Shifting Power and Political Dynamics in Colonial Punjab: An Analysis of 1937 and 1946 Provencial Legislative Assembly Elections

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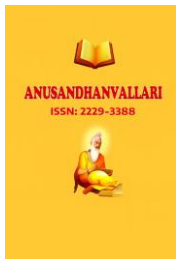
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ABSTRACT

This research paper undertakes a comparative study of the 1937 and 1946 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections to examine the transformation of power and politics in colonial Punjab during the final decade of British rule. The 1937 elections, conducted under the Government of India Act of 1935, consolidated the dominance of the Unionist Party, which represented agrarian interests across communal lines and upheld the colonial state's patronage networks. By contrast, the 1946 elections marked a decisive political shift, as the Muslim League emerged victorious with overwhelming support from the Muslim electorate, while the Unionist Party faced significant decline. This paper highlights how shifting socio-economic conditions, communal mobilization, and the limitations of colonial constitutional reforms altered the political landscape of Punjab. It further argues that the 1946 verdict not only dismantled the Unionist coalition but also redefined Punjab's role in the subcontinent's politics, ultimately setting the stage for Partition in 1947. By analysing electoral data, party strategies, and communal alignments, this study contributes to the understanding of how electoral politics shaped the future polity of Punjab, revealing the deep intersections among colonial governance, identity politics, and the transformation of regional power structures.

Keywords: Coalition, Communalism, Elections, Land Lord, Political Parties,

1. INTRODUCTION

After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Sikh Empire gradually weakened due to internal rivalries, palace intrigues, and the expanding influence of the British East India Company. His young son, Maharaja Dalip Singh, ascended the throne in 1843 at the age of five, but real authority was exercised by regents and court factions that were deeply divided and unable to uphold the unity of the Khalsa Raj. The British, recognizing the instability in Punjab, first confronted the Sikhs in the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845–46), which ended with the Treaty of Lahore. Under this treaty, Dalip Singh nominally remained on the throne, but the British stationed a resident in Lahore and assumed control over key territories, marking the beginning of indirect colonial domination. Continued tensions culminated in the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–49), which resulted in the complete defeat of the Sikh army. On 29 March 1849, Punjab was formally annexed to the British Empire, and the kingdom of Maharaja Dalip Singh was abolished (K. Singh 1977). This annexation not only ended Sikh sovereignty but also completed British territorial expansion across the Indian subcontinent, incorporating Punjab as a strategically vital province owing to its military potential and agricultural productivity. Following annexation, the British replaced Sikh monarchical rule with a highly centralized colonial administration. A new land revenue system based on periodic settlements was introduced, fixing taxes and collecting them directly from cultivators, thus providing greater stability than earlier arrangements. A modern bureaucracy, police force, and judiciary were established to

maintain law and order. Punjab soon became known as the "sword arm of the British Empire in India," as Sikh soldiers, once Britain's strongest adversaries, were recruited heavily into the British Indian Army. Missionary activity expanded, and English education was encouraged, though carefully regulated. While Sikh religious institutions such as gurdwaras remained under traditional control, the colonial state monitored them closely to prevent political mobilization. British investment in canal colonies from the 1880s onward transformed Punjab into one of the most agriculturally productive regions of India. The colonial government suppressed dissent firmly while cultivating alliances with the landed aristocracy by granting jagirs (landed estates), thereby securing their loyalty. British rule in Punjab was thus characterized by strict discipline, efficient administration, and extensive militarization. Although Punjab became both the granary of India and a key supplier of soldiers to the colonial army (K. Singh 1977), these same structures of economic extraction and social control later contributed to the rise of nationalist and agrarian movements in the early twentieth century. The evolution of elections and electoral politics in colonial Punjab reflected broader transformations in India's political landscape under British rule, shaped by communal identities, agrarian interests, and administrative priorities. Limited electoral institutions were introduced through the Indian Councils Act of 1892 and expanded by the Morley–Minto Reforms of 1909, though suffrage remained highly restricted by property, education, and loyalty qualifications. In Punjab, where agrarian communities dominated society, electoral politics were closely linked to landholding patterns and the colonial state's reliance on loyal landlords and tribal chiefs. The Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 broadened provincial legislatures, while the Government of India Act of 1935 further expanded the electorate and enhanced the role of elected representatives (K. Singh 1977). However, communal representation, particularly through separate electorates for Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, deepened religious divisions and constrained the development of unified political mobilization. Although the 1935 Act extended provincial autonomy and introduced wider direct elections, the franchise still encompassed only a limited portion of the population, largely determined by property, taxation, and educational criteria. These elections reinforced communal boundaries, as Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs were elected through distinct constituencies, shaping political alignments along religious lines. By the 1940s, with nationalist movements gaining momentum across India, Punjab's electoral politics became increasingly polarized among the Unionist Party, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League, with communal representation sharpening political competition. Ultimately, the experience of elections in colonial Punjab highlighted the limitations of British constitutional reforms and set the stage for the province's decisive role in the events leading to the Partition of 1947.

