

Religion and Conflict in India: A Sikh Perspective

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ABSTRACT *The author was caught up in the violence against Sikhs following Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984. She places this in historical and religious context, describing the desire for an independent Sikh state, the impact of partition, the role of Sikhs in independent India from 1947 to the present, the appointment of the first Sikh prime minister, the rise and decline of Sikh fundamentalism and militancy, the continuing debates over Sikh identity and the 'true spirit of Sikhism'.*

KEY WORDS: India, Sikhism, Khalistan, Operation Bluestar, Golden Temple, religious fundamentalism

1 November 1984: An Eyewitness Account

There was a glint of madness in their eyes and murder etched across their faces. Ominous shouts and cries of “*Koi Sardar hai? Goli se maar dalenge*” (Is there any Sikh? We will shoot him) followed. We were all shocked into a state of stunned numbness. I was a journalist working with a leading magazine, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. A Sikh myself, I was travelling with a group of 20 Sikh friends and family members to Delhi for a wedding. When we boarded the train from Calcutta at 10 a.m. on 31 October 1984 we had never imagined that death and destruction were in store for us. It was at 12.30 p.m. that we first heard that Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi had been shot by her bodyguards and was in hospital. Our instant reaction was one of disbelief. The confirmed news of Mrs Gandhi's assassination reached us over the radio at about 6.30 p.m. And it was only then that we learnt that the two assailants were Sikhs. Every passenger, irrespective of his or her religion, was in a state of shocked silence. But not one anticipated the disaster that awaited us at Ghaziabad. The train reached Ghaziabad (two hours from Delhi) at 11 a.m. the next day. That was the beginning of two harrowing hours for us, when we were suspended between life and death. A bloodthirsty mob, almost like a pack of hungry wolves hunting for prey, went from coach to coach in search of Sikhs. In a frenzy of madness the mob, armed with iron rods and knives, brutally dragged out Sikhs, burnt their turbans, hacked them to death and threw them across the tracks. Even

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the old and feeble were not spared. However, the mob, devoid of rationality, declared that women would be spared. But in what sense were they spared? After all, what could be more torturous for women than seeing male members of their family hacked to death in front of their eyes?

The only Sikhs who were spared were the six with us. And all because of the concern and cooperation of the passengers in our coach. Before the train even halted at Ghaziabad, the hysterical mob had caught a glimpse of the six Sikh men with us. A fusillade of stones followed and the glass windows were smashed to bits. Shutters were hastily put down for protection. The police, we were told, could not control the wild mob and so they just turned their backs and walked away. We had a ladies' compartment and the other passengers in our coach, realizing there was more trouble ahead, suggested that the Sikh men in our group occupy it. At first, they were reluctant but we literally forced them to stay inside. It was ironic. Sikhs, who were historically known for their valour, now had to protect themselves by hiding in a ladies' compartment. Two ladies were sent into the ladies' compartment so they could answer if any questions were asked. The main doors of the coach were locked from inside and we waited with bated breath. The mob was not to be deterred. Then it began.

They pounded on the heavy metal door for over 15 minutes. The incessant pounding was accompanied by threats to set the train on fire. One non-Sikh passenger shifted uncomfortably in his seat and felt that all of them would lose their lives, but he was sternly reprimanded by the others who declared that under no circumstances would the door be opened. But the mob finally broke upon the door. Their violent mutilation of the train had only whetted their appetite for more destruction. The mob stormed into our coach and walked past the ladies' compartment. But before we could even sigh with relief, they turned around and demanded that the door of the ladies' compartment be opened, so that they could check it. By now, our nerves had reached breaking point. We tried to convince them but the mob was adamant and began to bang on the door. They seemed to grow suspicious at the sight of a number of women outside the ladies' compartment and pointing towards us asked the other passengers, "Are these women travelling alone?" "No they are with us", came the quick reply. The other passengers couldn't have been more cooperative. The petrified screams of the two ladies from inside, our pleas and the persuasion of the other passengers finally seemed to convince the mob that there were no Sikhs inside. The mob retreated.

