

Chandigarh-dispute: Please handle with care

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This comment is not about the history and politics related to the Chandigarh-dispute between the states of Punjab and Haryana that began in 1966. There was a statement by the Central Government through its Home Minister regarding the proposed changes in the administrative system of the Union Territory of Chandigarh. The journalists/analysts have stated that the Resolution once again passed in the Legislative Assembly to include Chandigarh in Punjab state was a 'counter-move' of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government. The Chandigarh-dispute is not being discussed here even in the light of this tussle between the center and the state. Needless to say, the manoeuvres that continue on the common platform of the corporate-communal nexus of the BJP government at the center and the AAP government in the state of Delhi will now work fine at the level of Punjab as well. The possible resolution of the Chandigarh-dispute too is not the focus of this piece. This brief comment is about the concern and apprehension that in the age of corporate politics, India's power-hungry ruling-class has become completely shameless/reckless in playing with the sentiments of the people. So, people have to learn to take care of themselves.

I remember very well that when Haryana came into existence as a separate state on 1 November 1966 under the Punjab Reorganization Act 1966, there was a wave of enthusiasm among the people. I was a student of the third or fourth class at that time. In an expression of that enthusiasm, many folk songs were composed all over Haryana. Artists of the Public Relations Department of Haryana often used to sing those folk songs in their village-to-village presentations. The folk songs associated with the formation of Haryana also became very popular in schools. The whole map of the diversity and uniqueness of the entire Haryana state was reflected in the folk song '*Aaja haryana ki sair karaun matwale sailani*'. The folk song '*Yo subo tho punjab yako ab ban go haryano*' became very popular in the Gurgaon-Faridabad-Nuh region. In middle school, one of our classmates from Mewat used to recite this folk song with enactment. I still remember the lines of a stanza from that folk song – '*Haryana acting meri nas-nas pai, haryana number chhap gayo har ek bas pai. Are, ye idhar udhar soon aaven ghoom kae des apne loon jano. Yo subo tho punjab yako ab ban go haryano*'. The anecdotes regarding Haryana Roadways, which started with the formation of a separate state of Haryana, are going on till date.

But by the beginning of the 70s, that atmosphere of enthusiasm was coloured by the Chandigarh-dispute that arose between the two states. The dispute escalated in such a way that even the desecration of religious texts was done by both the sides. The strings of the separatist-terrorist movement that emerged in Punjab were related to the Chandigarh-dispute. The separatist-terrorist movement demanding a separate Khalistan from India could be suppressed only after paying a heavy price. The people once again resolved to live in harmony and peace among themselves. The stigma of hatred and violence suffered by the country and especially the Punjabi society during the separatist-terrorist era should have been a serious lesson for the ruling-class. But with the kind of politics that has been going on in Punjab for the past decade, it does not seem that the ruling-class, blind in their hunger for power, has learned any lesson.

On this occasion, I remember my friend Sardar Mota Singh. Mota Singh went to England in 1963 from his village Buwan Kothi (District Fatehabad, Haryana). He lived in Leamington spa Town, about 100 miles from London. He was a senior leader of the Labour Party and was elected County Councillor for 25 consecutive years. He was also the mayor of Leamington. He died in England on 31 January last year at the age of 81. Sardar Mota Singh, a Punjabi poet and a regular columnist of Punjabi and English, was a unique example of Indianness. Despite living abroad for 60 years, he cherished his Indian passport. He was a serious politician and was strongly against the pro-corporate and communal politics taking root in India. Whenever I met him in England or in India, he expressed worry and displeasure with the pro-Khalistan Sikhs settled abroad, including in England. He used to say that on special occasions these people hoist the flag of Khalistan in their homes which creates mutual distrust and estrangement among the people of the Indian community here.

In June 2019, along with Mota Singh, I had a conversation with some pro-Khalistan people in England. They were not ready to listen to any argument. The tragic 10-year long terrorist era in Punjab, Operation Bluestar, the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and the subsequent anti-Sikh riots in many cities of India, including Delhi in which thousands of Sikhs were massacred, did not seem to affect them in any way. When I asked them the reason why supporters of Khalistan supported the Aam Aadmi Party, they replied that it is necessary to end the Akali-Congress supremacy in Punjab politics. According to them, the fight for Khalistan cannot be revived without breaking the Akali-Congress supremacy in the Punjab politics.

It is not necessary that according to the understanding and strategy of pro-Khalistan Sikhs sitting abroad, conditions favourable for Khalistan supporters will be created in Punjab. But in view of governments' business of spreading hatred, violence and confusion among communities is going on in full swing these days in the country, the Chandigarh-dispute sparked by the Punjab government has created and raised fear.

The farmers' movement had led to fraternity and unity among the residents of every profession and strata of both the states of Punjab and Haryana. The participation of the women of Punjab on a large scale in the movement has given a deep dimension to that fraternity and unity. The political power of the movement was used in the assembly elections by AAP, which, in fact, supported the three black agrarian laws imposed by the central government and misled the farmers in Delhi by colluding with the central government. Now there is a need to preserve fraternity and unity.

The Samyukta Samaj Morcha, formed just before the Punjab Assembly elections by 28 farmer organizations of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), had tried to strike an electoral alliance with the AAP. Perhaps these farmer leaders of SKM did not understand that AAP has used the farmers movement as much as was possible. I mean to say that there was no dearth of AAP supporters in the SKM leadership, neither is it there now. Therefore, the urgent endeavour of maintaining fraternity and unity among the residents of Punjab and Haryana can be successful only with the continuous care of sincere citizens. One can only pray to the governments and leaders that they should handle the Chandigarh-dispute responsibly and reach a suitable solution.

(The writer associated with the socialist movement taught at Delhi University)