

Punjab Letter.

The Akali Rift

WHILE he has not formally set up a rival Akali Dal, Sam Pateh Singh has really formed a separate organisation of his own within the Dal. This, he claims, is the only "legal" body. Master Tara Singh continues to control the old offices but Sam Pateh Singh is appointing his own executive committee and is even starting his own newspaper. Both factions claim the sanction of the General Body of the Dal. The respective sides did indeed "elect" one of the two leaders as President and "expel" the other from membership — having taken care to invite only its own supporters to the respective meetings. About 200 'delegates' are said to have attended the meeting convened by the Sant, and about 50 or so, the one by Tara Singh, though the latter figure was put by the sponsors at a precise 231. Both the factions seem anxious to keep up the Action of a single Akali Dal but the fact is that there are two parallel organisations at present.

Government intervention prevented an imminent trial of strength but a clash between the two factions may not be far off. The 8 G P C is to meet shortly to discuss the Sam-initiated no-confidence motion against the Committee President, Kirpal Singh Sherewala, a non-entity whom Tara Singh has propped up as President. If the meeting is held and a violent clash is averted Tara Singh may still prevail. For he has the vital organisational — and financial — control in his hands. All the same, he will not find it easy to "quell" the rebellion.

In the meantime, a long-standing tradition has been broken. Panicking at the determination of the Sant to convene a General Body meeting within the Golden Temple area, Tara Singh sought official aid to maintain "law and order", thereby permitting the entry of the police into the precincts of the Temple. Soon, of course, he saw his mistake, for it had given the Sant an effective propaganda weapon and so now he vehemently denies having called the police,

Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, the Chief Minister, has benefited the most from the Akali rift. The police, once it entered the Gurudwara, occupied strategic positions and arrested a number of Akalis, belonging to both the factions, to prevent a clash. That hardly a murmur has been raised against the entry of the police into the Gurudwara indicates the people's indifference towards the whole affair.

Master Preferred to Sant

What will be Chief Minister Kairon's next move? The Akali rift definitely helps consolidate his position. The two factions are accusing each other of having played into his hands. He, of course, denies any understanding with either of them, but it seems likely that he would very much wish Tara Singh to continue as the Akali chief. The reason is that while Tara Singh does occasionally start a "movement" against the Government, he has not the determination to carry it to the end. Many times in the last few years Tara Singh has let an agitation get to a high pitch, only to ditch it ultimately. These Akali pinpricks actually strengthen Kairon's position in the Congress. He begins to look "indispensable" for the Congress in Punjab. A more determined and steadfast Akali leadership, of the type that the Sant may possibly provide, could, on the other hand, cause real discomfiture to the Chief Minister, either by carrying the opposition to his Government to a successful conclusion or by getting routed and thus ending the "Akali problem" which he so badly needs for his own continued supremacy in the State.

To return to the Pickwickian farce being staged at Amritsar, the rift was precipitated by Tara Singh, when it became apparent that he was facing the gravest threat to his leadership so far. Using the technique he has employed on many occasions during the last forty years, he tried to isolate Sant Pateh Singh in an attempt to force him into submission. He began the

attack by expelling a number of the Sam's leading supporters for "anti-party activities" — a convenient enough charge. With his hold on the Akali organisation, which in no small measure is due to his personal control over the party funds, Tara Singh could be reasonably sure of scoring an easy victory over the Sant. But he gravely under-estimated the latter's popularity as also his determination to fight it out to the bitter end. For unlike his previous opponents who had either joined the Congress or left politics, the Sant, by his manipulations, almost succeeded in making Tara Singh appear as the "dissident". The Sam's decision to hold a convention of his followers inside the Golden Temple, a day before the Master was to hold his own meeting, put Tara Singh very much on the defensive.

Tara Singh Unmasked

Hitherto Tara Singh's strength lay in the picture he had created of himself as a Saint-Politician. Even his bitter critics seldom doubted his sincerity. This image has, however, now been tarnished. There have been uncomplimentary references to his "fast unto death" which few, even then, took seriously. The Sant has actually, threatened to make public some "facts" about the fast.

As for Sant Fateh Singh, while his following is chiefly among the town-dwelling Sikhs (mainly shopkeepers), his popularity among Sikh peasantry is also considerable. The acute embarrassment that the Sam's campaigning on behalf of the Akali candidate caused the Chief Minister in his own constituency is proof of this. As against this, Tara Singh has the advantages of having control over the party's finances and a more vocal following. But even if he scores a tactical victory against the Sam in the forthcoming meeting of the S G P C, (which he may well do if the Government does not in the meantime suspend the Committee itself), the Sam will always remain a challenge to Master Tara Singh's leadership of the Akali Dal.