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THE KHALISTAN MOVEMENT IN INDIA:
The Interplay of Politics and State Power

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This paper traces the growth of nationalist sentiment among Sikhs in the Punjab and examines the factors that led to the rise of the Khalistan movement in the 1980s and its subsequent decline by 1992. The Khalistan movement, which sought a separate state for Sikhs, was a result of a multitude of social, economic and political factors that had led to a growing sense of alienation among Sikhs in India. The failure of the state to address the political and economic problems of the Sikhs facilitated the rise of militancy and the movement for a separate state, widening the chasm between the Sikhs and the Indian state for about a decade before Punjab limped to normalcy in 1992.

This paper postulates that the course of any separatist movement is contingent on a variety of factors. First, the nature of the movement itself: its leadership, organisational base, numerical strength and the historical and cultural forces which lend character and weight to the movement. Second, the response of governments to ethnic groups: the strategies employed by them vis-à-vis the respective groups - coercion, conciliation or a blend of the two, and the socio-political and economic policies of the state towards them. Third, the level of external support provided by other countries to the groups in question, the role of the diaspora in sustaining the movement from outside, and the role of other organisations in providing arms and other forms of support to the groups.

If all the above are present - that is, the ethnic group is well organised and has a strong leadership base, the response of the state is repressive, and the group finds external support in the form of arms and finance - there is a greater possibility of the group moving towards a separate state. Conversely the absence of any one or more of these factors makes it extremely difficult for a separatist movement to succeed, as witnessed in the rise and decline of separatism in Punjab.

Background to the Khalistan Movement

Sikhs constitute less than two per cent of the population of India and form a small minority group in the country. Most Indian Sikhs are concentrated

in the state of Punjab, situated on the North-western border of India. In spite of being a small minority, they are more than well-represented in Indian business, the army and the bureaucracy. In addition, going by all socio-economic indicators, Punjab is clearly one of the most prosperous states of India, with relatively high literacy rates and one of the highest per capita incomes in the country. Notwithstanding this, Punjab witnessed the alienation of a large number of Sikhs in the 1980s with the Sikh quest for a separate identity revolving around two important symbols: language (Punjabi) and religion (Sikhism). These were used to emphasise their distinctiveness in relation to Hindi-speaking groups and Hindu regions such as the neighbouring state of Haryana, and to press for more economic and political privileges from the central government.

The period prior to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 provides some insight into the politicisation of the Sikh identity and their subsequent disillusionment with the Indian state in the post-partition period. Sikhs had proven their loyalty to the British in the early years of British rule in Punjab, particularly as members of the British Indian Army. However, their loyalty to British rule was clearly on the wane after the Rowlatt Act (1919), which gave the colonial government sweeping powers to incarcerate people without trial to maintain internal order. Protests against the Act met with a stiff response from colonial authorities, the most significant of which was the Jallianwala Bagh massacre on 13 April 1919 which effectively turned many Sikhs against the British. Their anger deepened when instead of the much-promised 33 per cent representation that they expected as reward for their services in the army, they were given, under the Government of India Act 1919, only 15 out of a total of 93 seats in the Punjab legislative council. (Khwaja, 1980: 204). The Ramsay McDonald award of April 1932 which established separate electorates for minorities also deprived the Sikhs of their rightful representation based on their percentage. (K Singh, 1991: 232).

Sikh leaders had wanted the creation of a Sikh state along the lines of Pakistan. However, the Muslim League that had fought for the creation of Pakistan had enjoyed a political advantage at the time, and the number of Sikhs was no where close to the number of Muslims (there were 5,500,000 Sikhs as compared to 90,000,000 Muslims at that time). Further, the Sikhs were not concentrated in any area which could be carved out into a separate state. Under the circumstances, the Sikhs reluctantly agreed to the partition of Punjab in 1947 resulting in the western districts of the state, which had a Muslim majority, becoming part of Pakistan while the eastern districts of Punjab that had a Sikh-Hindu majority remaining as part of the Indian state.

Demand for a separate state. The Partition of Punjab however did not mark the end of aspirations amongst some Sikh groups for a Sikh

homeland. Initiatives such as Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) in 1948 and moves for a Punjabi Suba from the 1950s onwards sustained this desire. The Indian government, however, was not prepared to create a state based on religious grounds, although in 1966, it conceded to dividing Punjab on 'linguistic' lines into Punjab and Haryana. The former, with a Sikh majority espoused the Punjabi language, while the latter, with a Hindu majority, emphasised Hindi (M. Singh, 1988:165).

