

The Rise and Fall of the Khalistan Movement: A Chronology of Events

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ABSTRACT

The Khalistan Movement was an armed secessionist struggle led by the Sikhs of Punjab, in northern India. Perhaps the most haunting memories associated with the insurgency relate to the Indian Army's brutal raid upon the 'sanctum-sanctorum' of the Sikh faith, the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. While the support for Sikh political separatism pre-dates India's independence, many scholars, albeit somewhat synthetically, attempting to place a fixed timeframe around the Khalistan movement *tend* to commence their chronology of events from 1981 and end them in 1993. This is largely because it was during this time period that Punjab endured a *heightened* level of Sikh militancy. What this article aims to do is to carefully detail the significant events that occurred during that period.

Keywords: Khalistan, Sikh, Punjab, Chronology, Separatism, Secessionism.

BACKGROUND

It is often difficult to locate a precise start-date as to the rise of a particular secessionist movement. This is especially so when many of its adherents contend that their demands for separate nationhood are rooted in, and hence legitimised by, entrenched 'historical realities'. Nevertheless many scholars, albeit somewhat synthetically, attempting to place a fixed timeframe around the Khalistan movement *tend* to commence their chronology of events from 1981 and end them in 1993. This is largely because it was during this time period that Punjab endured a *heightened* level of Sikh militancy—with an estimated death-toll of over 25,000 resulting from the associated violence (Puri et al. 1999: 10; Kataria 2019: 57).

Though, strictly speaking, Khalistani fuelled militancy did not erupt until 1981, a significant event did occur only three years earlier which was of considerable explanatory importance for subsequent proceedings. On *Baisakhi* (13 April) 1978, a group of orthodox Sikhs¹ compromising largely of affiliates from the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, as well as supporters of lead protagonist Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale,² staged a protest outside the headquarters of the 'heretic' Sant Nirankari sect.³ This protest deteriorated into an open confrontation between the two opposing groups, resulting in the death of thirteen orthodox Sikhs and two Sant Nirankaris (Birinder Pal Singh 2016: 191). As expected there were, and remain, conflicting versions of this event, with orthodox Sikhs tending to believe that the protest had been peaceful, whereas the Sant Nirankari account alleges that they were attacked with weapons and thus acted purely in self-defence. Although this episode of religious-based violence was essentially an intra-Sikh one, the fallout actually served to widen the schism between the Hindus and Sikhs. This is owed to the corresponding judicial verdict

that acquitted the 62 Sant Nirankaris (including its head, Baba Gurbachan Singh) charged in connection with the killing of the thirteen orthodox Sikh protestors, on the grounds that they had acted in self-defence (Prakash 2008: 535). This controversial decision perhaps added credence to the growing murmurs among certain disillusioned Sikh ranks that the Indian state held an institutional anti-Sikh bias. Moreover as a result of the *Baisakhi* killings, a widow of one of the deceased protestors, Bibi Amarjit Kaur founded the Babbar Khalsa outfit: a militant group which, despite its original anti-Sant Nirankari edge, consequently performed a considerable role in the anti-Hindu/anti-India violence associated with the Khalistan movement (Prakash 2008: 536).

Growing Sikh-Hindu tensions

While tensions remained high between orthodox Sikhs and Sant Nirankaris over the next couple of years,⁴ by 1981 there were signs of growing tension between the Hindus and Sikhs. This was owed to a number of reasons. First, relates to the seeming endorsement of the Khalistan concept by certain Sikh socio-political leaders during the Chief Khalsa Diwan's hosting of the Sikh Educational Conference on 15 March 1981. The conference was attended by many high profile Sikh leaders from the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) and Shiromani Akali Dal. While no formal resolution was passed in favour of Khalistan, US-based Ganga Singh Dhillon put forward the idea that Sikhs were a separate nation and that they should seek their own statehood, this was met with slogans of 'Khalistan Zindabad' by members of the audience (Dang 1988: 4). Although the Chief Khalsa Diwan subsequently distanced itself from Dhillon's comments, suspicions remained among the New Delhi intelligentsia as to the 'true' aims of such Sikhs (Kapur 1986: 324). Second, relates to the assassination by Sikh militants of veteran newspaper editor Lala Jagat Narain later that year on 9 September, who was an outspoken critic of the Khalistan Movement. Third, concerns the Khalistan militant group Dal Khalsa's hijacking of an Indian Airlines Boeing-737 plane on 29 September.