We hoped that conditions in Delhi would be better. But no security arrangements had been made at the station. As a result there were more than 500 Sikh men stranded in the waiting room, while the women left the station to make arrangements for them. I left the station at 3 p.m. with the women in our group, while the Sikh men with us—who were the only ones on the train to survive the disaster—waited at the station. They removed dead bodies from the train and assisted the injured. By 8 p.m. we had been successful in making arrangements for them to be taken out of the station. In a state of stupefied silence, I saw bodies of Sikhs, with rivulets of blood streaming down their faces, being unloaded from the train in which I had travelled. Brutally battered bodies of Sikhs reached Delhi from other incoming trains as well. Innocent people who had done nothing wrong except for being Sikhs and travelling towards Delhi on that fateful day. That was 21 years ago.

Vengeance

In the aftermath of Mrs Gandhi's assassination there was mayhem; Sikh homes were systematically singled out for brutal destruction. Sikhs were hounded, tyres were put around their neck, petrol doused on their faces and they were set ablaze. More than 3000 were either burnt or butchered in Delhi itself. Two hundred *gurdwaras* (Sikh places of worship) were burnt in Delhi, hundreds of shops looted. A baffled helpless community was embittered: "And this is the nation we made so many sacrifices for! Why?" The situation worsened when Rajiv Gandhi was quoted as saying, "When a big tree falls, the ground beneath is sure to rumble". This gave those who were wreaking havoc a boost. For Sikhs the trauma of 1947 was being replayed. Partition had robbed them of everything. They had worked tirelessly to rebuild their lives and an amalgamation of *karam* (hard work) and *nadar* (blessings) had helped the community to jump back economically. The community had displayed strength and resilience. Subsequent events proved Sikhs to be loyal, compassionate and courageous. They did not carry a grudge too far. Hindus and Sikhs had been like a nail to a finger. Language, customs, eating habits were similar. They had coexisted peacefully. Suddenly Sikhs felt they had become strangers in their own land. The entire community, with its traditions of honour and chivalry, paid the price for the actions of a few on its extreme fringes.

Mrs Gandhi's assailants were avenging Operation Bluestar. In June 1984 Mrs Gandhi wanted to flush out terrorists, led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who were seeking refuge in the precincts of the Golden Temple. For most Sikhs the assault on the Golden Temple was unacceptable. After all, they reasoned, wasn't the military required to combat foreign attacks? Paramilitary forces were sufficient to guard internal security. They were not appeased by the words of General Brar, who led the Operation at 4 a.m. on 4 June 1984: "We went to the holy precincts with prayers on our lips." Sikhs were observing the martyrdom of their fifth Guru Arjun Dev (1563–1606), the builder of the Golden Temple, who fought against the tyranny of the Mughals. Historically Sikh gurus had sacrificed their lives for the country. The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, had raised his voice to protest against Babur's atrocities against the Hindus in the 16th century. Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life for Kashmiri pundits (a community, members of the Brahmin caste of Hindus who were/are learned in the religious scriptures). In proportion to their numbers, a mere 50 million in India and abroad, Sikhs have made huge sacrifices for India and have firm roots there.

Operation Bluestar went against all they had stood for. The Golden Temple was their most sacred shrine. Says Saran Singh, a retired bureaucrat and a distinguished member of the community, "It was sacrilege to send troops inside, open fire and in the process kill innocent devotees gathered to observe the martyrdom".¹ The community felt that a political issue needed a political solution, not military action. Sikh youths taunted the elders: "What an award for all your sacrifices!" The government of India had its own justification. In its White paper it stated:

The essence of the problem in Punjab was not the demands put forward by the Akali Dal but the maturing of a secessionist and anti-national movement. The Akali Dal [a predominantly Sikh regional political party] leadership allowed the initiative and control over the agitation to pass out of

their hands to the secessionists and terrorists. The terrorists escalated their violence. With each passing day the situation worsened. The subversive activists of groups inside the Golden Temple had assumed menacing proportions in the context of India's security. The influence of external forces, with deep rooted interest in the disintegration of India was becoming evident. The government was convinced that this challenge to the security, unity and integrity of the country could not be met by the normal law and order agencies at the disposal of the state. It was in these circumstances that the army was called in.²

From June to September 1984 most members of the Sikh community nursed a festering wound. It was this wound that affected the young men who were Mrs Gandhi's security guards and who murdered her.

