

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Punjab festering anew

Has the militants' seizure of the Golden Temple put everything back to square one?

In summer 1984, the Indian government seized control of the Golden Temple in Amritsar in Punjab, a center of terrorism and illegal drug- and weapons-running endangering the entire nation, and reestablished Indian sovereignty in "Operation Blue Star." Now, a year and a half later, the Golden Temple, the main shrine of the Sikh religious community, has again fallen into extremist hands.

On Jan. 26, India's Republic Day, the fundamentalist Damdami Taksal and allied All-India Sikh Student Federation (AISSF) seized the Golden Temple, burned the Indian flag and raised the saffron banner of "Khalistan" from the top of the Akal Takht. It was the most demonstrative show of resurgent extremism since the fateful year of 1984.

In what appears from press reports to have been a virtual coup d'état, the Damdami Taksal, the fundamentalist seminary directed by the late terrorist-separatist Sant Bhindranwale, forced the Sikh religious leaders to include them prominently in the *Kar Seva* (the tearing down and rebuilding of the Golden Temple to expunge the blot of Operation Blue Star, which had been set to begin Jan. 27). Then they staged a preemptive takeover of the event. Before a large crowd, the militants proclaimed a *sarbat kalsa* (public meeting where policy is made as a Sikh congregation), and issued a series of edicts. They dismissed the Shiromani Gurdwara Pravandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Akal Takht and Golden Temple priests, appointing extremists, including Indira Gandhi's con-

victed murderer, in their place. They denounced the Punjab accord signed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sant Longowal in August, and issued a new "hit list."

In principle, the Punjab state government of Mr. Surjit Singh Barnala and his Akali Party, elected overwhelmingly after the Rajiv-Longowal accord and lifting of President's rule in the state, is in an excellent position to crack down. The extremists have not been winning friends in Punjab with renewed assassinations, targeting young sons of Akali leaders and Sikh youths recently released from prison in particular, in the recent period.

In a blunt speech on the eve of the genuine *sarbat kalsa*, called as per religious custom by the Akal Takht priests, albeit after urgent deliberations by the Akali and SGPC leadership, Barnala warned that his government would not hesitate to take "some very harsh steps" against the extremists. The huge public meeting, held on Feb. 16, mandated the Akali Dal and SGPC to do all that was necessary to liberate the Golden Temple from illegal occupation by the AISSF and Damdami Taksal.

But in the nearly two weeks since, no steps have been taken to disturb the extremists who, for their part, have proceeded with banditry and low-intensity terror—in the most recent incident, raiding a government armory and robbing a bank. Meanwhile, evidence of the "Pakistan connection" to the trouble has reportedly multiplied, and Barnala has called for the central

government to completely seal the border and place the command of five border districts in the hands of paramilitary forces.

There are two specific problems Punjab governor Barnala faces. The first is New Delhi's inability to follow through in a timely manner to implement the Punjab accord, the main plank of the Barnala election program. Failure to effect the transfer of Chandigarh, now a "Union Territory" and the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana, to Punjab by Jan. 26 as per the agreement was a serious blow. In fact, when the Golden Temple was being taken over, Barnala was closeted with cabinet members in Delhi in last minute efforts to resolve the issue which had already led to the establishment of a "commission" and the dubious procedure of taking a language census in the border villages to resolve disputed claims by Punjab and Haryana, respectively.

In the end, there was a total deadlock, with the Hindu chauvinist opposition in Haryana putting a lot of pressure on the ruling Congress Party. Congress veterans claim that any strong measures against Haryana in the interest of settling the Punjab-Hindu dispute will lead to an electoral debacle for the Congress in that state, and perhaps in other states where Hindu chauvinism has a foothold.

The other problem Barnala faces is petty politicking among Akalis. The mischief centers on Mr. Prakash Singh Badal, a former chief minister and Akali leader who denounced the Punjab accord as a sellout from the outset, and SGPC chief Gurcharan Singh Pohra, a former card-carrying member of the Communist Party.

The Badal-Pohra combine, the story goes, is using the extremists as a cat's paw in a plan to bring down the Barnala government.