2. PUNJAB STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, 1936–37

The Punjab Legislative Assembly elections of 1936–37 were conducted under the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935, which introduced provincial autonomy and significantly expanded the role of elected representatives in governance. Punjab, as a politically important province with a predominantly agrarian economy, considerable communal diversity, and strategic value to the British Raj, witnessed an electoral contest that reflected both the complexities of colonial constitutional reforms and the distinctive socio-political dynamics of the region. A total of 175 seats were contested in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, allocated across communal and functional constituencies for Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and special interest groups such as landlords and commercial representatives.

Party	Seat Won
Unionist Party	98
Indian National Congress (INC)	18
Khalsa National Party (KNP)	13
Hindu Election Board (HEB)	12
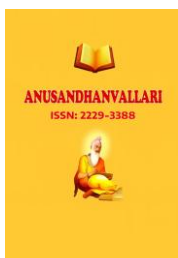
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	11
Independents	16
Majlis-e-Ahrar-ul Islam (MAI)	04
All India Muslim League (AIML)	02
Congress Nationalist Party (CNP)	01

(Yadav 1981)

The Unionist Party, a cross-communal coalition of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh landed elites, emerged as the dominant political force in the 1936–37 Punjab elections. It secured 95 seats, drawing heavily on the support of influential landlords and chiefs who maintained long-standing patronage ties with the colonial administration. The Indian National Congress, despite its growing influence in several other provinces, won only 18 seats, reflecting its relatively weak organizational presence in Punjab's predominantly rural society. The Sikh Akali Dal secured a modest number of seats, while the All-India Muslim League, later the principal actor in Punjab's politics, performed poorly, winning only 2 seats. The results underscored the sustained political dominance of the landed aristocracy and agrarian interests in Punjab, where communal differences were contained within the Unionist Party's power-sharing framework. Unlike regions such as the United Provinces or Madras, where the Congress achieved sweeping electoral successes, Punjab remained outside the nationalist mainstream, with its politics shaped more by rural hierarchies and colonial patronage networks than by mass anti-colonial mobilization. The 1936–37 elections thus revealed the limitations of the Congress in Punjab, the initial weakness of the Muslim League, and the resilience of the Unionist Party as a stabilizing force among different communities. This political equilibrium, however, would undergo a dramatic transformation in the 1946 elections, when the Muslim League successfully mobilized Punjab's Muslim electorate, leading to the collapse of the Unionist coalition and paving the way for the Partition of 1947.
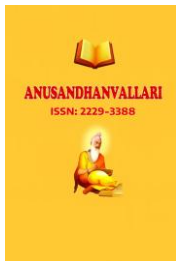
3. PUNJAB STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBELY ELECTIONS, 1946

The Punjab Legislative Assembly Election of 1946 was conducted in a highly volatile political environment shaped by the rapid communalisation of public life and the intensification of the demand for Pakistan. Since the early 1940s, the socio-political landscape of Punjab had undergone profound changes due to the impact of the Second World War, mounting economic pressures, the decline of the Unionist Party's cross-communal appeal, and the rising influence of the Muslim League under Muhammad Ali Jinnah. By the time Punjab went to the polls in early 1946, the province had become a central battleground for competing national visions: the creation of Pakistan, championed by the Muslim League, and the preservation of a united India, supported by the Congress as well as most Sikh and Hindu organizations. Consequently, these elections were not merely provincial contests but effectively a decisive referendum on the political future of both Punjab and the Indian subcontinent

Party	Seat Won
Unionist Party	19
Indian National Congress (INC)	51
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	21
Independents /Others	11
All India Muslim League (AIML)	73

(Yadav 1981)

In the 1946 Punjab Legislative Assembly election, the Muslim League achieved a decisive victory by winning 73 of the 86 Muslim seats, transforming itself from a marginal provincial actor into the principal political voice of Punjab's Muslims. This sweeping success enabled the League to assert that Muslim opinion overwhelmingly supported the demand for Pakistan. The Unionist Party, which had long governed Punjab through its cross-

communal alliances of agrarian elites, experienced a dramatic collapse, securing only a few seats and losing much of its Muslim support to the League's effective religious and political mobilization. The Indian National Congress performed strongly in Hindu-majority constituencies, winning approximately 51 seats, which reflected consolidated Hindu backing but highlighted the party's continued inability to expand its influence among Muslim voters. The Akali Dal won 22 seats, establishing itself as the primary representative of Sikh political interests and underscoring growing Sikh apprehensions about their future in a Muslim-majority province. Overall, the party-wise results revealed deepening communal polarization, signalling the breakdown of Punjab's long-standing composite politics and paving the way for the province's eventual partition in 1947.

4. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF 1937 TO 1946 AND THEIR IMPACT ON ELECTIONS

There was a ten-year gap between the Punjab Legislative Assembly elections of 1937 and 1946 primarily because no provincial elections were held in India during the Second World War (1939–1945), coupled with the constitutional and political crises of the decade. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the normal term of a provincial legislature was five years, but the Governor had the authority to extend it during emergencies. As a result, when wartime and political conditions deteriorated, the British administration prolonged the tenure of provincial governments instead of conducting fresh elections. After the 1937 elections, Congress ministries were formed in several provinces, while Punjab continued to be governed by the Unionist Party. Elections under the new Constitution became a tug of war between the Congress and Unionist Party to hold sway on future provincial politics (Josh 1979). However, in October 1939, Congress ministries across British India resigned in protest against the British decision to involve India in the Second World War without consulting Indian leaders. Although Punjab's government did not resign immediately, the broader constitutional crisis disrupted normal provincial functioning across the country. During the war, the British government suspended routine electoral processes. Wartime priorities, administrative exigencies, and security concerns made large-scale elections impractical. The colonial state relied increasingly on bureaucracy and emergency powers, while growing mass unrest, political repression, and instability made electoral activities difficult to manage. Consequently, provincial elections were postponed until the conclusion of the war. After the war ended in 1945, the British resumed constitutional discussions and sent the Cabinet Mission to India in early 1946. Fresh provincial elections were then announced to determine political representation for the negotiations leading to independence. Elections were finally held between January and March 1946. Thus, the decade-long gap resulted from wartime suspension of constitutional processes and the extraordinary political circumstances that shaped India's path toward independence.

4.1 DECLINE OF UNIONIS PARTY IN PUNJAB POLITICS

The Unionist Party emerged in the early 1920s as a powerful cross-communal political force in colonial Punjab. Built on the leadership of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh landed elites, its strength lay in representing the agrarian interests of the province's rural majority. The party's inclusive, non-communal platform centred on peasant welfare, irrigation rights, and revenue reforms enabled it to unite diverse communities at a time when communal politics elsewhere in India was intensifying. Under leaders such as Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, Sir Chhotu Ram, and later Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, the Unionists secured significant legislative support and formed stable provincial governments, most notably dominating the 1937 Punjab Assembly election. Their collaboration with the colonial administration and sustained focus on rural development further consolidated their influence. However, the party's dominance began to weaken in the 1940s as communal tensions intensified and the All-India Muslim League mobilised Muslim rural sentiment with greater effectiveness. The 1946 election results marked a major setback for the Unionist Party (Josh 1979).
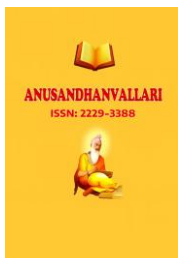
4.2 SOCIAL COALITIONS IN PUNJAB'S POLITICS STRONGLY FAVOURED THE UNIONIST PARTY FOR FORMATION OF GOVERNMENT AFTER BOTH ELECTIONS

 The party's electoral success in pre-Partition Punjab was rooted in a broad and durable social coalition that cut across religious and economic divisions. At its core were landed elites including Muslim zamindars, Sikh Jat landholders, and influential Hindu agriculturists those who trusted the Unionists to safeguard agrarian interests. This provided the party with a strong rural base in a province where more than 75% of the population lived in the countryside. Supporting this elite leadership were peasants, tenant farmers, and canal-colony settlers who benefited from the party's policies on agricultural credit, debt relief, irrigation expansion, and protection against moneylenders. The Unionists' emphasis on rural welfare created enduring loyalty among diverse agrarian groups. Another crucial component of their coalition consisted of panchayat leaders, village notables, and *biradari* networks, which functioned as channels of political mobilisation. These networks transcended communal boundaries, helping the party garner support among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs alike, setting it apart from the increasingly communal parties of the time. This socially diverse coalition enabled the Unionist Party to dominate Punjab politics in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly during the 1937 elections (I. Talbot 1980). Their inclusive, agrarian-oriented appeal forged a stable multi-communal alliance that sustained their electoral strength until the rise of communal politics in the 1940s weakened this coalition. Nevertheless, the social coalitions of various political groups continued to support the Unionists in forming the government after the 1946 election. However, fifty-seven Unionist Muslims were unseated. The virtual elimination of the Unionist Party surprised everyone (Josh 1979).