Khalistan

It was against this background that some political elements raised their hopes of Khalistan or Sikhistan—a cry for a separate country, spearheaded by self-proclaimed leaders of the community. An attempt was being made to create a sense of alienation. For a decade after Mrs Gandhi's assassination Sikh youths were killed in Punjab and Rajasthan on charges of terrorism. The demand for a Sikhistan or Khalistan was not new. From the late 19th century large settlements of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were established in West Punjab. These had tremendous social impact. The Arya Samaj was among the first of the reform movements within Hinduism to seek to woo back Sikhs to its fold. This led to a reaction from the Sikhs, and the Singh Sabha Movement (1880s), which wanted an independent Sikh identity to be preserved, was launched. Strangely the Sikh *gurudwaras* were managed by Hindu priests—an Akali movement was initiated to take back control and the Singh Sabha's project in a manner of speaking merged into the Akali effort. Finally in 1925 the Gurudwara Act was passed, recognizing the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) as the legal authority to manage and control Sikh *gurudwaras* and the Akali Dal as the political wing of the SGPC.

Religion and Politics

According to a senior journalist, B. S. Saral, where the Sikh community is concerned religion and politics go together.³ In fact Guru Gobind, the tenth guru, felt that it was not possible to protect the faith without control of the political process. The basic idea is that an individual who is truly religious, who is dedicated to the Almighty, who does fear God, will always be conscious of his actions and the result of those actions. Such a person will not do anything wrong. If such a person comes to power, he will not do any injustice to his subordinates or his people. If politics is checked by religion, then politics will move in a better way to serve humanity.

The demand for Sikhistan was raised in 1944 during the Gandhi–Jinnah talks. On 20 August 1944, at a meeting in Amritsar, it was Master Tara Singh, the most powerful *Akali* politician during the Partition period, who asked for an independent country for Sikhs. The *Akali Dal* favoured an undivided India with constitutional guarantees and electoral weightage for the Sikhs, but if Pakistan was conceded then

it demanded an independent Sikh state. However, the arguments for Sikhistan were undermined by the absence of any contiguous area where the Sikhs formed a distinct majority. In 1947 Sikhs comprised 1% of the population of India and 14% of undivided Punjab. There was no Sikh majority area in Punjab. Partition changed Punjab's ethnic mix, with Muslims now comprising just 2% of the population in Indian Punjab, whereas the Sikhs now comprised 35%—up from 15%. In 1951 the first Hindu Sikh riots occurred in Punjab over a census study on whether an individual's mother tongue was Hindi or Punjabi. A separate Punjabi *Subba* (State) was sought.

It was only on 10 March 1966 that Mrs Gandhi granted the Akalis a state with Punjabi as the state language, after they had proved their loyalty during the 1965 war with Pakistan. Punjab's social structure has always been uncondusive to terrorism. Sikhs have always been spread all over the country, even in the far flung northeastern states. Well established and enterprising, they have pursued their businesses with zeal. Sikhs and Hindus have been close. The Sikh was the militant, protective arm of the Hindus. Traditionally, each Hindu family in Punjab would make one of their sons a Sikh. It is felt by some that the Khalistan issue was raised by Akalis when they were not in power in a bid to secure a mass base. When they became a ruling party, better sense prevailed. The majority of the Sikh community finds little logic in the demand for Khalistan, seeing it as instigated by interested political groups and neighbouring countries.

