

# Separatists in the Punjab: the case of 'Sikh fundamentalism'

by Ramtanu Maitra

Northern India has been shaken over the past three months by a series of bloody incidents, including the cold-blooded murder of two high police officials and threats of terrorist disruption of both road and rail transport. The epicenter of the disturbances is the agricultural breadbasket of the country, Punjab state, involving the Sikh religious community.

While the Sikhs—who represent about 1.5 percent of the nation's population—are concentrated in Punjab and neighbouring states, they are famous as a talented industrial-minded group who have traveled and settled across the country. Their religion, which broke away from Hinduism at the turn of the 16th century, with its own temples and holy places, has thus far coexisted with India's many other faiths, integrated into the national tapestry.

This is now threatened by a phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, which still remains in its initial phase within the Sikh religion. But there is not a man on the street of any part of India who does not understand that the Punjab troubles are grave and have reached a turning point. Either the government and moderate leaders of the Sikh community assert their authority over the fundamentalists and extremists, or the next months will produce much bloodshed and tragedy.

On April 4, a *rasta roko* (block the traffic) demonstration broke up with a death toll of 11. A few days later, the Akali or Sikh opposition party eulogized the dead "martyrs" and on April 14, the Sikh New Year's Day, thousands of youths took an oath to be ready for new "sacrifice" in the event of a "Dharam Yudh" (religious war).

Later, Akali leaders called for a prolonged mass campaign, beginning June 17, including putting up barricades to stop the trains. The purpose of their *rail roko* (stop the trains) campaign, as the Akali leaders explained, is to prevent the newly harvested wheat crop from leaving the state.

On June 17 the government halted train traffic in Punjab in order to avoid a bloody confrontation. Barring a few scattered attempts at sabotage of the railroad by the extremists, the day passed relatively quietly. The authorities expressed their determination to reopen the railroads the next day, and the Akali leaders called off the campaign.

Even more than the demonstrations, the assassinations of two police officials by the extremists in broad daylight shocked the residents of Punjab. On April 25, a senior police official

was murdered outside the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar. The official was a Sikh who had entered the temple unarmed in civilian clothes to pray. His hit-and-run assassination—and the subsequent belief by many who saw the murder that the assailant had taken refuge in the temple—has created a situation where the police and government must intervene—and must do so without fueling a religious backlash.

On June 18, the day the "rail roko" campaign was called off, two unidentified gunmen walked into the office of the head of the criminal investigation agency in Kapurthala district of Punjab and shot him dead.

The deaths of these officials brought sharp reaction in Punjab, as elsewhere. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi indicated it was not possible for the government to take a new initiative to solve the problem until "we know what their [Akali leaders] attitude is to the spate of violence and murders taking place in the state."

Home Minister P. C. Sethi, who is responsible for maintaining law and order throughout the nation, bitterly condemned the assassinations, urging the moderate Sikh leaders to turn in those involved in terrorism and assassination and to remove all ammunition stockpiles from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. No official ultimatum has yet been issued, but there are precedents where state police have entered the Golden Temple premises to arrest criminals and miscreants.

As of this writing, a list of names of forty terrorists and assassins suspected of taking refuge in the Golden Temple at Amritsar has been put together and submitted to the moderate Akali leaders. But the list significantly omits the name of the arch-fanatic Sant Bhindranwale, who has used his religious preacher garb to foment violence, and is the link to the external "Khalistan" factor, i.e., to the small group of Henry Kissinger-aided extremists who want Punjab to secede from India to create a new independent "state" to be called "Khalistan." It is believed the government is still hoping to isolate Bhindranwale without confronting him directly.

## Three basic elements

Three broadly distinct factions within the non-Congress-I Sikh population dominate the political scene in Punjab today. These are: *the Akali Dal*, a political party consisting only of Sikhs, which was established in 1920 and came to

power in Punjab for the first time in 1967 through the electoral process; a group of Sikh fundamentalists under the leadership of a fanatic Sikh, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale; and *Dal Khalsa*, a small band of Sikh terrorists controlled and financed by external sources, who want to secede from India, to create "Khalistan." The most important and surely the largest faction participating in the agitation in Punjab are the Akalis. The Akali Dal was formed almost three decades before India won independence from the British colonialists. Initially the Akalis were only involved in the reform movement *within* the Sikh religion. At that time, the Akali Dal was asked to play a key role in establishing the Shiromani Gurdwara Pararbandhak Committee (SGPC). Run by elected committee members, the SGPC controls all Sikh gurdwaras (temples); it was formed a month before the Akali Dal was formed.