The fourth, and arguably most significant reason, relates to the Congress (I)'s inability/unwillingness to implement the main terms of the Shiromani Akali Dal's infamous Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Though this document was first formulated on 1973, it tended to become more of a prominent issue in Punjab politics once the Akali Dal were out of power in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, namely 1973-1977 and, particular so, from 1980-1985 when, as Khushwant Singh cynically puts it, they 'hailed [it] out of the archives and proclaimed it as a charter of *Sikh* demands' (1984: 8-9). The main demands of the resolution included; i) an adjustment of powers between the centre and state, whereby the former's jurisdiction would be restricted to foreign policy, defence, communications, currency etc.; ii) for all states of federal India to be equally weighted; and iii) for the Union Territory of Chandigarh, and the Punjabi-speaking areas 'deliberately left out' of the post-1966 *suba*, to be transferred to Punjab. The demand relating to reduce, or simply halt, the diversion of water from Punjab's rivers (Ravi-Beas) to 'non-riparian' states was a relatively late entry onto the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Even though the main terms of the resolution were essentially secular, it was evident that the majority of Hindu Punjabis remained either suspicious of Akali demands (much to the infuriation of ordinary Sikhs).

With growing frustration over the perceived inability/unwillingness of the centre to acquiesce to their political demands, the Sant Harchand Singh Longowal-led Akali Dal upped the ante in August 1982 by launching its *dharam yudh morcha*. The *morcha* received widespread support from the Sikhs to the extent that it managed to draw together all of the main Akali factions as well as the increasingly popular preacher—Sant Bhindranwale. It was while the *morcha* was into its third

month that the 'Sikhs as a community were humiliated in Haryana when they were not permitted [by the state police, under orders of the then Chief Minister, Bhajan Lal,] to go to Delhi during the 1982 Asian Games', an action justified on the basis that they may have tried to disrupt the event (Gopal Singh 2002: 170). This experience, according to Kalyan Rudra, 'left a deep scar on the average Sikh mind that their community was not trusted' by the government (2005: 3). During the course of 1983, the Akalis led a series of *rokos* with the intention of creating India-wide economic disruption, the first being the *rasta roko* of April, followed by the June *rail roko*, and in August, the *kam roko*. Unfortunately for the Akalis even these demonstrations failed to draw the major concessions from the centre that they had hoped for. It is generally acknowledged that this continued political stalemate contributed towards the gradual undermining of the more mainstream Akali leaders and growth in the credibility of more militant sections who not only endorsed the use of violence but also tended to view the Hindu Punjabis as a mere extension of the 'Indian state enemy' (Brass 1991: 194; Gopal Singh 1994: 82). Indeed, Sant Bhindranwale used such opportunities to ridicule the Akalis for their insistence on using peaceful methods of protest, '[w]ell, if you go with a begging bowl what do you expect? Unless you stand up to this Government, you'll get nothing' (quoted in Aurora 1984: 91).

