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Bhindranwale: How One Controversial Religious Figure Threatened the Unity of India

By Aditya Indla

In 1984, the Indian army attacked the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, to kill Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his band of Sikh terrorists, who had holed up in the holiest of Sikh shrines. In the aftermath of this event, India fell into a prolonged civil war as factions vied for control of Punjab, the most prosperous province of India. This war spanned three decades and led to the loss of over 20,000 lives. The attack on the Golden Temple is often seen as the cause of the Sikh separatist movement known as Khalistan.

Bhindranwale, a controversial religious figure, fanned the flames of anti-Indian and anti-Hindu sentiments in Sikhs through his fiery speeches. Bhindranwale first rose to power in 1978, when he incited violence against a group of Sikhs he saw as heretics. Within six years, Bhindranwale gained enough grassroots support among Sikhs to challenge the central government of India. The violence that ensued under his leadership forced the Indian government to launch the attack on the Golden Temple, which in turn triggered the civil war. Sikhs have been part of India since Sikhism's founding in the tenth century, and during the partition of India, Sikhs in Pakistan chose to migrate to India rather than stay in Pakistan. Journalists and historians point to Operation Blue Star as the direct cause of the civil war for a separate Khalistan. This paper argues, however, that Bhindranwale tapped into an already existing undercurrent of Sikh resentment against the Hindus and exploited their grievances in a Hindu majority India to turn the richest state in the country against the central government. This power furthered his revivalist ambitions for a Sikh nation.

Historical Context

Sikhism is the fifth most prominent religion in the world, with over thirty million followers in fifteen countries.⁶⁵ In 1489, Guru Nanak, a twenty-year-old resident of the rich agrarian Punjab province of India, underwent a profound religious experience, a communication from God to "...Go into the world and teach mankind how to pray. Be not sullied by the ways of the world, let your life be one of praise of the word (*naam*), charity (*daan*), ablution (*ishnaan*), service (*seva*) and prayer (*simran*)."⁶⁶ He founded Sikhism with the core beliefs of "truthful living, service to humanity, and devotion to God."⁶⁷ A succession of nine prophets shaped and governed Sikhism over the next two centuries.

Early Sikhs were socially integrated and practiced interfaith harmony with Hindus and Muslims of India. However, the founding of the Mughal Empire by the Taimurid ruler Babur (1526) established the hegemony of Islam in India and led to religious oppression and the forcible conversion of non-Islamic religions. The hostilities paused under the religiously tolerant Mughal ruler, Akbar (1556-1605). He complied with the Sikh desire for identity, and according to legend, gifted the Sikhs land in

⁶⁵ Amber Pariona, "Countries with The Largest Sikh Populations," *WorldAtlas*, July 21, 2016, accessed January 18, 2019, <http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-largest-sikh-populations.html>.

⁶⁶ Khushwant Singh, "The Genesis of Hindu-Sikh Divide," in *The Punjab Story* (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 2004).

⁶⁷ "Beliefs." *Sikh Coalition*. Accessed January 15, 2019.

<http://www.sikhcoalition.org/about-sikhs/beliefs/>; Simran Jeet Singh. "Principles of Sikhism." E-mail interview by author. March 20, 2019.

This interview is a series of emails with Simran Jeet Singh, who serves on Governor Andrew Cuomo's Interfaith Advisory Council for the State of New York. He is also a fellow for the Truman National Security Project and a term-member for the Council on Foreign Relations. He is the subject matter expert on matters related to Sikhism for reporters around the world. He confirmed the validity and authenticity of many of my sources and provided me with new sources to use to further my paper.

the Punjab province to establish the holy city of Amritsar.⁶⁸ The Sikhs constructed their holiest spiritual site, the Golden Temple, in the center of Amritsar in 1604.⁶⁹ Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru, codified Sikh principles of worship and cultural values into the scripture of Sikhism, Guru Granth Sahib, which was housed in the Golden Temple.⁷⁰ However, the peace between the Mughals and Sikhs was short-lived.

Akbar's son Jehangir resumed Sikh persecution and, apprehensive of the growing influence of Sikhism, executed Guru Arjun, setting the stage for a military conflict between Sikhs and the Mughals.⁷¹ Sikhs engaged in armed resistance, constructing the Akal Takht fort facing the Golden Temple in 1606, as the seat of Sikh leaders and everyday Sikh affairs.⁷² The ninth leader, Guru Gobind (1666-1708), further militarized the Sikhs, creating a religious army, called Khalsa.⁷³ He entrenched the Sikh-warrior mindset with principles of unshorn hair and a beard to evoke a fearsome appearance, a common surname of "Singh" (Lion) depicting bravery, and a mandate to carry a sword (Kirpan) at all times for defense of faith.⁷⁴ In the path of Islamic invaders to Delhi, the capital of India, Sikhs were trained as fighters and have since been India's premier fighting force. Sikhs are easily recognizable due to being required to wear the 5 k's: *Kesh* (uncut

⁶⁸ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63.