4.3 SIKANDER-JINNAH PACT INTRODUCE A TRANSFORMATIVE DYNAMIC INTO MUSLIM POLITICS IN PUNJAB

Concluded in October 1937 between Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, leader of the Punjab Unionist Party, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, president of the All-India Muslim League, the pact marked a turning point in Punjab's political landscape. It allowed Unionist Muslim members to join the Muslim League while remaining in the Unionist Party, effectively creating a system of dual membership. For Sikandar Hayat Khan, the agreement strengthened his position by ensuring that the Unionists retained control over Punjab's Muslim seats while avoiding open conflict with the Muslim League, whose national influence was steadily increasing. For Jinnah, the pact was a major breakthrough, granting the League legitimacy among Punjab's influential Muslim landed elites and enabling the party to expand beyond its earlier urban base (I. Talbot 1980). The pact reshaped Muslim politics in Punjab by bringing previously independent Muslim elites into the League's fold, albeit still under Unionist leadership. It also helped Jinnah project the League as the authoritative representative of Indian Muslims nationwide. However, the arrangement proved fragile. After Sikandar's death in 1942 and the rise of communal mobilisation, tensions intensified, ultimately contributing to the Unionist Party's decline. By the 1946 elections, the Muslim League capitalised on this shifting political environment to secure a sweeping victory in Muslim constituencies across Punjab.

4.4 PAKISTAN RESOLUTION OF 1940 BY MUSLIM LEAGUE IN LAHORE HEIGHTEN COMMUNAL POLITICS IN PUNJAB

When the Second World War began in 1939, the British Government declared India a belligerent without consulting Indian leaders. While the Indian National Congress opposed this unilateral decision and resigned from provincial ministries, the All-India Muslim League adopted a different approach. Under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the League supported the British war effort, calculating that such cooperation would enhance its bargaining power and political influence. The League argued that British recognition of Muslim political rights and the deepening communal divide necessitated a new constitutional arrangement. It was within this shifting political context that the League held its historic Lahore session in March 1940, where it adopted the Pakistan Resolution (also known
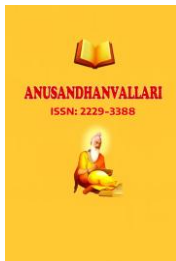
as the Lahore Resolution). The resolution called for the creation of "independent states" in the Muslim-majority regions of north-west and eastern India (I. Talbot 1980). Although it did not initially specify a single nation-state, it laid the ideological foundation for Pakistan. Thus, the Muslim League's wartime cooperation with the British strengthened its political standing and enabled it to advance the demand for a separate Muslim homeland, with the Pakistan Resolution becoming the central objective of Muslim politics in the years that followed.
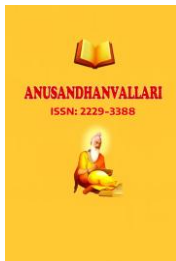
4.5 QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT AND IMPRISONMENT CONGRESS LEADERS

The Quit India Movement, launched by the Indian National Congress on 8 August 1942 at its Bombay session, was a mass civil disobedience campaign demanding the immediate end of British rule in India. Mahatma Gandhi's call of "Do or Die" inspired widespread participation from students, workers, peasants, and women, resulting in protests, strikes, and sabotage of communication networks across the country. In response, the British Government acted swiftly and repressively. Within hours of the resolution's adoption, all top Congress leaders were arrested on the morning of 9 August 1942. Those imprisoned included Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Rajendra Prasad, J. B. Kripalani, Sarojini Naidu, while Aruna Asaf Ali initially evaded arrest and emerged as a key underground leader. Most of these leaders remained in prison for nearly three years, leaving the movement to be sustained by local activists, underground networks, and spontaneous public uprisings. The British crackdown was severe: thousands were arrested, press freedoms were curtailed, and demonstrations were met with violent repression. Despite this, the Quit India Movement marked a decisive turning point in India's freedom struggle, demonstrating that the British could no longer govern India without Indian cooperation. However, the absence of Congress leadership in Punjab created a political vacuum, enabling the Muslim League to radicalise provincial politics with little resistance and created an open field for the Muslim League to advance communal politics in Punjab (I. Talbot 1980).

