

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Breakthrough over Punjab

*After four years of chaos and the rise of a full-fledged secessionist movement, the first major breakthrough.*

**O**n July 23, a beaming Rajiv Gandhi told the 500-odd cheering Indian parliamentarians that an agreement has been reached between the central government and the Akali Dal, the dominant Sikh opposition party in Punjab. An 11-point memorandum of agreement, signed after two days of intense talks between Prime Minister Gandhi and the top Akali leader, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, is expected to lead to a peaceful settlement of all Sikh demands.

The agreement received wide support almost immediately. Sant Longowal, emerging from the signing of the agreement, said gleefully: "We are fully satisfied with the package deal." Prime Minister Gandhi was also optimistic: "This brings to an end a very critical period in the history of this country."

The Akali Dal's demands go back almost a decade. They were originally focussed around three issues: that the city of Chandigarh, the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana states for decades, be given over to Punjab in exchange for transferring the Hindi-speaking regions currently in Punjab to Haryana; that Punjab have a greater share of the waters from the riparian rivers that flow through the state; and that all Sikh shrines be put under one Sikh institution, the S.G.P.C. The memorandum meets these core demands and more.

These three issues have been discussed in detail before—for example, in 1977, when the Akali Dal shared power with the Janata Party—but no

concrete solution emerged. Whenever the discussions were on the verge of a breakthrough, some violent act would break off the talks. While the Sikh radicals were mostly responsible for sabotaging the talks, the power struggle within the Congress (I) leadership in Punjab also posed obstacles.

The rift between the Akali leaders and New Delhi opened wide in 1981 when the Sikh leadership began to move toward mass activity disrupting the normal activities in the state. It was at that time that, with the assistance of Sikh left-radicals, a fundamentalist movement began to emerge. Bhindranwale, an illiterate, gun-toting fundamentalist, was promoted as the counterpole to the moderate Sikh leaders.

Within a year, a large faction of the Sikh Naxalites (proponents of Maoist guerrilla warfare to take state power) belonging to the All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF), and the British-Libyan controlled overseas Sikhs, joined hands with Sikh "Mullah" Bhindranwale to launch a systematic assassination and terror campaign throughout Punjab and New Delhi.

By 1983, with the help of large funding derived from drug-trafficking and generous sources from abroad, the sacred Sikh shrine at Amritsar, the Golden Temple, had been turned into a massive arsenal harboring fugitives, terrorists, and secessionists. The Indian Army cleaned up the terrorist nest in June 1984. By that time, the separatist-terrorist "Khalistanis" had been

established as a fully integral part of the Soviet-controlled international terrorist apparatus.

The brutal October 31 assassination of the Indian prime minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, by two Sikhs was meant to knock out the Non-Aligned Movement and throw the world's largest democracy into uncontrollable chaos.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who took over at this crucial juncture, moved quickly to restore the political process in Punjab. He identified in Sant Longowal a Sikh leader who would be able to negotiate on behalf of the entire Akali Dal.

The Prime Minister's first step in this direction was to appoint a tough congressman, Arjun Singh, former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, as the governor of Punjab. Last month, preparing to open up dialogue with the Sikh leadership, Prime Minister Gandhi summarily dismissed the newly-elected Punjab Congress (I) chief, S. S. Randhawa. Reports indicated that Randhawa, backed by left-leaning congressmen including former Punjab chief minister Darbara Singh, was involved in harboring terrorists who had been involved in assassination of political leaders. The new appointee is a former army man, Gen. R. S. Sparrow.

These steps were no doubt necessary to straighten out the internal rot that had been eating away the party base in Punjab. Sant Longowal, a moderate who had been terrorized into submission by Bhindranwale and the Naxalites, also made a statement in early July pointing the finger at Moscow for the festering trouble in Punjab. A number of Sikh arrests made in the United States also confirmed Soviet involvement in the Punjab issue.

Finally, after more than a year of addressing each other from a distance, New Delhi and the Akali Dal began to negotiate a peaceful solution.