That the tide of Sikh anger was turning increasingly against the Hindu Punjabis was evident after September 1983 when 'an indiscriminate killing of Hindus' began across the state (Kapur 1986: 227). A particularly gruesome incident took place on the night of 5-6 October in which Sikh terrorists halted a Delhi-bound bus passing through Kapurthala district, ordered off its passengers, separated the Sikh passengers from the Hindu ones, and shot dead the latter in cold blood (Pritam Singh 2008: 40; Jeffrey 1986: 46). The bus-tragedy proved to be terminal for the Congress (I) administration in Punjab with Chief Minister Darbara Singh tendering his resignation, followed by, on 10 October 1983, the centre imposing President's Rule. In reaction to the proclamation of President's Rule in Punjab, Sant Bhindranwale was reported to have told his audiences,

Six Hindus are killed and the Government falls. Two hundred Sikhs have been gunned down by the police and nothing has been done. This shows that to the Government, Hindu lives are more important than Sikh lives (quoted in Talveen Singh 1984: 41).

The enforcement of President's Rule, however, failed to curb the growth of militancy across Punjab. Moreover, the heightened militant influence contributed towards the hardening of pre-existing Sikh political demands, whereby the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was now viewed as a 'minimalist demand', and that nothing but its full-implementation could avert further violence or the realisation of Khalistan. Indeed, Bibi Amarjit Kaur remarked that, 'if the centre wants peace in the Punjab they must fulfil the demands in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution...if the centre does not agree to this then there will be Khalistan' (quoted in Talveen Singh 1984: 44).

Elevation of Sant Bhindranwale and brutal retaliation

By the end of 1983, Sant Bhindranwale took up residence at the sacred *Akal Takht*, situated within the Golden Temple complex, which arguably spoke volumes about his popularity among the Sikhs at the time. This also seemed to suggest that attempts by commentators to neatly separate the agitators between 'moderates' and 'extremists' were at best extremely crude, since it was clear that Sant Bhindranwale could not have inhabited the *Akal Takht* 'without the tactic consent of the SGPC' and its then chief, Gurcharan Singh Tohra (Major 1987: 43; Grewal 2005: 316). Telling of his

objection to the centre's decision to lift President's Rule in Punjab 1985, KPS Gill, who served as Director-General of Punjab Police during the height of the militancy, writes,

I was convinced that there was no real difference between the fundamental thinking of the Akalis and the terrorists—and that the Akalis completely lacked the desire and the will to contain terrorism (2001: 31).

Over the first few months of 1984, with militant violence continuing unabated across Punjab, many within high government and media circles publically endorsed the view that Sant Bhindranwale was not only the lead-militant of the agitation but that he had been directing (or at least inspiring) acts of terrorism across the state (Kaur 1984: 17; Grewal 2005: 326). The insinuation of course being that a firm response from the centre was needed to protect the lives and property of the Hindu Punjabis. On 2 June 1984, in light of another Akali planned *roko* (this time to block wheat stocks from leaving the state), the centre resorted to quite drastic measures, by sealing off Punjab from the rest of India through the construction of an armed perimeter along its border and ordering a virtual media blackout within the state (Malik 1985: 44). During the next few days the Indian Armed Forces raided over forty gurdwaras across Punjab suspected of harbouring terrorists and/or being used to store weapons for their use. Of the many gurdwaras raided, included the sanctum-sanctorum of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple, in what was codenamed Operation Blue Star on 3-6 June 1984. The assault on the Golden Temple ended with the surrender of the senior Akali leaders, the death of, according to 'official' sources, 493 civilians/militants (including prominent armed rebels such as Sant Bhindranwale, General Shabeg Singh and Bhai Amrik Singh), and the death of 83 members of the Indian Armed Forces (White Paper 1984: 169). It is fair to say that this action drew widespread revulsion from the Sikh community, many of whom simply ceased to consider themselves Indian any longer. The fact that four out of the six generals in charge of Operation Blue Star were Sikhs 'did little to assuage [their] deep sense of humiliation and anger' (Hardgrave 1985: 133). Immediately after Blue Star, the Indian Armed Forces conducted, through Operation Woodrose, what was essentially a tidying up exercise to catch absconding militants thought to be hiding out across rural Punjab. Many impartial scholars agree that numerous innocent Sikh youngsters were brutally terrorised during this operation, prompting many to flee across the border into Pakistan for safe-haven only to return back to India as trained, ideological indoctrinated, Khalistani militants (Gupta et al. 1988: 1678; Deol 2000: 108; Prakash 2008: 537).