4.6 MUHAMMAD IQBAL'S PHILOSOPHICAL APPEAL FOR A SEPRATE MUSLIM HOMELAND

Muhammad Iqbal, the poet-philosopher and an influential figure in Muslim political thought, provided the ideological foundation for the demand that later evolved into Pakistan. His appeal was rooted not in territorial nationalism but in a philosophy emphasising cultural identity, ethical autonomy, and spiritual self-realisation for Indian Muslims. Iqbal's principal critique of western enlightenment philosophy was that it had taken the freedom of free thinking to such extreme limits as to deny that "all human life is spiritual". Islam on the other hand was "an emotional system of unification" which "recognises the worth of the individual" and "rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity" and "demands loyalty to God, not to thrones". It followed that 'ijtihad' was meaningless if denuded of religious spirit. What Iqbal's philosophical reconstructions of Islamic thought made plain was the gaping chasm between a view of Indian nationalism based on keeping religion out of politics and the normative Muslim conception of treating the spiritual and temporal domains in non-oppositional terms (Jalal 1998). Iqbal argued that Muslims in India constituted a distinct "millat" with their own history, values, and moral worldview. In his famous Allahabad Address (1930), he proposed the creation of a self-governing Muslim-majority region in north-western India, where Muslims could freely cultivate their political, cultural, and spiritual life. For Iqbal, such a political arrangement was essential to preserve Muslim identity and to enable the flourishing of Islamic principles such as justice, equality, and social harmony. His philosophical concepts such as particularly Khudi (selfhood), Ijtihad (reinterpretation), and the revitalisation of the Muslim community offered a moral justification for political autonomy. Although he did not use the term "Pakistan," Iqbal's intellectual vision laid the moral, cultural, and philosophical groundwork upon which Jinnah and the Muslim League later built the Pakistan Resolution of 1940. Muhammad Iqbal's philosophical appeal for a separate Muslim homeland played a major role in attracting Muslim support for the idea of Pakistan in Punjab.

4.7 PUNJAB'S MUSLIM ELITES PLAYED A DECISIVE ROLE IN STREGNTHENING THE PAKISTAN MOVEMENT

The support of Punjab's Muslim elites played a decisive role in strengthening the Pakistan Movement under the influence of the Muslim League and other prominent communal leaders of the region. In the elections of I946 the revivalist Sajjada Nashins provided the vanguard of religious support for Pakistan and played an important role in carrying the Muslim League to triumph over the Unionist Party (Glinmartin, Religious Leadership and the Pakistan: Movement in Punjab 1979). The movement derived its momentum from the backing of influential Muslim elites whose political authority, social status, and economic resources shaped Muslim politics in the 1940s. These elites included large landowners, bureaucrats, professionals, businessmen, and religious leaders who increasingly aligned themselves with the All-India Muslim League. Landed aristocrats in Punjab supported the movement due to fears that a Congress-dominated central government might undermine their traditional privileges, impose higher taxation, or weaken their control over rural society. Many educated middle-class professionals like lawyers, teachers, journalists, and students viewed Pakistan as essential for safeguarding Muslim identity and ensuring upward social and economic mobility within a Muslim-majority political framework. Muslim urban merchants and industrialists, particularly in cities such as Lahore, Calcutta, and Bombay, backed the movement to secure their economic interests in an environment where they felt overshadowed by more dominant Hindu business communities. Similarly, the support of high-ranking Muslim bureaucrats enhanced the organisational capacity of the Muslim League. Elite endorsement provided the Pakistan Movement with legitimacy, financial resources, and large-scale organisational strength. Their leadership enabled the Muslim League to expand its influence rapidly, culminating in its overwhelming victory in the 1946 elections, which firmly established Pakistan as the predominant political aspiration of India's Muslims. David Gilmartin (Glinmartin, A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and the Election Process in the Colonial Punjab 1998) rightly describe that he history of these elections suggests in another sense the structural importance of the election process for the articulation of colonial Muslim nationalism.

