

## How did India's Punjab crisis arise and how has it been resolved?

The storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar by the Indian Army during Operation Bluestar has been described as “a disastrous political decision and a seriously bungled military operation”. Reportage in the Indian press tended to focus on the Sikh provocateur Bhindranwale, whose heavily-armed forces sought sanctuary in the temple. However, the blame for the crisis does not rest solely with Bhindranwale. This essay examines why Mrs. Gandhi felt it was necessary to order such an assault, and concludes that in addition to some long-term simmering tensions, the problem was, in part, of her own making, and that it has not really been resolved at all.

Increased communalisation in the Punjab was the background to the crisis, and helps to explain why the problem was so serious; the terrorists in the Golden Temple were part of a much wider cultural movement, and must be seen in this context. Communalisation happened partly as a result of long-term socio-economic factors. The Sikh youth in the countryside were already frustrated with the tapering-off of the Green Revolution, causing great pressure on the land, and moved into urban areas in order to find employment. Unlike in the colonial era, Sikhs were no longer privileged in finding employment in the Indian Army, so needed formal education to succeed in city-based businesses. Literacy rates are relatively high in Punjab, and there was frustration among Sikh youth that even with their education they had difficulties finding employment. An outlet for such frustration was the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) which pressed for more political power for Sikhs, and showed some sympathy to the idea of an independent Sikh state. During the Emergency many of its members were imprisoned, which initiated into the movement and politicised a whole generation of Sikh youths. Under the leadership of Bhai Amrik Singh, membership of this organisation increased from around ten thousand to well over one hundred thousand. There were also economic fault lines among the Sikhs themselves, caused partly by the extra benefit of the Green Revolution to larger landowners. The richer peasants traditionally supported the more moderate Akali Dal party, so militants like Bhindranwale were able to garner support among frustrated peasants as well as urban youth.

Brass argues that the communalisation of the Punjab was inevitable, as India ‘was not and could not be a nation-state’. It was in Brass’s view a multi-national state, a view which Indian policy-makers at the centre understood, in practice even if not in principle. There was a type of unofficial dual nationalism, whereby people could feel like a member of a Sikh, Tamil or Bengali nation at one level, and an Indian nation at another. A new minority consciousness emerged in

the few years preceding the Punjab crisis, suggesting that communalism is not always traceable to tradition, nor confined to communal parties. Sikhism is a very young religion, with only a small gulf between the laity and the hierarchy, which allowed individual preachers to agitate by appealing to the people's economic and social interests. It was also a vehicle for the assertion of the affluence of the Sikh community. The greatest change in minority consciousness came in 1980, when the Akali Dal passed their Anandpur Sahab resolution. Disputes over Chandigarh, other territory and the sharing of river waters came to a head. It suggested that Chandigarh should be the capital of Punjab, territorial disputes should be investigated by a territorial tribunal, and river water disputes should be settled by the Supreme Court. Generally throughout India three phases in centre-state relations can be shown: the initial demand for unilingual states, nativist or 'sons of the soil' movements, and finally regional movements demanding more regional autonomy. The demands of the Akali Dal were mainly regional; since Sant Fateh Singh took over the SGPC their policies were articulated as being applicable to Punjabis, not just to Sikhs. However, with interference from the central government, this regional movement became ethnicised, with disastrous results.

The centralising tendencies of Mrs. Gandhi's Congress government were well known. Challenged electorally after 1965, Congress began to adopt a much more aggressive political style. In 1971 Mrs. Gandhi was responsible for the de-linking of parliamentary from legislative assembly elections, and a new method of selecting Chief Ministers was established, whereby the Prime Minister relied on the advice of her close personal advisers. Direct intervention came about first in 1970 when the BKD in Punjab failed to deliver three votes in the Rajya Sabha which were expected by Congress. In retaliation, Congress withdrew from the BKD government in Uttar Pradesh, bringing it down in the process. The fates of central and state governments had become interlinked. In order to maintain power in the centre, Congress felt obliged to centralise power, nationalise issues and intervene directly in state and even local politics. However, as state governments were increasingly packed with those loyal to Mrs. Gandhi, such interventions became misguided and misinformed.

The Anandpur Sahab resolution became more important after 1980, as Gupta states, because the Akali Dal were able to claim more 'source credibility'. This came about because of the gulf between the transparency of the Akalis' demands and the negative reaction of Congress. The resolution was labelled secessionist, the 1978 case on water disputes was withdrawn from the Supreme Court, and the demand for Chandigarh was made conditional on the near-impossible transfer of Abohar and Fazilka to Haryana. Such actions led the Akali Dal to talk in August 1982

of a *dharam yudh* or religious war. This was thought to be irrelevant at the time but was brought sharply back into focus by Operation Bluestar and the Sikh massacres on November 4<sup>th</sup> 1984.