The origins of the movement in recent times came with the passing of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution by the Akalis on 16 October 1973. The major demands were seemingly innocuous:

1. limit the power of the central/federal government to defence, foreign affairs, currency and communications;
2. integrate Punjabi speaking areas into Punjab;
3. provide central assistance for power generation projects;
4. institute agricultural reform, particularly in financing of farmers;
5. provide a solution to water sharing with neighbouring states.

Over a period of time the non-fulfilment of these demands became the cornerstone on which the secessionists attempted to capture popular sentiment.

Present-day Divided Politics

It suits groups with a vested interest to drive a wedge. Journalist and political observer, Inder Jit, says:

There is no sense of alienation. It is a case of rank opportunism. These feelings are motivated by those playing political games. This is a trumped up sense of alienation with one motive—to wrest political power.⁴

There were those who did not hesitate to add fuel to the fire. Will we get security in a Hindu raj? Don't we inspire jealousy? After all, we are a minuscule community, just 2 % of the population, yet we are comparatively more prosperous: no beggars, the

best temples, charity, the famed *langar* (free meal in the community kitchen in all *gurudwaras*). The Indian army had fought three wars and Sikhs had displayed amazing valour and done the country proud. Sikh intellectuals began introspecting on what had gone wrong. Their community had lost sons and fathers fighting wars for the nation. Punjab grew the most food. It fed the entire country. Ever so gradually a feeling of hurt began to grow. First Punjab had been broken up into West and East (which went to Pakistan). Then again the West was divided into the states of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Land holdings shrank with time, as families grew larger and land prices escalated. If a Sikh had three sons, traditionally one would go to the army, one would head abroad, where a relative had already gone, to make money and the third would be involved in agriculture. Daughters received an equal share of the family land. Often, there was litigation. These factors prompted sons to sell their share of the land to the builders' lobby. Jaspal Singh, a businessman and member of United Sikhs, a global organization, says:

There was liquid cash with the youth and those working against the state did what Japan did to China. As Pearl S. Buck said, Japan could not defeat China but made China an opium den. Suddenly there was an introduction of drugs and liquor into Punjab. Labour from Bihar poured into the state.

Neighbouring countries with agendas of their own, such as Pakistan, seized the opportunity. Youths were cajoled into crossing the border for training. The idea was to foment trouble and create instability. Young men were given AK47s and taught how to rob a bank. Sikh leaders and ordinary residents of Punjab were disturbed by this trend. Things worsened as, despite growing a bulk of the food crops for the entire country, Punjab found itself strapped for cash. Since the state was relatively prosperous, federal laws ensured that a substantial part of the taxes collected in the state accrued to the centre, causing even more resentment. The central government's policies alienated youth and embittered a patriotic community. In addition, the Sikhs in the diaspora, particularly those spread over Western Europe and North America, seemed to feel a need to reiterate their identity and began to fund the separatist movement.

At present Punjab is one of the most peaceful states in India. There is still unemployment but the percentage of those educated has gone up. There have been substantial changes—agriculture has been mechanized. The new generation of inheritors of agricultural land holdings is diversifying—they are not using land only to grow crops but are opening spas and McDonald's outlets as well—testimony to the changing Punjab. Less well-to-do youth are migrating to Canada and the USA. In search of better economic prospects both skilled and unskilled labour is leaving in droves. Migrants go to the extent of selling their land to raise money as agents charge around £10 000 to help them leave Indian shores, very often illegally. This exodus is having its repercussions; the demography of Punjab is changing. Seizing the opportunity for any kind of work, impoverished labour is migrating from Bihar. Over the years, Biharis have even begun making forays into politics. They are able to vote in Punjab and their votes can make a crucial difference to the outcome.

Senior Sikh residents of Punjab who suffered the loss of loved ones and property 21 years ago do feel a sense of pain but they still feel part of the Indian nation.