4.8 MUSLIM THOSE WHO OPPOSED PAKISTAN DEMAND WERE PORTRAYED AS ANTI- ISLAM

A significant proportion of Muslims in pre-independent India expressed opposition to the Two-Nation Theory and the proposed creation of Pakistan (Islam 2017). Muslims who opposed the Pakistan demand were increasingly portrayed as "anti-Islam" by pro-Pakistan media and leadership. During the 1940s particularly after the Pakistan Resolution of 1940 and the rapid expansion of the All-India Muslim League, the demand for Pakistan became closely connected to Muslim political identity. The League's leadership presented Pakistan not merely as a political objective but as essential for safeguarding Muslim culture, identity, and the future of the community. Consequently, League propaganda during the 1945–46 elections equated support for Pakistan with loyalty to Islam, and opposing Pakistan with undermining Muslim interests. As a result, Muslims who rejected Pakistan, such as the Unionists in Punjab, members of the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-e-Hind, or pro-Congress Muslim groups were frequently depicted as betraying the Muslim community, even though their objections were political rather than religious. By the mid-1940s, the political demand for Pakistan had acquired strong religious symbolism, blurring the boundaries between political dissent and religious loyalty. This framing played a significant role in mass mobilisation and contributed to the Muslim League's sweeping victory among Muslim voters in the 1946 elections (I. Talbot 1980).

4.9 DEATHS OF MAJOR UNIONIST LEADERS SEVERELY UNDERMIND COMMUNAL HARMONY AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN PUNJAB

The Unionist Party's decline was closely tied to the loss of its foundational leaders, whose political stature and organisational abilities had held together the party's diverse social coalition. Sir Fazl-i-Hussain's death in 1936 (Azim 1946), one of the founding architects of the party, built its cross-communal agrarian base. His death
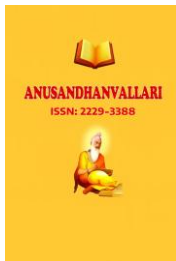
removed its principal strategist and ideologue. Sir Chhotu Ram's death (Chowdhry 1984), respected among Hindu and Sikh agriculturists, championed agrarian reforms and rural protections. His death weakened the party's hold over non-Muslim rural voters. Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan (d. 1942), the most influential leader of the later Unionist period, maintained balance between the Unionists and the Muslim League through the Sikandar–Jinnah Pact. His sudden death created a leadership vacuum that his successor, Khizar Hayat Tiwana, struggled to fill. No minority leader was more vocal in their opposition to a two-state solution than Hyat-Khan. This was clear throughout his life in politics, even before his election as Premier (Sheehan 2020). The deaths of these leaders between 1936 and 1945 deprived the Unionist Party of its organisational coherence, cross-communal credibility, and political authority. Without strong leadership to manage rising communal tensions, the party rapidly declined, enabling the Muslim League to dominate Punjab politics by 1946.
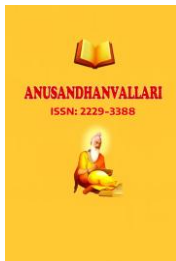
4.10 HINDU COMMUNAL GROUPS INTENSIFY COMMUNAL POLITICS IN PUNJAB

Hindu communal groups like Hindu Mahasabha, Arya Samaj, RSS and various Hindu Sabha organisations played a significant role in shaping communal politics in Punjab in the years leading up to Partition, especially after the 1937 elections. These groups focused on protecting Hindu political, economic, and cultural interests in response to the Muslim League's growing influence and its demand for Pakistan. RSS was marginally involved in Bengal and eastern Bihar riots of 1946 because it was relatively weak in these areas. But during second world war, the RSS infiltrated in Upper caste Hindus in urban areas and establish its own leadership. In Punjab, Hindu communal leaders campaigned strongly for a united India and opposed any division of the province, fearing Muslim dominance and loss of security. Their rhetoric emphasised Hindu identity, demographic vulnerability, and the need for assertive political mobilisation. While these organisations lacked the electoral strength to control the provincial government, they contributed significantly to Hindu communal consolidation and intensified Hindu–Muslim polarisation. Although the Two-Nation Theory is primarily associated with the Muslim League, Hindu communal organisations, especially the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, also articulated versions of a two-nation perspective well before Partition. Leaders like V.D. Savarkar asserted in the late 1930s that Hindus and Muslims were distinct nations with separate cultural and historical identities (Rai 1963). The RSS promoted a vision of India as a Hindu Rashtra, where Muslims could not be equal nation-partners unless they assimilated into Hindu cultural norms (Golwalkar 1947). In Punjab, these ideas hardened communal identities and contributed to the belief among Hindu groups that a shared political future with Muslims was untenable. By the 1946 elections, many Hindu leaders supported partitioning Punjab along religious lines as a defensive measure. Thus, even though the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS opposed Pakistan, their ideological framing of two separate nations indirectly strengthened communal polarisation and contributed to the climate that made Partition appear inevitable. Bipin Chandra (Chandra 1954) describe that the most of the Hindu communalists therefore tended to use another of its variant. Since Hindus faced two enemies and the British were bound to leave, Hindus should not' waste their energy in the anti- British fight; they should let the Congress carry that on. Hindus should conserve their strength for the eventual and final struggle against Muslims.

