electoral rolls and some sections of the Sikh community — notably the Namdharis — did not participate in the elections at all. The number of Sikh voters on the S G P C roll was 18,53,000 or about 30 per cent of the 62,00,000 Sikh population in Punjab. Of these, only 7,80,000 actually voted for Akali Dal. So if the votes in favour of the Akali Dal were all votes in favour of a Punjabi Suba, even then Master Tara Singh's contention that the Sikh community was solidly behind him in his demand for a separate Punjabi State is not substantiated.

As things stand, however, there is no doubt that this Akali victory would give a big boost to the demand for a separate state for the Sikhs, and the Congress party as well as the Governments would be hard put to it to resist this demand.

The Congress uneasiness is bound to be accentuated by the strong un-

dercurrent among its own followers for the division of Uttar Pradesh, on the ground that its size and population are too unwieldy, and for the creation of a greater Delhi State comprising the Hindi-speaking districts of Punjab, western districts of Uttar Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan. The decision on the break up of Bombay State into two linguistic states has provided these elements with the necessary ideological ammunition.

The Akali victory was not unexpected, though the wide margin by which Akalis have won has definitely come as a surprise even to its most optimistic supporters, perhaps to Master Tara Singh himself. The explanations offered for the ignominious defeat for the non-Akalis are various. One of them is that the alliance of the Sad Sangat Board with the Communist-backed Desh Bhagat party at a time when the Communists were suspected on account of their attitude to the Chinese border incursions was a mistake, and that it antagonised some of the secular Sikhs. This is rather difficult to believe. For the local Congress leaders who were in the forefront in the fight against Akalis surely would not have risked an alliance with the Communists had they not seen some advantage in it. There is the other view that if Giani Kartar Singh, who had given up his seat in the Cabinet in order to contest the elections, had fought the elections independently of the Congress-backed Sad Sangat Board, he would have fared better. The association of the Sad Sangat with the Congress smacked too much of 'dirty politics'. This explanation fails to take into account the fact, that much of the resentment of the Sikhs was directed against Giani Kartar Singh himself.

The reasons for the eclipse of the non-Akali Sikhs have to be sought

elsewhere. There is little doubt that the mass discontent against the Congress Government — and specifically against the Chief Minister Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon and his policies — had brought much grist to the mill of the Akali charges of corruption and political interference in Gurdwara administration on the part of Government and Congress leaders. Indeed the Punjab Government's last minute bunglings were in no small measure responsible for the ignominious failure of the Congress and its supporters. Punjab police arrested a number of leading Akalis on the eve of the elections on dubious grounds and this was naturally played up by the Akalis to "prove" their charges against the Government. There was also much internal wrangling among various factions of the Sikhs in the Congress camp, which kept immobilized a number of the more active members of the party.

The defeat of the Communists is no less ignoble than that of the Congress. The Communist-backed Desh Bhagat Party had put up 54 candidates, not one of whom has been returned by the electorate. In the previous elections, the Desh Bhagat Party and its allies had secured about 15.5 per cent of the votes polled, while this time their poll has been less than 10 per cent. Though the elections have proved to be a disappointment to the Communists, they can still point to one advantage which their alliances with the Sadh Sangal Board gave them, viz, much needed respite from being condemned by Congressmen on the Chinese issue.

The sweeping victory of the Akalis has brought to light how deep is the estrangement of the Sikhs from the Congress. Master Tara Singh has already expressed his sympathies for the Swatantra Party for its stand against the Congress; and he is soon going to meet Rajaji. Meanwhile the agitation for "the Punjabi Suba is being revived in a big way. Though Master Tara Singh has asked his followers to pursue their goal in a peaceful manner, it is extremely doubtful if a movement of this type can remain peaceful for long, if it drags on indefinitely. Even the leaders may not be able to control the actions of their followers in such a situation. Difficult times are ahead, not only for the Congress, but also for the Sikhs and the people of Punjab.

Advisory Committee on Oil-
A 15-MAN Committee has been set up to advise the Government on problems related to petroleum products and, in particular, to assess the pattern of demand, supply, distribution and consumption in the country. Shri K D Malaviya, is the Chairman of the Committee.

The terms of reference of the Committee, among others, are:
Preparation of forward estimates, productwise and area-wise, of consumption of various petroleum products which are to be reviewed every year.

Periodical determination of the extent of likely deficit regarding particular products for the country as a whole as also for particular areas after taking into account the likely effect of plans in other spheres

of the economy and the effectiveness of measures to curb or discourage consumption of such deficit products.

Examination of ways and means to reduce or eliminate surplus in any particular product through increase in consumption or exports or to find means for new uses for such product (or distillate concerned.)

Preparation of productwise forward estimates of refinery production and periodical review and assessment of actual production.

Determination, first on freight basis, of the area of economic supply for each refinery (existing and future) and after assessing the relative deficits and surpluses of each product in the area which could be linked to the refinery concerned.

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