In late 1984, ghastly anti-Sikh pogroms broke out across parts of northern India, though particularly concentrated in the national capital of New Delhi, over a three-day stretch (1-3 November) in response to the news that PM Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards (Kapur 1986: 236). The pogroms resulted in 2,217 dead, of whom 2,147 were in New Delhi, and prompted many to draw parallels with the partition violence of 1946-1948 (Mathew 1985: 259). The pogroms, along with Operation Blue Star and Woodrose, were three cataclysmic events for the Sikh community in 1984, which undoubtedly contributed towards a sense of isolation from their fellow Hindu countrymen and the Indian state like never before—and no doubt the memory of which acted as, and still remains, a major stimulus for the manufacture of pro-Khalistani sentiment (Gopal Singh 1994: 90).

Attempts at normalizing the Punjab crisis

Rajiv Gandhi, appointed as successor to the Prime Ministership following his mother's assassination, affirmed his position through democratic mandate following Congress (I)'s emphatic

victory in the general election of December 1984. A short-while into his tenure it appeared as though achieving a lasting political solution to the Punjab problem was high on his agenda. On 11 March 1984, Rajiv Gandhi ordered the release of the Akali leaders who had been imprisoned since Operation Blue Star, including Sant Longowal (Malik 1985: 58). As a result, Rajiv Gandhi and Sant Longowal were able to thrash out a settlement that dealt with all the major provisions of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. However the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, as it became known, failed to be implemented as agreed largely because it failed to receive the backing of the other Akali factions—with Parkash Singh Badal, one of the foremost Akali politicians in Punjab during the agitation, branding it a ‘sell-out’ (Pritam Singh 2008: 47). In fact, some have since indicated that it failed to materialise because Congress (I) felt it could suffer electorally elsewhere in India (particularly in the ‘Hindi-heartland’) on the grounds of the Accord being interpreted as minority appeasement (Gurharpal Singh 1993: 94; Gupta et al. 1988: 1678).

On 17 August 1985, Rajiv Gandhi announced that state elections would take place in Punjab (thus spelling the end for President’s Rule in the state). Despite calls by militants for a boycott, and the tragic assassination of Sant Longowal, the elections took place successfully with a rather impressive turnout of 67.58 per cent of the eligible electorate and resulted in an outright victory for Shiromani Akali Dal (Longowal) headed by the newly appointed Surjit Singh Barnala (Kapur 1986: 245; Wallace 1986: 372). Despite winning the majority of seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly for the first time in their history (73 out of 117), it should be noted that the Akalis only polled marginally more than the Congress, 38.6 per cent of the vote percentage for the former in comparison to 37.9 per cent for the latter (Malik 1986: 359; Wallace 1986: 374). Regardless of this, the optimism that many Punjabis had for the incoming Barnala administration quickly faded after it became apparent it could not contain the spread of militancy, with the failure of the Congress (I) centre to transfer Chandigarh to Punjab and deliver upon the provisions of the Accord in general, arguably undermining their capacity to do so (Telford 1992: 985; Gurharpal Singh 1993: 93-94). On 26 January 1986, the date that was supposed to have coincided with the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, a huge congregation of defiant Sikhs assembled at the Golden Temple which, apart from installing a new pro-militant *jathedar*, announced the formation of a Five-Member Panthic Committee to oversee the creation of Khalistan (Pritam Singh 2008: 50).