⁶⁹ "History of Sachkhand Sri Harmandir Sahib," Official Website of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Sri Amritsar, accessed January 20, 2019, <http://sgpc.net/sri-harmandir-sahib-2/>.

⁷⁰ "Sri Guru Granth Sahib," Official Website of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Sri Amritsar, accessed January 20, 2019, <http://sgpc.net/sri-guru-granth-sahib/>.

⁷¹ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 69.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

hair-held up in a turban), *Kara* (steel bracelet), *Kanga* (wooden comb), *Kaccha* (cotton underwear), and *Kirpan* (steel sword).⁷⁵

The turbulent collapse of the Mughal Empire in 1707 led to the British annexation of large swaths of India.⁷⁶ During this chaotic transition, in 1799, Sikh warrior Ranjit Singh united the warring princely states of Punjab into a thriving Sikh empire, the first Sikh homeland.⁷⁷ His death in 1839, however, caused infighting among his sons over the succession, leading to the British annexation of the Sikh empire in 1849.⁷⁸ During India's partition of 1947, Sikhs aspired for a Sikh homeland, Khalistan, along the same lines of Muslim Pakistan. However, the British perceived this demand simply as a counterpoint to prevent the formation of Pakistan, rather than an actual deep seated desire for a Sikh nation, and dismissed it outright.⁷⁹ Less than 2 percent of an undivided India's population, the Sikhs felt marginalized during the partition as 2.5 million Sikhs lost their vast land holdings to Pakistan.⁸⁰ The Akali Dal, the ethno-religious political party representing Sikh interests in Punjab, blamed Jawahar Lal Nehru, partition architect and India's first prime minister, and his Congress Party for the failed Khalistan bid and the subsequent waning of Sikh influence.⁸¹ Akali Dal emerged as the only political player in the Punjab arena to truly champion Sikh rights. To increase her political power in Punjab against the moderate Akalis, Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party Prime Minister (1966-77, 80-84) allied with a passionately orthodox Sikh preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

⁷⁵ Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 92.

⁷⁶ "India: A Country Study," *The Library of Congress*, 30-35, accessed January/February 2019, <http://www.loc.gov/item/96019266>.

⁷⁷ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 198-210.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷⁹ Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (New Delhi: Rupa &, 1994), 35.

⁸⁰ Khushwant Singh, "The Genesis of Hindu-Sikh Divide," in *The Punjab Story*. (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 2004).

⁸¹ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 34-35.

Bhindranwale's Early Life

Jarnail Singh (later known as Bhindranwale) was born in 1947, the year of the partition, in the village of Rode in Punjab, to a poor farmer, Joginder Singh.⁸² His name Jarnail was a Punjabi pronunciation of the word general. Enrolled in a religious seminary, Damdami Taksal, he was a pious student. Joginder Singh described Bhindranwale, when a young boy, as “someone who could fell a tree in a single blow and at the same time memorize whole chapters of the scriptures and recite them a hundred times a day.”⁸³ Unlike most students at the seminary, Jarnail Singh imbibed Sikh religious fervor and became a force to be reckoned with during his time at Damdami Taksal.

Standing an impressive and lean six feet tall, his looks commanded attention. He had a strong nose and deep-set eyes which almost disappeared when he broke into a toothy grin.⁸⁴ Unlike an average Sikh, Jarnail wore his blue or saffron turban tied in tiers, allowing him to stand out. The rest of Bhindranwale's wardrobe was based entirely on commands from the Guru, as he focused on proving himself a faithful true Sikh. His fervor often took the form of conversions and sermons to Sikhs he felt had abandoned the true faith. The leader of the seminary, impressed by the young speaker, anointed him the heir to Taksal leadership.⁸⁵ Upon becoming the head of Damdami Taksal, based in the town of Bhindran, he added Bhindranwale (from Bhindran) to his name.

In the 1900s, the Sikh lifestyle in Punjab was undergoing a rapid change. Under the British Raj, Sikhs were treated preferentially against Hindus in a divide and conquer strategy, resulting in increased monetary and political influence. Independence and the Green revolution brought prosperity to

⁸² Tavleen Singh, “Terrorist in the Temple,” in *The Punjab Story* (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 2004).