The creation of the Punjabi state did not, however, completely satisfy the demands of the Sikhs. In the new Punjab, Sikhs formed approximately 54 per cent of the population. Punjabi was declared the official language but the situation remained complicated because a large number of Hindus continued to reside in Punjab and showed little enthusiasm for Punjabi. The retention of Chandigarh as a union territory serving as capital for both Punjab and Haryana, and the perceived unfair distribution of river waters further instilled a sense of discrimination among the Sikhs.

Party politics in Punjab. Sikh resentment was also intensified by the regular tussle between the Congress and the Akali Party to capture power in Punjab. Following Indian independence, the Akali Dal representing the interests of the Sikhs, and the Congress Party were the two major political forces in Punjab that alternately shared power in the state. The dilemma for the Akali party was that despite being a strong advocate of the Sikh culture and religion, it never enjoyed the full support of the Sikhs. Its narrow support base comprised the Jat Sikhs and segments of the urban Sikh population. Its rival, the Congress party, had been more effective in state politics, relying on Hindus, scheduled castes[1], and segments of the non-scheduled caste rural Sikh population.

Subsequently the Akali Dal failed to capitalise on its advantage of being the sole and effective champion of the Sikhs (Kaur, 1999: 61-69). It was also plagued by internal squabbles which intensified by the early 1980s.

Further, the Congress party under Mrs Gandhi, played a significant role in undermining the Akali Dal (Kothari and Deshingkar, 1985: 623-24). Mrs Gandhi adopted a highly authoritarian approach with an aggressive agenda of centralisation, which in 1980 saw nine states, whose governments were unfavourable to the policies of the central government, placed under temporary President's rule. Punjab was one of these states where the Akali Dal and Janata Sangh combine was dismissed. In order to split the electorate and ensure that the Akali Dal did not garner widespread support, Congress cultivated the religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as an alternative power base.

Bhindranwale, a young Sikh religious preacher with a flair for oratory, was a natural rallying point for those inclined to a more assertive brand of politics. It is widely accepted that Giani Zail Singh, the former President of

India and trusted aide of Mrs Gandhi, was instrumental in bringing Bhindranwale into the political limelight. (K Singh, 1991:332) In the 1978-79 elections of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabahandak Committee (SGPC)-the council in charge of Sikh holy shrines-the Congress government supported the extremists, including Bhindranwale's nominees, against the Akali Dal. (Tully and Jacob, 1985: 57-83).

According to Atul Kohli,

> The repeated failure of the Akalis to wrest power from Congress had left open a political space for those who argued that increased militancy was the only means for protecting Sikh interests. Bhindrawale stepped into that space. (1990: 361).

Bhindranwale was initially Congress's master stroke as he put the Akali party under considerable pressure. However, as Bhindranwale's popularity grew, both the Akali Dal and Congress found themselves in a dilemma. Supporting Bhindranwale gave both parties some mileage with respect to the Sikh voters but risked alienating Hindu voters. Bhindranwale was very quick to read the signs and had the political acumen to capitalise on this situation by playing the two parties off against each other. Congress soon found that the genie it had unleashed was refusing to go back in its bottle.

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution. The Akali found themselves being pushed into a corner when the Congress government at the centre raised the spectre of Sikh separatism to exploit the insecurity of Hindu voters. Concerned with their declining popularity, lack of solidarity in the rank and file of the party, and the machinations of the Congress to oust them from power, the Akali brought out the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1978. (G Singh, 1991: 258-67). This declaration addressed the economic concerns of the Punjab along with the religious and ethnic demands of the Sikhs. The resolution was not secessionist in content but called for greater autonomy for Punjab and protection of the cultural and religious rights of the Sikhs.

