

Prakash Singh Badal

Prakash Singh Badal has been at the center of Punjab politics for well over three decades. Most people considered him the least communal of all the Akali leaders. He was a breed apart. Moderate, pacifist, liberal were the adjectives used to describe him, that is until he too became a hard-liner in the wake of Operation Bluestar.

Born on 8 December 1927, Badal was an affluent sport-loving gentleman-farmer who had strayed into politics almost by chance. The story is told of how young Badal had almost accepted the post of tehsildar when the stalwart Sikh leader of the day, Giani Kartar Singh, had intervened and snubbed the family for trying to push Badal into a 'third-rate government job.' The shrewd Giani had seen great potential in Badal and taken him under his wing.

Prakash Singh was still a student when he entered politics in 1957. Five years later, he became an MLA: on a Congress ticket, believe it or not. The reason why Badal had started his political career as a Congress nominee was that the Akalis had at that time disbanded themselves as a political force. Even so, Badal later claimed he was the senior most Akali leader around.

Prakash Singh Badal got into the Akali Dal only after the Punjabi Suba agitation started. He took part in the demonstrations by Master Tara Singh, and the then Strongman of Punjab, Pratap Singh Kairon put Badal in jail, though he was still a Congress MLA. Had it not been for that arrest, Badal would perhaps have remained in the Congress and become its chief minister in 1970. Badal became a minister in the Gurnam Singh ministry of 1966 and 1969. In 1970, Gurnam was eased out, and Badal became the chief minister. His tenure, however, lasted for little over a year. The next six years were spent in the political wilderness. In 1977, he was elected to the Lok Sabha, and found himself inducted as a minister at the Centre. A few months later, when the state elections were held, Badal chose to go back to Punjab, possibly to keep a tight rein on state politics. The elections brought into power a combination of the Akalis and the Janata Party with Badal as the chief minister. This second stint as chief minister lasted for about three years. His ministry was dismissed after Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980.

Badal was only 43 when he first became the chief minister. He was still "a shy, black-bearded young man," recall his old friends. They described him as "a respectable kakaji of the landlord community."

Badal had received a liberal education in a Christian college in Lahore, married into a landlord family, and had hardly anything in common with the militant fire-breathing leaders of the Akali Dal like Gurcharan Singh Tohra or

Jagdeo Singh Talwandi. Duck shooting was Badal's favourite sport. For the rabid Akalis he had nothing but contempt, and at that point there was of course no question of Badal accepting anyone like Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as a "saint", as he later did.

Time was when Badal and Bhindranwale could not even stand the sight of each other. Many would remember the tension that gripped the Manji Sahib hall when Badal, who was then the leader of the Akali legislature party, stepped onto the stage where Bhindranwale happened to be sitting. The fiery Bhindranwale at once got up and withdrew. So fierce was their enmity that Badal never felt secure entering the Golden Temple, particularly the Guru Nanak Nivas where Bhindranwale lived before moving to the Akal Takht.

In 1980, after the dismissal of his government, Badal along with Longowal had gained control over the Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, the apex body of the Sikhs. With the militants gaining ground, Badal's moderate politics remained at a discount for several years.

It was again imprisonment that threw Badal into the arms of the Akali extremists in 1984. Nearly a year in solitary confinement left him so bitter and hardened that he was ready to have a dialogue with Bhindranwale's father, Baba Joginder Singh. "My only constant companions," Badal wrote in his jail diary, "were pigeons and cats. I was kept in complete solitary confinement." Apart from the trauma of the solitary confinement, Badal had come to realise that the extremists would kill anyone who came in their way. He had no desire to become a martyr. And so, even though he remained essentially a moderate at heart, as later events were to show, he decided that at that point it was more discreet to assume an extremist posture.

Here was Prakash Singh Badal in a different incarnation. You saw him canonizing Sant Bhindranwale, burning copies of the Indian Constitution, thirsting for "revenge" against the Centre for "all the excesses committed on the Sikh brethren." He had become Gurcharan Singh Thora's new comrade-in-arms, and was trying to emerge as the supreme leader of the militant Sikhs. He became a strong opponent of the Rajiv-Longowal accord and did his best to stop its ratification by the Akal Takht leaders. When Sant Longowal gave Rajiv the green signal for holding elections in Punjab, Badal and Tohra said the terrorists would make a mockery of the polls.

The Akali victory in the election was a big defeat for Prakash Singh Badal. But there was no going back. Having been the chief minister of Punjab twice, there was no way he could join the government of Surjeet Singh Barnala. He preferred to play the radical role, until he could get into the saddle himself.

The politics of Badal has seen frequent changes over the years. Until the early 80's nobody could have associated him with any form of extremism. Religious fanaticism was alien to his nature. The twists of Akali politics have once again brought Badal back to his moderation and liberalism. People thought it suited him better.

And yet, nobody was quite prepared for the new Badal they saw in his tussle with the religious leaders of the Akal Takht in early '99. This was not his first face-off with the religious leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal. He had had a major tussle with them in 1994, but even those who had backed him at that time were taken aback by any he had used his state power to oust the Akal Takht jathedar and install his own puppet. Badal had first got the Sikh Gurudwara Judicial Committee reconstituted by packing it with his own men. He then mounted an attack on the Jathedar and got him removed. He even sought to oust Tohra from the presidency of the SGPC, accusing him of being in league with the Congress. He alleged that Tohra had been plotting against his government and was planning to install a well-known industrialist and Shiromani Akali Dal MLA as chief minister.

The supporters of Badal maintained that he had "liberated" the Akal Takht from the clutches of the clergy who had been trying to crush the freedom of thought through their bukurnamas. But if this time Badal had won a battle and succeeded in cutting the clergy to size, the war was by no means over.