The Panthic Committee included Wassan Singh Zaffarwal’s Khalistan Commando Force (KCF)—a body which went on to play a huge role in the pro-Khalistani militancy over the following few years (Pettigrew 1995). Once again, from the premises of the Golden Temple, the stance in favour of secession was reiterated through the ‘Declaration of Khalistan’ on 29 April 1986. As it turned out, this declaration actually provided the government with the pretext to launch Operation Black Thunder I on the following day, which involved troops from the National Security Guard (NSG) and Border Security Force (BSF) storming the Golden Temple to rid it of militants. Though the temple itself escaped significant damage on this occasion, the raid itself turned out to be a strategic disaster with the then Director-General of Police (DGP) in Punjab, Julio Ribeiro, conceding that, apart from capturing a few small-time militants, ‘no one of note was caught’ (quoted in *India Today* 1986). Moreover, the fact that Barnala had signed and approved the raid severely undermined his credibility among the Sikh masses who were on the whole, at this stage anyway, quite sympathetic towards the militants (Rudra 2005: 47).

KPS Gill era

In May 1987, the new DGP of Punjab KPS Gill, who had taken over the reins from Julio Ribeiro, conducted yet another raid on the Golden Temple: Operation Black Thunder II. This operation, done 'under the fullest glare of the media', was a resounding success for Gill resulting in the militants' 'meek surrender' which did much to damage their prestige and boosted the morale of the Punjab Police who had, unlike in Black Thunder I, played a frontline role in the raid (Prakash 2008: 540; Gupta et al. 1988: 1678). Nevertheless, despite this notable success, the position of Barnala remained untenable. On 11 June 1987, following his twenty-month long tenure in which over a thousand people had been killed in Punjab as a result of the insurgency, President's Rule was re-imposed. Over the next few years militancy continued to rise relentlessly, a situation worsened by the release of Sikh prisoners suspected of, or charged with, terrorist involvement, the so-called 'Jodhpur detenus', on 4 March 1988 and the continued arrival of many well-equipped terrorists flooding back from Pakistan (Prakash 2008: 540).

It should be noted that the role of militant influence in Punjab extended beyond its obvious contribution towards increased levels of violence, and instead into civil matters as demonstrated through the creation of several Khalsa Panchayats which often attempted to resolve small level village disputes (Deol 2000: 114). It was said in early 1991, during the peak months of the movement, that 'in parts of rural Punjab, particularly along the border, the militants no longer run a parallel government. They run the government!' (India Today 1991). Contrary to the typical New Delhi line, many militants exerted an incredibly positive role in Punjab society by helping to tackle societal ills such as alcoholism and drug-addiction. But the moral high ground that the militants seemed to possess, at least in comparison to the Indian security forces, faded significantly in the latter years of the movement, with many resorting to extorting money from innocent civilians, indiscriminate (as opposed to targeted) killings, rape and forcible marriages (Jain 1995: 195; Puri et al. 1999: 10). Quite a few Khalistanis have maintained that such unscrupulous characters were essentially government agents or 'black cats' that had infiltrated their cells in order to undermine their movement. The late US-based Khalistani, Dr Paramjit Singh Ajrawat (President of Anti-Defamation Sikh Council for Freedom of Khalistan), said that in the immediate aftermath of the operation,

[t]he Indian government introduced criminals and terrorists, disguised as Sikhs with flowing beards, among the Sikh populace, who then killed innocent people, extorted money from innocent people, and fuelled heinous acts of terrorism to muffle the voices of freedom and righteousness.⁵

While such infiltration undoubtedly took place, it would be insincere to assume that it accounted for anywhere near *all* the corrupt actions of the militants.