The resolution also demanded that Punjab be given full jurisdiction over its administration and law, and that the power of the central government be restricted to the management of foreign policy, defence, currency, and general communications. In addition, two issues that came to the fore of the political agenda of the Akalis, were the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab in lieu of the two Hindi speaking villages of Abohar and Fazilka in Punjab to Haryana, and the re-distribution of river waters that would favour Punjab. The Chandigarh issue had long been a bone of contention between the federal government and the states of Punjab and Haryana. Not willing to forego the Hindu votes from the state of Haryana, Prime minister, Indira Gandhi declared that Chandigarh would go to

Punjab provided Haryana was suitably compensated and got its share of Hindi-speaking areas in Punjab. (White Paper on the Punjab Agitation, 1984:15). But this was complicated because Abohar and Fazilka were situated in the heartland of Punjab and giving them to Haryana entailed the construction of a corridor between the two states. The inability to reach an acceptable solution resulted in Chandigarh remaining as the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana, thereby exacerbating resentment among Sikhs in Punjab.

Similarly, the Sikhs' long-held grievance against the federal government had been that the water from the three rivers, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej flowed through Punjab but an elaborate canal system diverted water to irrigate drier areas of other states like Haryana and Rajasthan. In the wake of the *Punjab Reorganisation Act* of 1966, the central government announced that Punjab would get only 23 per cent of the water from its rivers while the rest would go to Rajasthan and Haryana states. Even though their share went up subsequently from 23 to 24 per cent, the Akalis felt that this was insufficient. The matter was referred to a tribunal for a final decision which never came, leaving Sikhs in a state of dissatisfaction over an issue which was seen as critical to agricultural growth and development in the state.

Economic Dimensions. The political factors, as discussed above, laid the basis for the crystallisation of Sikh identity but the economic factors also added to a deepening sense of alienation and growth of separatist sentiments among the Sikhs. Punjab is the fourth smallest state in India and accounts for nearly 2.5 per cent of its population. It is, however, one of India's most prosperous states. For instance, in 1985-86, per capita income in the state was Rs. 1,600 compared to an all-India average of Rs. 779 at 1970-71 prices. (Gill, 1988: 437) Similarly, although 72 per cent of its people lived in rural areas, Punjab's percentage of rural people living below the poverty line was the lowest among all Indian states and it had the highest average life expectancy. From the mid 1960s onwards following the Green Revolution, Punjab made spectacular strides in terms of agricultural productivity and emerged as the bread basket of India, producing one-fourth of the total wheat in the country, apart from being a major producer of cereals such as rice, maize, millets, and cash crops such as cotton, sugarcane and groundnuts.

However, Punjab's relative wealth and prosperity could not contain the popular disaffection against the centre for a number of reasons. The gains from the Green Revolution were distributed unequally among the various sections of society and the different regions in Punjab. This led to the growing pauperisation of marginal and poor peasants, who could neither reap the benefits of the land nor find employment in the industrial sector (G. Singh, 1984: 42-43). The Green Revolution was successful

initially because the government had provided subsidies and support prices to help the farmers. However, this could not continue indefinitely and with the rising cost of fertilisers and pesticides, small farmers were the worst hit, accumulating huge losses and debts. Even big landlords who could avail themselves of credit facilities at cheap rates, began to feel the pinch with the increase in the prices of inputs, and shortages of electricity and water. Also, while increase in productivity was the main objective of the Green Revolution, productivity could not be sustained for long because the new varieties had generated a new ecological vulnerability by reducing genetic diversity and affecting soil and water systems.

Ironically, the rise of prosperity in Punjab was accompanied by growing unemployment. While agriculture witnessed considerable growth, the industrial infrastructure of the state remained relatively under-developed save for some small-scale industries such as woollen textiles and hosiery financed largely by the remittances of overseas Sikhs. Many Punjabi youths were forced to go elsewhere to seek employment and, in turn, Punjab attracted semi-skilled and unskilled labour from states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. All this led to growing resentment among many sections of society, fuelling wide discontent among the masses. The status conferred by the green revolution on Punjab, as the breadbasket of India became a cause for discontent, when the benefits started fading.

The situation was aggravated by perceived injustices in the distribution of wealth and opportunities. Sikh farmers and peasants felt that they were not getting their due and that much of the benefits from their efforts were flowing to other parts of the country. The mismanagement of the wealth generated from the Green Revolution as well as the failure to develop other industries to absorb educated Sikh youth added fuel to the fire. It is important to note, however, that the economic factors worked only as an add-on to growing political discontent (Gupta, 1996:70). In other words, even though economic grievances were emphasised time and again to point to discrimination at the hands of the centre, they only gained credence once the political situation had deteriorated and the secessionist demand had become more viable. This explains why the tapering off of the green revolution in the mid 1970s was not followed by militancy or demands for separatism, which became a feature of Punjab's politics only at the beginning of the 1980s.