The bitterness of this scarred community would have reduced if those guilty of instigating the 1984 riots had been punished. Five times more people were killed than in the Gujarat carnage in 2002. Slack leadership was blamed for not taking the guilty to task. Nine commissions or panels have been instituted by the government to enquire into the 1984 riots, starting with the Marwah Commission in November 1984 itself, but all of them have either been ineffectual, wound up or had their findings not acted upon. An independent citizens' group led by Dr Rajni Kothari and retired judge V. N. Tarakunde published a detailed report, *Who are the Guilty?*, which squarely blamed the government and several leading lights of the then ruling party for inaction and complicity—but no action was forthcoming. It took 21 years for the riot victims to get the first semblance of justice. The 339-page Justice G. T. Nanavati inquiry report (instituted by the previous government in May 2000) was submitted to the present Congress-led government on 9 February 2005 but was not placed before the Indian parliament until 8 August. The government sought to gloss over the findings in its *Action Taken Report*, giving a clean chit to the indicted Congress leaders. There was a huge outcry the following day, with public protests and rallies. The opposition parties, TV networks and newspapers condemned the government, forcing it to act. Two of the accused, including a central minister, were forced to resign. The prime minister, himself a Sikh, apologized for the 1984 riots and made a statement in parliament on 11 August:

On behalf of our government, on behalf of the entire people of this country, I bow my head in shame that such a thing took place... I have no hesitation in apologizing to the Sikh community. I apologize not only to the Sikh community but to the whole Indian nation because what took place in 1984 is the negation of the concept of nationhood enshrined in our Constitution. Though we cannot rewrite the past we should have the ability to write a better future for all of us.⁵

For the younger generation all this is history. The death toll in Punjab between 1984 and 1994 was around 25 000. The return of peace and the political process commenced, in a sense, with the signing of an accord on 24 July 1985 between the then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and the Sikh leader, Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal. This was followed by elections to the Punjab assembly. It culminated in May 1996 when the Akalis supported the right-wing Hindu nationalist party the Bharatiya Janata Party in forming a central government. Simultaneously the border with Pakistan was barricaded, making infiltration and cross-border terrorism difficult. The state police machinery came down heavily on the militants, often ignoring human rights, in their bid to curb terrorism.

Today, the clock has turned full circle. For the first time ever, India has a Sikh prime minister appointed by the Congress. It also has a Sikh army chief and Sikhs in many important posts. The old glory is returning.

Fanaticism

Unfortunately, certain groups are not following the true spirit of Sikhism. Fundamentalism seems to rear its ugly head every now and then. Fanaticism ruins the essence of a religion. A few months ago a member of the SGPC wanted the word

'Temple' removed from the Golden Temple. The reason? It could be mistaken for a Hindu Temple. The SGPC's announcement, on 6 June 2005, the anniversary of Operation Bluestar, that it would like to build a memorial in the Golden Temple for those killed in the army action has given a fillip to dormant militant groups and fringe radical Sikh political groups.

The majority of Punjabi Sikhs are not attracted by extreme views. Indeed, one concern of senior members of the community is that, among the young, hair is being shorn and Sikh identity diminished without the traditional symbols. Says a clean-shaven Sikh:

I don't wear a turban but that does not mean that I am less of a Sikh. Nine of our ten Gurus did not wear long hair and the last one, Guru Gobind Singh, introduced the *Khalsa Panth* in his later years. As for objecting to the depiction of the community in films or theatre, fanatic members of the Sikh leadership raise irrelevant issues for their own vested interests.⁶

Such protests occurred in England over the play *Behzti* and in India very recently over the film *Jo Bole So Nihal*. A terrorist group, Babbar Khalsa International, which had been almost destroyed in 1992, organized bomb blasts in two cinema halls in New Delhi on 17 May 2005 where the film was being shown. One of its key planners, Jagtar Singh Hawara who was arrested in June, spilled the beans: these were attempts by foreign-based militants to revive terrorism in the state. Large sums of money and weapons were being trafficked into the state and high-profile people were on the hit list. He confessed to a network of human bombs, operatives and sympathizers being created in large parts of Punjab.⁷ The timing could not be worse for the present Chief Minister of Punjab, Mr Amarinder Singh, who is trying to attract investors into Punjab from other parts of India and abroad. But a composed Singh comments:

There is no question of revival of terrorism in Punjab. In the 80s people got carried away not knowing the repercussions. Those with vested interests took advantage of collective naiveté. But the suffering inflicted by terrorism has made people wiser. Now there is no possibility of even 1% support from the masses. The likes of Hawara were trying to resurface but our government reacted swiftly to negate any such possibility. The common man wants peace.