In spite of provocations by the British in the 1940s urging the Sikhs to form an independent Sikh nation, Akali leaders chose to be a part of India. During the Independence struggle, the Akali leaders also rejected a dubious offer made by the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, asking the Sikhs to join the Federation of Pakistan. The murderous riots between Sikhs and Moslems that followed the 1947-partition of Punjab indicate that Jinnah's offer, had it been accepted by the Sikhs, would have ended in a catastrophe for the Sikh community.

However, within a decade after Independence, Akali leaders started an all-out agitation for carving out *within* India a new state of Punjab on the basis of the distinct Punjabi language and culture. This Akali movement came to be known as the campaign for "Punjabi Suba" or Punjabi homeland. Still, during this turbulent period, the movement was kept secular. In 1966 "Punjabi Suba" was won. A new reconstituted Punjab came into existence when a new state, Haryana, was carved out of the former state of Punjab.

Although this reconstitution met the essential Akali demand, many residual problems remained, some secular, others religious. The other two groups within the Sikh community tried to use these issues to stir up fanaticism.

## The roots of extremism

In the mid-seventies when Sant Bhindranwale came into the limelight, he launched a vicious campaign against the Nirankaris—a Sikh sect which preaches co-existence of Sikhs with other religious groups. In April 1978, fundamentalists clashed with the Nirankaris, and thirteen were killed. Bhindranwale, boosted by the media, stepped up his blatant racial attacks and bigoted speeches.

When, in 1981, the leader of the Nirankaris was gunned down, there was no doubt who had instructed the killers to pull their triggers. Although a warrant was issued for the arrest of Bhindranwale by the Punjab government, Bhindranwale was frequently seen thereafter visiting various cities in India, his armed guards swarming around him.

Particularly during the past three years, Bhindranwale and his terrorist associates have capitalized on every Akali

move. They have infiltrated the moderate Sikh ranks and, in effect, taken over and turned what were planned as *morchas* (peaceful demonstrations) into violent riots. Their main goal has not been achievement of various demands, but the destruction of the secular forces who favor negotiation.

Behind his religious facade, Sant Bhindranwale, like Ayatollah Khomeini, is nothing more than a mad killer. The Sant's formal education terminated at the fifth grade. Surrounded by bodyguards, Bhindranwale is now hiding in the Golden Temple with a cache of arms and a pile of money. Although this mad Sant has not openly demanded "Khalistan," i.e., an independent Sikh nation, his seditious activities leave no doubt that he is supporting—with arms, hard cash and inspiration—the Dal Khalsa.

Since most of the religious demands used by Bhindranwale to establish his credibility over the years have been met, the fundamentalist faction he leads is now isolated. At this time Bhindranwale does not wield real political power among the population. Very few religious Sikhs consider him their religious mentor, or even want to associate with him. But, sitting in the Golden Temple, where he is beneficiary of the Sikh custom of giving donations for community betterment that brings an estimated \$7 million annually into the SPCG religious establishment, Bhindranwale continues to be a pivotal and dangerous force in the Punjab tangle. Unless he is removed from the scene, future negotiations between the Akalis and New Delhi will be difficult if not impossible.

More to the point, any delay in negotiations will increasingly tip the balance, helping the fundamentalists and extremists to gather new strength, menacing the entire Punjab population, Hindus and Sikhs alike.

The last group, led by the senile Jagjit Singh Chauhan, is presently headquartered in London, with close ties in Canada and the United States. Chauhan, a former Akali leader who had served in the 1967 Punjab cabinet, calls for establishing an independent Sikh nation, "Khalistan." "Khalistan" secretary Sandhu has also set up shop in the Golden Temple.

Chauhan and his ragtag group have been given wide publicity across the world, and has been portrayed by the Western press corps as enjoying strong support within Punjab. However, it is clear that only those forces who would like to see the Indian Union broken up into a number of manipulable small nations are financing this terrorist group. In fact, Dal Khalsa has virtually no support within Punjab state.

## Unsettled issues and Akali politics

Soon after the new Punjab state was created, having shed the Hindu majority in Haryana, the Akalis took political power in the 1967 state elections. The Akalis formed a United Front Government, bringing in the Communist Party of India as well as the right-wing Jana Sangh. The government also enjoyed the support of the Communist Party (Marxist).

Political secularism, however, prevailed in Punjab throughout the sixties and early seventies.

In the 1977 national elections, moderate Sikh leader Prakash Singh Badal led the Akalis in forming an alliance with the Janata-led coalition that defeated Prime Minister Gandhi, but the alliance proved to be shortlived.