4.11 BULK OF UNIONIST LEADERS JOIN MUSLIM LEAGUE

A major dynamic was the shift of loyalty of many Unionist leaders toward the Muslim League in Punjab. During the 1940s, especially after the deaths of Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan (1942) and Sir Chhotu Ram (1945), the Unionist Party experienced severe organisational weakening. At the same time, the Muslim League successfully positioned itself as the primary representative of Muslim political identity. The League's strategy linked the Pakistan demand with the defence of Islam and Muslim rights, creating pressure on Muslim politicians to align with it. League propaganda during the 1946 elections made it difficult for Muslim leaders to remain with the Unionists without being labelled "anti-Muslim." Khizar Hayat Tiwana lacked the authority to maintain party unity after Sikandar's death. Consequently, many influential Muslim landlords, *Pirs, Sajjada-Nashins*, and rural notables defected to the Muslim League during the 1946 elections. The landlords who had joined the League by 1946 included amongst

their number members from such families as the Hayats, the Noons and the Daultanas from which the Unionist Party had traditionally drawn its leadership (I. Talbot 1980). These defections enabled the League to secure 73 out of 86 Muslim seats, leading to the Unionist Party's collapse and ensuring Punjab's decisive contribution to the Pakistan Movement.

4.12 DECLINE OF MARGINAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND SOCIAL GROUPS IN THE POLITICS OF PUNJAB
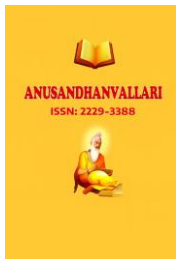
The position of marginal groups and smaller political parties changed drastically between the 1937 and 1946 Punjab Assembly elections. In 1937, the weak organisational presence of both the Congress and the Muslim League in Punjab allowed smaller groups to win significant representation. The Unionist Party's dominance created political space for community-based parties. Sikh groups such as the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Khalsa National Party won seats due to fragmented Sikh politics. Hindu groups like the Hindu Election Board mobilised caste and *Biradari* networks, while Muslim marginal organisations such as Majlis-e-Ahrar-ul-Islam performed better than the still-weak Muslim League. Independents constituted a sizeable block, reflecting localised politics and personal influence. By 1946, however, rising communal tensions and the Pakistan debate transformed the political landscape. The Muslim League captured nearly all Muslim seats, marginalising groups like the Ahrar and Unionist Muslims. The Akali Dal emerged as the dominant Sikh force, overshadowing smaller Sikh organisations (Josh 1979). Hindu groups lost ground as Hindu voters consolidated behind the Indian National Congress. Independents and smaller parties declined sharply as communal polarisation reduced the space for local politics. The Unionist Party collapsed as Muslim supporters defected to the League and Hindu/Sikh supporters aligned with Congress and Akalis. Thus, while 1937 represented a pluralistic and fragmented political field, the 1946 election was marked by intense communal polarisation that consolidated political power into the Muslim League, Congress, and Akali Dal (I. Talbot 1980).

4.13 RESERVE CONSTITUTENCIES FOR SCHEDULED CASTE WERE SHIFTED FROM AD-DHARM MANDAL TO INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

Scheduled Caste reserved constituencies were increasingly taken over by larger national-level parties in the elections of 1946. The Ad-Dharam Mandal, a Dalit reform movement founded by Mangu Ram Mugowalia in the 1920s, sought to promote a distinct Ad-Dharmi identity and secure political representation for Dalit communities. In the 1937 elections, the Mandal mobilised Dalit voters to register as "Ad-Dharmis," asserting a non-Hindu identity. The first election to incorporate the stipulations of the Government of India Act of 1935 took place in 1936, and the Ad Dharmis supported independent candidates in the eight constituencies reserved for the Scheduled Castes. They mounted a campaign reminiscent of the Great days of the 1931 census and to their own surprise, they swept all but one of the seats (Juergensmeyer 1988). These candidates were supported by the Unionist party because of Sikander Hayat Khan and Babu Mangoo Ram's friendship (Juergensmeyer 1988). By 1946, however, the intense communal polarisation surrounding the Pakistan issue reduced political space for social reform movements like Ad-Dharam. Internal divisions weakened the Mandal, and many Dalit voters gravitated toward larger parties such as Congress. As a result, the Ad-Dharam Mandal failed to win seats in 1946, only Babu Mangu Ram win with the coalition of unionist party (Ram 2004), and Scheduled Caste representation became dominated by Congress-aligned candidates or independents associated with major parties. The rise of communal politics overshadowed caste-based mobilisation, leading to the decline of Ad-Dharm as a political identity.