Without a doubt members of the Sikh community must collectively protest against the emergence of fundamentalism. Otherwise the image of the entire community will be tarnished.

Spirit of Sikhism

Guru Gobind Singh said that Hindu tradition lays more stress on *Dharma*, or righteous conduct, than on belief in God. It is *Dharma* which sustains life in society and not any particular belief or way of worship. This fact underlies his well known exhortation, "Let Khalsa Panth be victorious in the world. Let Hindu *Dharma* awake so that all falsehood and misconduct be on the run." The Chairman of the National Minorities Commission, Tarlochan Singh, points out:

In the last millennium there has been only one new religion and that is Sikhism. It is based on reason; there is no conflict with modern science. Also Sikhism is more liberal than other forms of belief. It does not believe in conversion and nor is there a critical view of other faiths.⁸

Indeed, Guru Nanak also said:

Anyone can be born anywhere and follow any form of worship. We don't find fault. We don't consider ourselves superior to Hindus or Muslims. They are equally good.⁹

Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh points out that the Guru Granth Sahib's central message is one of humanism and the universal brotherhood of man.

It is a source of inspiration for those who seek social justice, the equality of all people, the empowerment of women and of the under-privileged. It also teaches us to develop a concern for the environment, preaching the value of living in harmony with nature. It adopts a rational approach to life and a compassionate approach to the living. It is for these reasons that I believe the text has remained alive as a guide to all those who value these fundamental principles of humanism and human integrity. There can be no better way to honour this sacred text than to learn to live by its teachings, live in peace and harmony with one another and with nature.¹⁰

The Future

There are no signs of a conflagration in the foreseeable future. Sikh teachings are passed down to the younger generation. "*Nanak ardas chardi kala, tere bhaaney sarbat da bhala*" (The Guru Granth Sahib accepts all faiths). This generation wants to move away from fanatical elements. Young Sikhs are filled with the spirit of enterprise, more concerned with their own future and careers. There is no sense of alienation but a certain separateness. Sikhs see themselves as a separate community. With the passage of time, most wounds heal. In general, a sense of optimism prevails among Sikhs under most circumstances. There is an inherent resilience, an ability to accept. Three hundred years ago Guru Gobind Singh lost four sons in a period of four weeks—two in battle and two were walled up alive. Under such trying circumstances all he could do was echo the philosophy of the Sikh Gurus—"Tera keeya meetha lagey" (I accept this as your sweet will).¹¹ It is this spirit that survives even today.

Notes

1. Interview with author in Calcutta, 4 May 2005.
2. Government of India, White Paper, released 10 July 1984.
3. Interview with author in Calcutta, 10 May 2005.
4. Interview with author in New Delhi, 24 May 2005.

5. Parliamentary Records and widely quoted in the media.
6. Interview with Dr Darshan Singh, representative of *Punjabi Tribune*, 25 May 2005.
7. Recorded confession in police custody.
8. Interview with the author in New Delhi, 26 May 2005.
9. Attributed to Bhagat Kabir, quoted on p. 1349 of *Guru Granth Sahib* (a compendium of religious mystic and metaphysical poetry compiled in 1604 in Amritsar by the 5th Sikh Guru Arjun Dev).
10. Dr Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, in Amritsar on the 400th anniversary of the installation of the Granth Sahib at the Golden Temple, 1 September 2004.
11. Fifth Guru, Arjun Dev Ji, in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 349.

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