Demise of militancy

In the end, it was a probably combination of the visible moral bankruptcy of many secessionist militants, intra-militant rivalry, right-minded Punjabis turning their backs on the violence⁶ and the brutal 'state-terrorism' of Gill's Punjab Police, which ultimately contributed towards the demise of the Khalistan movement (Telford 1992: 986; Rudra 2005: 131; Narayanan 1996: 44). Following the near consecutive rises in the annual militancy related death-tolls from 1985 to 1991 (the exception being between 1988 to 1989 when the number dropped from 2,432 to 2,072), there was a drop from 1991 to 1992 when the number fell from 5,265 to 3,883, and then a huge drop in 1993 when

the figure fell to 871 (SATP 2020). On 25 February 1992 President's Rule was lifted for the last time and the Punjab Legislative Assembly elections, boycotted by practically all Shiromani Akali Dal factions and with a turnout of just only 24.3 per cent of the electorate, resulted in an unsurprisingly huge victory for the Congress who won 87 out of the 117 seats available (Gurharpal Singh 1992: 994). Since 1993 there have only been sporadic cases of 'Khalistani militancy'—including most notably the assassination of Chief Minister Beant Singh in August 1995. Though support for the Khalistan concept has not disappeared completely, it, along with the Anandpur Sahib Resolution and Rajiv-Longowal Accord are essentially spent issues in mainstream Punjabi politics. In a sombre assessment of the over decade-long insurgency in Punjab, Tarlochan Singh (Retired Statesman and Member of *Rajya Sabha*) remarks:

There were many policemen and those in the armed forces that lost their lives in relation to the militancy, but for the government, in reality, they lost nothing by their actions...*the loss was entirely ours [the Sikhs], we lost our youth, we had an entire generation wiped out...*but those that took to arms were not helping the Sikhs...the only thing that did was to create suspicion in the minds of the rest of India...to the point that even today people have doubts about Sikh loyalties to India...This is very unfortunate [emphasis added].⁷

SUMMARY

To summarise, this article has demonstrated, quite succinctly, the main events that occurred during the Khalitstani militancy between the years of 1981 and 1993. Admittedly, the roots of this conflict arguably lie far deeper than what this article was able to cover, and arguably can be traced back to the Partition of India (and Punjab). This is because Partition not only created the template for carving out a religious-based state in the Subcontinent, but it also significantly undermined of the composite secular ethos that India's founding fathers had committed themselves to. However, in the context of this article, it is clear how, from the intra-Sikh tensions of the late 1970s, Sikh-Hindu tensions in the Punjab became the main basis for much of the problems that were witnessed. As such political demands emanating from the Akalis, though apparently secular, were interpreted suspiciously by both the Hindu minority in Punjab and the government in New Delhi. In this regard, unlike for many Sikhs, the centre was very much viewed as the main guardian for the interests of the Hindu minority in Punjab. However, the manner in which the centre assumed this responsibility, it can be seen, unnecessarily inflamed tensions in Punjab, with Operation Blue Star arguably being the most disastrous policy choice of all. That said, it would be incorrect to blame the centre entirely for this militant movement or the bloodshed associated with it. Rather, it is clear that the government, both at the state and centre, as well as both the Akali and Congress parties (together with their various factions), committed huge policy blunders and contributed towards a crisis that was very much avoidable. Furthermore, one cannot absolve responsibility from the conduct of certain state security forces, the Sikh militants, nor the communally-charged masses, be they Sikh or Hindu.

Footnotes

These are typically Sikhs who subscribe to the Tat Khalsa doctrine of their faith.

Sant Bhindranwale, who had taken over as head of the esteemed Damdami Taksal in 1977, went on to play an increasingly prominent role in the socio-political landscape of Punjab.

The Sant Nirankaris were, and continue to be, considered heretics by orthodox Sikhs since the former are led by a line of 'living Gurus', in contrast to the latter who believe that Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last living Guru, enshrined the Adi Granth with the Guruship over the Sikhs—hence 'Sri Guru Granth Sahib'

A predicament not helped by the 'reprisal killing' of Baba Gurbachan Singh on 24 April 1980 at the hands of an Akhand Kirtani Jatha member.

Interview with Dr Paramjit Singh Ajrawat. [E-mail Interview], 30 October 2010.

Interview with Kuldip Nayar. Delhi, 29 August 2010

Interview with Tarlochan Singh. Delhi, 19 August 2010

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