Growth of Religious identity. The economic and political crisis began to take religious overtones when the Akali Dal, the main party of the Jat Sikhs or the farmers, started couching its economic and social demands in the name of religion. This laid the basis for militancy in Punjab. The rise of Sikh fundamentalism can be traced back to 1978 when Bhindranwale

assumed the role of a religious preacher and leader in the Sikh community. As the central government failed to reach a political settlement with the Akali party on issues such as the capital territory of Punjab and the distribution of river waters, the stature of Bhindranwale went from strength to strength; Bhindranwale directed his anger at the central government and started advocating ways of propogating his brand of Sikhism which he claimed would purge religious malpractices that had crept into the order over the years. His messages were carried out through Gurudwaras, Sikh educational institutions and various religious congregations. He also organised killer squads in each village to eliminate the 'enemies' of the Sikh faith, thereby increasing his visibility and reach across the state.

Violence in Punjab escalated from 1982 to 1983 with attacks on policemen and political figures becoming the order of the day. Shaken by the scale of violence that had taken on a communal colour, Presidents rule was imposed in the state on 6 October 1983. Bhindranwale and his followers took refuge in the Golden Temple and the army was called upon to remove the militants in an operation mission codenamed 'Operation Blue Star' that lasted from 3-6 June 1984, and resulted in huge civilian and military casualties, as well as considerable damage to the temple.[2] The attack on the Golden Temple, considered the holiest Sikh shrine, was condemned by Sikhs all over the world and subsequently led to the assassination of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards on 31 October 1984. This in turn resulted in violent riots and attacks against Sikhs that some blamed on the Congress party (Joint Enquiry Report into the Causes and Impact of the Riots in Delhi, 1984:1). The attack on the Golden Temple and the subsequent riots in which Congress was complicit broke the straw on the camel's back and catalysed the movement into a militant and violent campaign for a separate state.

Dealing with the Punjab Crisis

Following the unprecedented level of discontent whipped up by the army action in the Golden Temple, there was a major rethinking in government circles. The Indian government set about pursing a combined strategy of conciliation and force to stem the tide of terrorist violence and gain the confidence of the people in the state.

The Rajeev Longowal Accord. Realising the failures of Mrs. Gandhi's autocratic style of functioning, the Congress government under the new prime minister, Rajeev Gandhi (1984-89), began on a conciliatory note, although it remained committed to pursuing a hard-line policy towards the militants. The assault on the Golden Temple was recognised as a major error on the part of the central government even by the Congress leaders. Having gained a massive electoral victory, Rajiv Gandhi was more

amenable to political concessions in Punjab including a settlement with the Akalis, which was crucial for any resolution that would prevent an escalation to the growing demands for a separate Sikh state. On their part, the Akalis realised that the continued radicalisation of Sikh politics would yield disastrous consequences for the Sikh community in India. Consequently, Sant Longowal, reinstated as head of the Akali Dal in 1985, pushed for a peace initiative, reiterating the importance of Hindu-Sikh amity, condemning acts of violence by Sikh extremists, and repeatedly declaring that the Akali Dal was not in favour of Khalistan. (Sharma, 1992: 105)

The Rajeev–Longowal accord signed on 24 July 1985 agreed to establish commissions and independent tribunals to resolve the Chandigarh issue and the river water disputes. Despite stiff resistance from extremist Akali factions, and leaders like the former Chief Minister, Prakash Singh Badal, and the leader of the SGPC, Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the accord constituted the first step towards restoring normalcy in the state. It also laid the basis for Akali victory in the coming elections. However, the fact that the demand for Chandigarh was still linked to Abohar and Fazilka, made the whole exercise futile. The centre appointed many commissions to examine the issue but could not work a satisfactory solution to suit both Haryana and Punjab. (Sharma, 1992: 117-23; Kohli, 1990: 370-71).

Within weeks of the accord, Longowal was killed by extremist elements who felt that he had sold out to the government. The successor government of Surjit Singh Barnala, which came to power in 1985, tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the centre and the extremist factions, and was ultimately dismissed on 11 May 1987.