The undercutting of moderate groups by Congress and the refusal to talk to Akali leaders gave the Akalis a dilemma, as Gupta states:

*“The moderates were thus shoe-horned into a dilemma by the force of their own latent potentialities. Each rebuff by the centre gave respectability, albeit in small doses, to refractory Sikhs, and any concession to these elements by the Akali Dal weakened Longowal’s public commitment to the integrity of India, to the Anandpur Sahab resolution and to communal amity”*

Tully and Jacob emphasise Mrs. Gandhi’s indecisiveness during the crisis, acting only when her back was against the wall. This would be uncharacteristic of her, but even if it is true, it does not explain the type of response, an Army assault rather than political accommodation with the Akali Dal. Congress had altered the political balance by ensuring that central power depended on both an ability to control the states and the ability to sway voters by creating a ‘wave’ on an emotive set of issues. Were Mrs. Gandhi to have come to an agreement with the Akali Dal, she might have lost power in Punjab, where the Akalis would claim the credit, and in Haryana, where the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab would be seen as a sign of weakness. Centralisation can in this way be seen as one of the primary causes of the crisis.

Factionalism in Congress also helps to explain some of the early origins of the crisis. Nehru had always taken a tough stance on communalism, casteism, linguism and provincialism, speaking the language instead of socialism, planning and industrialisation as the means of progress for all of India. His preferred style of Chief Minister in the states was a ‘boss’ who would deal firmly with regional issues. Mrs. Gandhi had a similar view on the unity of India but preferred sycophants to ‘bosses’ in the states. She preferred provincial instability, and weak Chief Ministers entirely dependent on her, in order to maintain central control and ensure the loyalty of all groups. These ministers of course led to instability. In Punjab, both Zail Singh and Darbara Singh were ineffective as Chief Ministers. Zail Singh supported programs favouring scheduled castes and backward classes, which antagonised many prosperous Jat Sikh farmers. After Zail Singh was promoted to home minister in the government of India, he used his position to undercut Darbara Singh. Bhindranwale was used to show that Darbara Singh could not govern Punjab effectively. Mrs. Gandhi’s relationship with Zail Singh meant that she allowed this to take place, asking him for advice in handling the crisis and failing to support Darbara Singh’s desire to root out the terrorists before they had claimed sanctuary in the Akal Takht and fortified the entire complex.

The radical Sikh preacher Bhindranwale has a controversial role in the crisis and in the terrorist actions of 1981-84. In the view put across in most scholarly writings, he is seen as a preacher picked up by Congress in order to divide the Akali Dal and ensure the persistence of Congress rule. He then developed his own line, methods and support, becoming an independent political force feared by Punjabi politicians, who were willing to take no actions he opposed and became incapable of participating effectively in a political process dominated by violence. A second view sees Bhindranwale as a preacher whose political activities were incidental thereto, and blames the violence primarily on other groups such as political extremists, sects and even the police; he was, according to this view, used as a scapegoat by Congress to deflect attention from their own role in the crisis.

There can be little doubt that the proselytising and revivalist Bhindranwale was important to Sikh self-perception as a community; he put his Sikh faith squarely in opposition with Marxist or secular ideology. It was difficult for the Akali Dal to criticise someone expressing what were widely seen as legitimate Sikh demands. Revivalist preachers were hardly a new phenomenon in the Punjab, but he was able to use much more effective methods of communication than ever before, such as distribution of his taped messages, a tactic often used by Muslim preachers in Iran and elsewhere in the Arab world. The worst violence initially was directed against the Nirankaris, a Sikh-Hindu group seen as heretical by the dominant and orthodox Keshdhari group. Bhindranwale was not necessarily involved in the murders but expressed satisfaction with them. The instability is summed up well by Brass:

*“From April 13<sup>th</sup> 1978 onward, Punjab became the scene of warfare among heavily armed terrorist groups bent on exterminating each other for the glory and purity of the Sikh faith.”*

One of the greatest tragedies of the crisis was the support given to Bhindranwale by the Congress Party for their own political gain. Congress leaders supported him and his followers in the 1979 election to the SGPC, in response for which Bhindranwale supported Congress in the 1980 general election. It seems that for Congress the primary aim was political control, and settlement of the issues was secondary. However their goals were ultimately incompatible - Bhindranwale was for Sikh unity, while Congress was for Sikh division. Nevertheless, only when terrorists began killing Hindus did the strategy of Congress change, as they needed to portray themselves as the protectors of Hindu Punjabis. In Haryana, Congress organised mob violence against Sikhs in towns. As Brass says:

*“As in the past, the government of India responded to lawlessness and violence with violence and lawlessness”*

Bhindranwale was perhaps not such a central figure as the press made out, as the crisis was more about the symbols which he represented: Sikh values, Panthic unity and communal identity. Yet by supporting him Congress created the very conditions it hoped to prevent, that is the greatly increased solidarity of Jat Sikhs and a movement of the (scheduled-caste) Mazhabi Sikhs to the Akali Dal.