⁸³ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 53.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

Punjab, as modern agricultural methods yielded bumper crops. Due to influence from the British as well as agricultural prosperity, Sikhs began to feel less restricted and started consuming alcohol and tobacco, slipping into what Bhindranwale considered debauchery. Tying a turban and washing waist-length hair became too cumbersome for Sikhs in a fast-paced modern lifestyle. Safety razors became the new symbol of heresy for orthodox leaders like Bhindranwale.

During the 1970s, Bhindranwale traveled around the villages to convert people back to the true faith by baptizing people and preaching sermons about the evils of modern life.⁸⁶ Journalist Tavleen Singh, who interviewed Bhindranwale multiple times says, “His philosophy in six words was ‘Give up addictions. Take Baptism. Become good Sikhs.’ (*Nashey chaddo. Amrit chhako. Gursikh bano*).”⁸⁷ Bhindranwale was one of the few Sikh leaders to engage with the community, an itinerant preacher giving incendiary speeches and intervening in domestic disputes. He preached in parables and folksy language, connecting with the ordinary Sikhs.⁸⁸ The lower castes appreciated Bhindranwale’s regard for them as equals, finally feeling accepted and represented by someone. He was able to leverage these feelings and molded these dregs of society into his most devoted acolytes. Punjabi youth considered him a role model. He showed no interest in a political career and was content being a preacher, albeit a violent one.

Eminent Indian historians such as Ramachandra Guha and Khushwant Singh consider Bhindranwale simply as a militant, who sowed seeds of discord between the peaceful Hindu and Sikh communities. They cite Bhindranwale’s assurance, “I am not interested in political power,” as evidence that he was simply a

⁸⁶ Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and Ranbir Singh Sandhu, *Struggle for Justice: Speeches and Conversations of Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale*. (Dublin, OH: Sikh Educational & Religious Foundation, 1999), i.

⁸⁷ Tavleen Singh, “Terrorist in the Temple,” in *The Punjab Story* (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 2004).

⁸⁸ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, ii.

rabble rouser. Others see his motivations as a simple power grab, and paint him as a religious goon, who ran a parallel government in Punjab, interfering in family and property matters and extorting money from traders.⁸⁹ A minority of Sikhs revere him as a saint who fought for Sikh rights and was martyred for the Sikh cause.⁹⁰ But an analysis of Bhindranwale's speeches shows a carefully cultivated narrative in support of a "Sikh Nation," not necessarily from a democratic political power, but rather as a religious nation, harking back to the principles of the time of Guru Gobind Singh, like the modern demands for an Islamic nation by organizations such as ISIS.⁹¹

Bhindranwale chose to drum up support for a Sikh nation via anti-Hindu fundamentalism rather than the peace and love of God, a common tactic employed by religious revolutionaries to destabilize the status quo and engender chaos. This unfortunate

⁸⁹ Avinash Singh, "Recollections of Bhindranwale," Telephone interview by author (January 10, 2019). This is a firsthand Skype interview between Professor Avinash Singh and I, currently a professor at Punjab University, Chandigarh, India and previously a journalist for the Hindustan Times, who had spoken with many of the important figures in Operation Blue Star, including Bhindranwale. He provided me with his interpretation of the rise and fall of Bhindranwale, his impression of the man and the central government's role in his meteoric rise. He also provided me with an eyewitness account of the operation itself, having seen the operation unfold from the balcony of his house in Amritsar. Together, these helped give me the point of view of a bystander with little to no connection to either Bhindranwale or the government.

⁹⁰ "An Echo of Terrorism," *The Economist* (June 12, 2003). Accessed March/April 2019. <http://www.economist.com/asia/2003/06/12/an-echo-of-terrorism>.

⁹¹ Hassan Hassan, "The True Origins of ISIS," *The Atlantic* (November 30, 2018). Accessed February 21 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/isis-origins-anbari-zarqawi/577030/>. ISIS arose from the religious ideals held by one Abu Ali al-Anbari, a devout religious fanatic preaching a return to a more conservative faith in the face of increasing Western influence and invasion. Similarly, Bhindranwale preached a return to a more traditional form of Sikhism in the face of an increasingly modernizing India which left devout Sikhs behind. Furthermore, Bhindranwale inflamed preexisting tensions between Sikhs and Hindus, just as al-Anbari antagonized Shiites.

choice would have far-reaching consequences for the Sikh community, most notably the tragedy of 1984.