According to Hamish Telford,

> The Punjab crisis should have ended at this point, but the failure of Rajeev Gandhi's government to implement the accord undermined the legitimacy of the Barnala ministry and directly contributed to the revival of the militant movement which was soon suffering from acute factionalism. (1992:985)

Political Impasse and use of force. The dismissal of the Barnala government was used by the hardliners to revive militancy in the state. In the event, both the Congress and the Akali parties accused each other of aiding and abetting terrorism. To make matters worse, the Congress government at the centre adopted short-sighted policies to cover its own tracks. The fact that the Barnala government was dismissed on the eve of the election to the Haryana assembly, and President's rule promulgated on 11 May 1987, was not lost on the Sikhs. The timing of the dismissal stirred doubts about the centre's intentions and its desire to placate the Hindus in Haryana. According to Ved Marwah, Additional Commissioner of Police, Delhi,

"it's not the acts of terrorism, but the panic response of the Government of India that achieved for the terrorists their aim of destabilising the political system." (1995:169).

Helpless against the growing violence and with no political solution in sight, the centre resorted to a series of military operations to curb militancy such as Operation Woodrose (1986-1987) and Operation Black Thunder (1988). However, force only aggravated the situation and guerrilla activities of the Sikh militants escalated after 1987.

The Centre could make no headway on the political front which alone could have brought about some improvement in the situation on the ground. Political initiatives under the V.P Singh government (December 1989 to November 1990) and the Chandrashekhar government (November 1990 to June 1991) also failed. The atmosphere grew even more vitiated after the general elections of 1989 that bought to power extremist leaders such as Simranjit Singh Mann, Attinder Pal Singh (leader of the Khalistan Liberation Organisation); and Bimal Khalsa (the widow of the assassin of Indira Gandhi) in Punjab. Emboldened by the election results, the militants issued orders demanding conformity with a new set of rules that forbade the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, and meat at weddings; banned skirts and insisted that school uniforms be in particular colours of religious significance; and stressed the promotion of the Punjabi language (Baweja, 1992: 31).

External Support. The movement for the formation of an independent Sikh state also found support in the Sikh diaspora. Overseas Sikhs deeply affected by the attack on the Golden temple in 1984, were instrumental in the formation of numerous Sikh organizations outside India that came to be actively involved in collecting funds and organising training camps for the militants. Extremist organisations such as the National Council of Khalistan, Babbar Khalsa International and Dal Khalsa flourished in different parts of the world, particularly in the US, Canada, Italy, Denmark, Holland, and the United Kingdom.

These organisations found the support of extremist leaders, such as the late Ganga Singh Dhillon, a US national who headed the Nankana Sahib Foundation and declared the Sikhs to be a separate nation; and the late Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan, a former medical practitioner, who put forth the demand for an independent Khalistan for the first time in 1971. To be carved out of the state of Punjab and Sikh dominated areas of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan, Chauhan had grand visions of Khalistan as a state with its own currency, flag, passport, and stamps. (Nayar and Singh, 1984:145). In addition to the Sikh diaspora, Pakistan was also a crucial external player in the Khalistan crisis. The Indian government time and again pointed to the involvement of "a foreign hand", a veiled reference to Pakistan in abetting the movement. The White Paper on the

Punjab Agitation prepared by the government of India had stated as early as 1984 that the militants were able to obtain sophisticated arms through sources outside the country and by developing clandestine links with sources within the country. It was suspected that militant organisations such as Khalistan Commando Force (KCF); Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF); and Khalistan Liberation Organisation (KLO) worked with each other and had strong links with Pakistan.

The government believed that there were large illegal flows of arms into India from across the border and that the terrorists were receiving different types of active support from certain foreign forces, but could not divulge more information for the sake of public interest (White Paper on the Punjab Agitation, 1984: 57). Though not much information is available on the logistics and arms provided to the insurgents, recovery of Chinese-made AKMs (popularly listed as AK-47 assault rifles) and RPGs pointed to Pakistan's involvement. India claimed that Pakistan provided Sikh secessionists with sanctuary, arms, money, training and moral support, and encouraged their demand for a separate homeland. The accusations against Pakistan began to increase in 1986-87 when the Government of India presented its case, based largely on circumstantial evidence, including broadcasts of the Pakistani media, interrogation reports, reports of trans-border encounters, and phone calls (Cronin, 1984: CRS-27). Armed intrusions across the Pakistani border, and interrogation of terrorists who were apprehended by Indian security forces, also revealed the existence of many militant training camps in such places as Sialkot, Gujranwala, Lahore, Kasur, Sargodha, Abbotaabad, Murree and Faisalabad.