However, the Akali Dal cannot be seen as exempt from blame. As Kohli says, this was a tragedy with no visible heroes. Rivalry was rife between the various branches of Sikh government - the SGPC, Akali Dal politicians and the ministerial offices - in terms of their visions of the nation, social class, regional backing and personal competition for leadership. This meant that there was no strong moderate representative of the Sikhs to deal with Congress. The terms of the factional quarrel were changed by the actions of Congress and the rise of Bhindranwale, but had a single leader established complete dominance over the Akali Dal the crisis might have been averted. The Akali Dal, by abandoning its religious stance for a secular one, helped to create the 'space' in which Bhindranwale could put forth his vision of a new Sikh identity based on inner conviction.

The immediate resolution of the crisis was simple and brutal - an assault on the holiest site of Sikhism in which Bhindranwale and his followers, along with hundreds of Sikh pilgrims, were killed and the Akal Takht (the centre of the temple itself) was largely destroyed. Two days after the official end of Operation Bluestar, the Sikh library in the temple complex was set on fire, and hundreds of Sikhs were arrested and tortured in an atmosphere reminiscent of the anti-Naxalite operations the previous decade. The task of rebuilding the Akal Takht was given by the government to a member of the Buddha Dal, a renegade Sikh sect. The damage caused to Sikh pride by these events was enormous, and it was inevitable that the problem would not end there.

The death of Mrs. Gandhi brought some hope to Sikhs in Punjab, and the Akali Dal appeared to be in a stronger position than before. Longowal, their leader, publicly distanced himself from the faction led by Bhindranwale's father, and the Rajiv-Longowal accord suggested that mutual cooperation would be the way forward. Rajiv was in a more secure position than his mother had been, and his concessions to the Akalis looked like magnanimity rather than an admission of defeat. Akali leaders and some other Sikhs were released from prison, an enquiry into the killings in Delhi was ordered, and the ban on the AISSF was lifted. Support for Sikh militants declined and the Akali Dal won the 1985 election.

However, Rajiv (who himself came to power on a wave of Hindu nationalist sentiment) failed to address the issue of the Sikhs' hurt pride, and the peace could not be sustained. An extremely hectic schedule at the beginning of his term, combined with the highly personalised decision-

making system instituted by his mother, meant that Rajiv failed to implement the accord between Congress and the Akali Dal. This paved the way for militants to get the upper hand again. Factionalism among the Akalis continued, and there was a climbing spiral of repression and terrorism which the police were unable to effectively contain. During 1986 the massive increase in terrorist killings (after a fall in 1985) was blamed on a 'soft' government. Terrorism was described as a 'police problem' by Rajiv, not a political one.

The Mishroi report into the Delhi killings failed to implicate any senior Congress party officials in the killings of Sikhs, and this stirred up more tension. Militants charged that the Akali Dal government in Punjab were acting as stooges of New Delhi for selfish reasons of power. In May 1987 a familiar situation returned as Rajiv re-imposed Presidential Rule on Punjab. Between 1982 and 1992 nearly 20 000 people were killed in incidents relating to the Punjab crisis. The situation in Punjab highlights the major structural problem produced by the conflict between a centralising government and the long-term tendency in India towards pluralism and regionalism.

It might be assumed from this that the problem in Punjab is intractable. It has been suggested that Congress, the Akali Dal and the terrorists were all playing a zero-sum game, as Punjab's gain would have been Haryana's or Rajasthan's loss. However, this position cannot be sustained, as trade-offs are available which do not present such a problem, such as central funds for a new capital in Haryana, canals built from the disputed rivers and consistent principles applied to disputed territory. It seems more reasonable to suggest that the main cause of the crisis was the failure of either Congress or the moderate Akali leaders to adopt a solution which did not present them with political advantage or which threatened political damage, and that its eventual solution lies in genuine 'statesmanship' where the good of the region and the nation is placed above the interest of the party and the politician.