Birth of Hindu-Sikh Divisions

Sikh historians such as Khushwant Singh, paint Bhindranwale as the cause of Hindu-Sikh tensions in Punjab, tracing the roots to his fiery speeches.⁹² However, the seeds of Hindu-Sikh discontent hark back to the time of British Raj.

The annexation of the Sikh empire by the British in 1789 brought a radical change in the Hindu-Sikh relations in Punjab. The Hindu revivalist movement, Swami Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Samaj, founded in 1877 in Lahore, Punjab, played a key role in disrupting the Hindu-Sikh harmony via attempts to convert Sikhs into Hinduism.⁹³ The Arya Samaj would go on to play a big part in post-independence Punjab as a fomenter of Hindu-Sikh tensions. In 1879, an article titled "Sikhism Past and Present" ridiculed Guru Nanak and criticised Sikhism as a degenerate religion, saying "while the prejudices of the Hindu community are fading away before the progress of western civilization...the Sikh is as much a bigoted and narrow minded being as he was thirty years back."⁹⁴ To defend against the ongoing attacks on their faith by Hindus, the Sikhs founded a Sikh reformist society, the Lahore Singh Sabha in 1888, and held large protest meetings condemning Arya Samaj rhetoric against them. The early Sikh leaders were educated Sikhs, landlords and Sikh princes. Some Arya Samaj activists preached Hindu conversions inside the Golden Temple complex, directly challenging the Sikh faith in their place of

⁹² Khushwant Singh, "Oh, That Other Hindu Riot of Passage," <https://www.outlookindia.com/>. November 14, 2004. Accessed April 23, 2019. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/oh-that-other-hindu-riot-of-passage/225692>.

⁹³ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India: The Case of the Punjab, 1960-1990* (Master's thesis, University of London), 137.

⁹⁴ Kenneth W. Jones, "Ham Hindu Nahin: Arya-Sikh Relations, 1877-1905," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1973, pp. 457-475, www.jstor.org/stable/2052684. Accessed 26 Feb. 2020.

worship. In 1899, two pamphlets titled *Sikh Hindu Hain*, or *Sikhs are Hindus*, were published by Arya Samaj followers, claiming Sikhism was a strain of Hinduism.⁹⁵ In response, Sikhs published a rebuttal, titled *Ham Hindu Nahin*, or *We are not Hindus*, reaffirming their distinct identity.⁹⁶ As Kenneth W. Jones notes, “Sikhs in future years might debate who they were, but they knew with increasing certainty who they were not: Ham Hindu Nahin.”⁹⁷ By 1899, Sikh Sabhas had presences in over 120 locations in Punjab.⁹⁸ In the early 1900s, conversions of a number of Sikhs back into Hinduism by Arya Samaj activists brought forth protests and demonstrations by Sikhs in Punjab. As Sikhs sought to protect their identity, the British sought to further drive a wedge between the two communities in a divide-and-rule strategy. The British promoted Sikh superiority through employment in government service and leadership positions in the army, rewarding their loyalty during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny by Hindu and Muslim soldiers.⁹⁹ Sikhs prospered under the British and enjoyed influence in return for allegiance and tax revenues. Khushwant Singh, in “The History of Sikhs,” claims the Sikhs became the most prosperous peasantry of India and states, “the economic advantages of being Sikh checked the disintegration of Sikhism and its lapse into Hinduism.”¹⁰⁰ As the prosperity of Sikhs grew, the revenues of Gurudwaras including the Golden Temple increased significantly and the Sikhs wanted to control these monies, away from *mahants* or priests who often incorporated

⁹⁵ Kenneth W. Jones, “Ham Hindū Nahīn: Arya-Sikh Relations, 1877-1905,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 32, no. 3 (1973): 457–475., www.jstor.org/stable/2052684. Accessed 26 Feb. 2020.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 467

⁹⁷ Deol, 150.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Ian A. Talbot, “The Punjab under Colonialism: Order and Transformation in British India,” *UCSB Global Studies*, Department of Global Studies, University of Santa Barbara, www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7_sp/files/sitefiles/journals/volume14/no1/14.1_Talbot.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ *A History of the Sikhs* volume 2, 119.