Recruitment to terrorist ranks went up appreciably and the militants begun to exercise a greater role in the separatist agenda. To make matters worse, the Akali parties boycotted the elections and joined hands with militant organisations under a newly formed Shrimoni Panthic Action Committee comprising Kartar Singh Narang of the Babbar Akali Dal, Prakash Singh Badal, Baba Joginder Singh, father of Bhindranwale, and Manjit Singh of the All India Sikh Student Federation (AISSF). With the Akalis under their wing, the militants now launched an offensive against the Congress government. They initiated a campaign of boycott and coercion to disrupt the functioning of the government.

Back to normalcy: Cooperation between police and the army. Notwithstanding this, the centre persevered in its efforts to bring back normalcy in the state through political processes. The Congress party's election victory in 1992 marked a watershed in improving the situation in Punjab. In the elections, that had been boycotted by most parties in Punjab because it had been postponed for a year, Congress secured a three-fourths majority with just 9 per cent of the votes. With this victory, it set

about the task of containing militancy in a very determined manner employing the help of the police, army, and para-military forces.

The strategies of K.P.S. Gill, the police commissioner, known for his aggressive tactics, and a "bullet for a bullet" approach, boosted the morale of the police force (Interview with KPS Gill, 28th May 1998). The stern measures employed by Gill were supported by the army, which provided invaluable help to the Punjab police under Operation Rakshak II to assist in anti-terrorist operations and create conditions for a free and fair election. While Gill's efforts sparked complaints of brutal excesses and tortures, militancy was effectively eliminated from Punjab by the end of 1992. The state had gained a decisive advantage over them through the intervention of the army and the police striking at the root of militancy. The major breakthrough came with the elimination of the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF) chief, Gurjant Singh Budhsinghwala, Sukhdev Singh Dasuwal, the legendary chief of the Babbar Khalsa, and Talwinder Singh Parmar, of the Babbar Khalsa International, who was behind the fund-raising operations of the Babbar Khalsa International and had links with the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). The heavy hand used to curb militancy, and a growing rejection of violence amongst the people of the state marked the virtual end of the Khalistan movement.

While the measures taken from 1992 were critical in bringing to an end the demands for a separate state, it should be noted that the creation and sustenance of Khalistan as a viable independent state was a doubtful proposition to begin with. First, India was never going to accept an independent Khalistan, and resistance would have been futile simply because of the sheer size and might of India. Moreover, India's strategic interest in Khalistan was immense as any secessionist movement would have made India's frontiers vulnerable to outside powers and compromised the integrity and security of the country.

Second, even if Khalistan had been created, the economic and strategic challenges would have been insurmountable. Given its land-locked status, Khalistan would have been totally dependent on other powers, which would have severely compromised its capacity to trade and move goods and people independently. It could hardly have survived on agriculture, agro-industries, small-scale industries, foreign exchange remittances from emigrants, and skilled manpower as was envisaged by Jagjit Singh Chauhan (Masod and Stockdale, 1988: 141-42). More importantly, the creation of Khalistan on the basis of a Sikh identity was complicated by the fact that Sikhs and Hindus shared many traditions in terms of language and cultural practices (Kumar, 1995: 55-58). Therefore, the very conception of Khalistan was problematic, as it failed to recognise the interconnectedness of the Sikh and Hindu communities (Joshi, 1993: 18). Much of the strongest support for Khalistan came from its expatriate

communities with individuals like Chauhan and Ganga Singh Dhillon taking the lead, and Khalistan essentially remained a vision nurtured with a passion by Sikhs who lived overseas. (Jeffrey, 1994: 211).