4.14 SIKHS WERE POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT BUT LACKED DECISION MAKING POSITION

Throughout both the 1937 and 1946 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections, the Sikhs occupied a position of political significance but structural constraint due to their demographic minority status and the communal electorate system. In 1937, Sikh representation was largely mediated through the Shiromani Akali Dal, which faced internal divisions and struggled to consolidate the Sikh vote. Although Sikhs were influential in rural Punjab,

the Unionist Party's cross-communal coalition forced them into a position of negotiation rather than direct authority. By 1946, communal polarisation had intensified, and Sikh political mobilisation increased as Sikh parties sought to protect community interests and resist the prospect of Muslim-majority rule under the League. The election also highlighted the consolidation of opinion in the minority communities in the face of Pakistan threat. The Sikh formed a *Panthic Pratinidhi* Board representing all groups except the communists in order to present a common front in elections. In all, *Panthic* Sikhs won twenty-two seats (I. Talbot 1988). Despite improved organisation and assertiveness, Sikhs lacked the numerical strength to decisively shape the provincial government (Rai 1963). Consequently, Sikhs remained influential yet not dominant actors, able to shape coalition politics and constitutional debates, but unable to secure control in the rapidly changing political environment of late-colonial Punjab. The role of the Sikhs in Punjab politics between 1937 and 1946 requires particular attention. Hodson (Hodson 1970) explore the role of Mountbatten in partition that he may be excused his failure to pacify the Sikhs because they had no effective political leadership; he dealt successfully with Baldev Singh, but Baldev Singh could not deliver the goods. The real leadership of the Sikhs was multiple, and (apart from state rulers) spontaneous and irresponsible; for a hundred years the Sikhs had accepted British paternal authority, but it was not the viceroy's role to become their father-figure. During this period, Sikh political leadership increasingly moved away from sustained collaboration with Hindu parties and instead sought to consolidate an autonomous political identity. Sikh leaders also recognized the necessity of establishing a workable understanding with Muslim leaders in Punjab, who similarly acknowledged that the province could not be governed effectively by any single community. The Sikander–Baldev Singh Pact became a central component of this strategic orientation. However, internal divisions within the Sikh community weakened this approach. Political disunity and factionalism among organisations representing the Sikhs placed them at a distinct disadvantage in their dealings with the colonial state, the congress and the Muslim League (Singh and Shani 2022). A significant number of Sikhs, driven by political calculations or religious considerations, chose to align themselves with the Indian National Congress or the Hindu Mahasabha. Consequently, Sikh leaders advocating cooperation with Muslim political groups were never able to secure a decisive majority within the community (Oren 1974). Some scholars argue that the Sikh masses did not extend consistent or wholehearted support to the Akali Dal and that this lack of popular backing contributed to the party's electoral setbacks. Master Tara Singh explain that Sikh voters failed to cooperate fully with the leadership, resulting in the Akali Dal securing only 23 seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1946, while 10 seats went to the Indian National Congress. However, the sustained political mobilisation and sacrifices made by the Sikh masses, from the Gurdwara Reform Movement to the 1946 elections, undermine the validity of this interpretation. The loss of these 10 seats can more plausibly be attributed to the decisions and strategies of the leadership, which repeatedly encouraged Sikh voters to align with the Congress (Sandhu 2012).

5. CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the Punjab Provincial Legislative Assembly elections of 1937 and 1946 differed markedly in both character and consequence. The 1937 elections contributed to the strengthening of democratic principles, fostered social harmony, and enabled several marginal social and political groups to articulate their interests within the provincial political arena. A diverse range of social groups entered electoral politics and secured representation, indicating that a new model of democracy was emerging one that appeared conducive to self-rule in Punjab. The Unionist Party subsequently formed a coalition government grounded in the principle that democracy should function as an inclusive social institution that protected the rights of all communities, particularly rural Punjabis. In contrast, the 1946 elections transformed the political landscape entirely, as they were conducted along sharply communal lines. Formerly cooperative social groups became adversaries, democratic voices were marginalized, and criminal as well as extremist elements gained prominence. The highly

polarizing and antagonistic electoral campaigns of 1946 significantly contributed to escalating communal tensions, ultimately culminating in widespread violence and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

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