A turning point was the 1980 landslide elections that brought Mrs. Gandhi back to power. The Akalis, despite their claim to be the sole representative of the Sikh community, won only 37 of the 117 seats in the Punjab Assembly. The Akalis failed even to muster half the total Sikh strength of 80 within the Assembly.

Frustrated by the outcome of the 1980 elections, the Akali leaders dusted off the set of old unresolved issues involving the central government and the State, organizing agitations to pressure the ruling Congress-I Party for settlement in their favor. In the process, the Akali leaders produced the seven-year-old "Anandpur Sahib Resolution," which was asserted as a demand of the entire Sikh community and a kind of ultimatum to New Delhi to meet those demands or face the paralysis of Punjab. The resolution called for restricting the Union Government's jurisdiction to the areas of defense, foreign policy, currency, and communications, and also raised the bogey of discrimination against the Sikhs, declaring that "religion is not safe without sovereignty." The Sikh "nation" was called upon to make sacrifices in the religious crusades (*Dharam Yudhs*). It was in this document that the seed for a separatist movement was planted.

The document asserts that the Sikhs are a separate nation, that their political goal is "supremacy of Khalsa," and that the realization of it through a geographical entity and a political constitution is their "birthright." Only the term "Khalistan" was not spelled out in the document.

Along with putting the Anandpur Resolution forth as a political platform for the Sikh community, the Akali leaders asked the central government to act on the following issues:

- 1) Extending permission to relay Sikh religious songs from the government-owned All India Radio; placing a ban on tobacco around the Golden Temple in Amritsar; extending permission to travel with a kirpan (a small knife) of a specific size; and enactment of an All-India Gurdwara Act under which all the 800 Sikh shrines scattered across the country would be managed centrally.

- 2) Reopening of the 1981 water-sharing agreement between Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Jammu & Kashmir.

- 3) Awarding Chandigarh, the city built as the capital of an original undivided Punjab (before the split with Haryana) to Punjab; transfer of Fazilka and Abhor areas to Haryana; and determination of the status of several disputed villages along the Punjab-Haryana border.

The first issue, consisting of various religious demands, has been mostly met by the central government, although only after an undue delay. The only Akali religious demand that is yet to be met is enactment of an All-India Gurdwara Act. The government of India has accepted the concept in principle, and there are signs that an agreement can be reached.

Within the Sikh community itself this act has not, how-

ever, been universally accepted. Some Sikhs have expressed fears that such an act would mean domination by the religious class among the Sikhs. They have also expressed concern that *gurdwaras* as well as other religious places should not be used for political purposes or as a shelter for anti-social persons of any religion.

### Difficult issues

The second and third demands are in no sense "Sikh" demands. They are endorsed by all Punjabis. The second demand, concerning the division of surplus waters of the Ravi and Beas rivers, is perhaps the most difficult issue to resolve. The Punjab farmers who depend heavily on irrigated water for agriculture hate to see the surplus water drain into some other territory. Because the Ravi and Beas rivers cross the territory of the old undivided Punjab, Akali leaders concede that Haryana has a right to share this surplus water—but not Rajasthan.

Some agitators forget that the Akali government which came to power in 1977 became a party to the implementation of a settlement which included Rajasthan when it issued land for digging the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal, which will carry the surplus water to Haryana. Today the same Akalis are busy setting up barricades to prevent digging of the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal. By all available accounts, the central government is ready to refer the issue to a high-level judicial panel, and the Akalis have tentatively agreed to abide by the panel's decision.

The third demand, concerning the award of Chandigarh, along with Fazilka and Abhor, was very close to settlement during the recent tripartite talks between the Congress-I, opposition leaders, and the Akali leaders. The talks broke off when the extremists escalated their terrorist activities.

### A signal

Two developments indicate that a political settlement *can* be reached and that the moderate Akalis may be able to prevail. In a recent election of the Akal Takht, the highest spiritual-cum-temporal seat of the Sikhs, the Akalis elected Thakedar Kripal Singh, a moderate leader. Sant Bhindranwale had tried vainly to get himself elected; he failed to obtain the required votes.

Secondly, preceding the Akal Takht election, the Sikh leaders had assembled in the Golden Temple to pledge support to the Sikh leader San Harchand Singh Longowal, a longtime associate of former Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal. The Sikh leaders reached a consensus that the Akalis will abide by whatever decision Longowal reaches with the Center on the unresolved issues. Bhindranwale, among others, was present at the ceremony.

The Akali leaders have also come to understand that the New Delhi authorities are not going to buckle down under the threat of violence and chaos preached by Bhindranwale and his men. Withdrawal of the *rail roko* campaign by Sant Longowal himself is an indication of such understanding.