Why did the movement fail?. As argued earlier, it was the firm handling of the Centre, underlined by a mix of force and conciliation that had a major bearing on the direction and scope of the movement. There were several factors that contributed to the quelling of militancy in Punjab. The centre made repeated efforts to explore a number of options to work for a negotiated settlement of Punjab. The Rajiv-Longowal accord, coming as it did in the aftermath of the desecration of the Golden Temple was one such important step. However, the death of the moderate leader Longowal, and the difficulties associated with the implementation of the accord, made force a more effective alternative thereafter. Some points deserve mention in this regard. First, the effective co-ordination of the police and army operations was a major factor in quelling militancy in the state. The combined might of the state proved too strong for the Khalistan movement. The militants were hardly a match for the Indian state which had vastly superior forces numerically and in terms of resources. Second, the atrocities committed by the militants in terms of murder, rape, and extortion had alienated many of the ordinary people who, after a while, were not prepared to tolerate such actions in the name of Khalistan, especially when the terrorists began to target civilians regardless of their faith or denomination. The movement suffered a further setback when it was seen as being used by unscrupulous individuals and criminal elements who were interested mainly in personal profit (G. Singh, 1996: 63-74).

Third, Congress came into power at the Centre in 1992 and this played a vital role in transforming the situation in Punjab. The Congress government was committed to wiping out militancy from the state. The fact that Punjab was also controlled by Congress made things easier as the same party was in charge both at the Centre and the State. This facilitated better communication and cooperation between the state officials and the Central bureaucracy. (Joshi, 1993:19). Finally, support from Pakistan began to wane costing the movement its external support.

Some Conclusions

To sum up, the Punjab crisis was largely about the Sikhs' quest for more regional autonomy and identity. Political dithering and non-resolution of water and boundary disputes issues, compounded by the centralising policies of the Congress government, gradually led to widespread alienation among the Sikhs. Growing communal unrest and the upsurge of ethnic sentiments strengthened the claim for a distinct identity, with its extreme manifestation being the demand for Khalistan that tapped into

the reservoir of ethnic mobilisation and plunged the state into violence for more than a decade.

The Khalistan movement endured during the 1980s for three important reasons. First, the centralising policies of the state had already sown the seeds of discontent among the Sikhs that led to a deep sense of alienation among the Sikhs. The support for the cause of Khalistan by the Sikh people, outraged by the attack on the Golden Temple in June 1984 and the massacres of the Sikhs that followed the assassination of Mrs Gandhi later that year, was almost inevitable in the given circumstances. Second, the movement had a strong base from a developed organisational infrastructure which comprised *inter alia* several militant outfits such as the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF), Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF), and Khalistan Liberation Organisation (KLO). Third, external support from the Sikh diaspora in the US and UK, as well as from Pakistan, which was allegedly providing Sikh secessionists with sanctuary, arms, money, and training, helped to sustain the movement for sometime.

However, once the state started deploying, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the army, the federal police, and the paramilitary forces, through a series of well-planned operations to overcome the militants, the movement came under relentless pressure. The State also gradually gained the confidence of the people through sustained political negotiations and conciliatory policies. The combination of force and conciliation gradually put in place new political alignments in the state paving the way for normalcy.

Finally, the lack of unequivocal, external support for an independent Khalistan was a major setback to the movement's plans. In particular, Pakistani support, under increasing pressure from the West, declined considerably making it harder for the movement to stay alive. Even if external support was available, it could do little in the face of the virtual annihilation of the leadership and the complete control exercised by the federal government. The militant organizations on their part lost the support of the people once their membership had begun to attract lumpen elements that joined the movements for the lure of money rather than the long cherished cause of a separate homeland for the Sikhs and indulged in wanton rape and killings in the rural areas. Incarceration and the killing of prominent militant leaders further weakened the organisational structure of the movement and made it susceptible to suppression by the federal agencies. By 1991, the entire movement had begun to lose direction. It was the combination of all these factors singly and collectively that irretrievably weakened the militant forces and led to the ultimate demise of the separatist movement in Punjab.

Notes

1. In India's hierarchical caste system, the lowest position was occupied by people referred to as untouchables, and they were treated as outcasts and discriminated against socially, economically and politically. To redress this injustice, the Art 341 of the Indian Constitution provides that certain castes, races or tribes may be deemed as scheduled castes for special protection and privileges.
2. The actual figures are hard to determine with any certainty, with estimates varying from the official numbers of around 500 to the upper end of up to 5000 (Jeffrey: 1994: 181; Deol: 2000: 107).

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