Hindu rituals in Sikh worship. Through the Sikh Gurudwara Act of 1925, the British created the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), a group of elected Sikh leaders who controlled the Sikh temples in the state including the Golden Temple. This transition was not smooth, the most notable example being the massacre of Sikhs at Nankana by mahant Narain Das and his followers, a violent clash of Hindus and Sikhs.¹⁰¹ SCPG controlled the revenues of the multiple temples in the state and gained political and social influence. The political wing of the S.G.P.C, the Akali Dal, formed in 1920, eventually became a major player in the Indian political spectrum, with the stated goal of preserving Sikh identity and political power. Under the British, Sikhs were granted separate representation in the legislature, a decision opposed by the Hindus in Punjab. It was during this period of preferred treatment that the desire for an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, began anew.

By 1944, at the end of WWII, it became apparent to Sikhs that India would be independent, and the possibility of a Muslim Pakistan was clear. So, the Akali Dal proposed their own nation, Azad Punjab or Free Punjab. In March 1946, a resolution by Akali Dal stated, “Whereas the Sikhs being attached to the Punjab by intimate bonds of holy shrines, property, language, traditions, and history claim it as their homeland and holy land and which the British took as a ‘trust’ from the last Sikh ruler during his minority and whereas the entity of the Sikhs is being threatened on account of the persistent demand for Pakistan by the Muslims on the one hand and of the danger of absorption by the Hindus on the other, the Executive Committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal demands, for the preservation and protection of the religious, cultural and economic rights of the Sikh nation, the creation of a Sikh state.”¹⁰²

As Khuswant Singh said in *A History of Sikhs*, “The way the Sikh spokesmen worded their demand for a Sikh state – not as something inherently desirable but simply as a point in an

¹⁰¹ Deol, 145.

¹⁰² <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/1443/1/U093328.pdf> (page 161)

argument against Pakistan – robbed the suggestion of any chance of serious consideration.” The demands were ignored, and the Sikhs felt robbed during the partition, with 2.5 million of them losing their vast land holdings to Pakistan. The Akali leaders claim that Congress leaders promised special status to Sikhs, in return for giving up the demand for a Sikh nation, as evidenced by Nehru’s words at a press conference in Calcutta on July 6 1946, “The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set-up in the north wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom.”¹⁰³

Despite its position as a secular democracy, India’s social and political identities have always been tied up in religion. Sikhs had to fight to maintain their religious identity in post-colonial independent India, where Hinduism was setting the standard of an Indian citizenship.¹⁰⁴ This fight for Sikh identity formed the foundation of Sikh fundamentalism and the Khalistan movement and became the root of Bhindranwale’s argument for Sikhs being a distinct nation.

Hindu-Sikh relations in post-independence India: Punjabi Suba Movement and Anandpur Sahib Resolutions

Between the time of Bhindranwale’s birth in 1947 to his ascent as the leader of Damdami Taksal in 1977, the politics of Punjab were undergoing rapid transformation.

Sikhs continued to struggle to maintain their identity distinct from Hindus in a secular, post-independence India. Article 25b of the Indian constitution failed to differentiate Sikh religion and places of worship from Hindus’, noting, “...Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious

¹⁰³ Reference: Anadpur Sahib resolutions

¹⁰⁴ Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, “Sikh Rebellion and the Hindu Concept of Order,” *Asian Survey* 29, no. 3 (1989): 337. Accessed April/May 2019. doi:10.1525/as.1989.29.3.01p02605.

institutions shall be construed accordingly.”¹⁰⁵ This clause provided Bhindranwale an easy example of Sikh oppression by the Indian government.

The Sikh ethno-religious party, Akali Dal, in 1950s, initiated efforts to preserve Sikh identity in modern India via the demand for a Punjabi language-based state or Punjabi Suba.¹⁰⁶ While language is not typically associated with a religion in multilingual and multi religious societies, in post-independence secular India built on the principles of religious pluralism, the quest for a Punjabi state became a proxy to Sikh religious identity in a Hindi-speaking Hindu-majority India.

Hindus accused the Akali Dal of conspiring to create a Sikh state under the guise of the Punjabi Suba. The Arya Samaj launched a statewide campaign for the Hindus to renounce Punjabi and declare Hindi the official language of Punjab in “an overt and deliberate political act designed to undercut the linguistic basis of the Punjabi Suba demand.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Nehru himself fervently opposed the creation of an autonomous Punjabi state, claiming, “Sikhs are fine people, but they are led by separatists and fanatics. I cannot hand over a state to them on the border with Pakistan...”¹⁰⁸ The demise of Nehru in 1964 and the contribution of Sikh efforts towards India’s defense in the war against Pakistan in 1965 resulted in a central government sympathetic to the Sikh cause. Ultimately, in 1966, the parliament under Indira Gandhi, finally created a Sikh- majority Punjab nearly 54 percent Sikh and 44 percent Hindu.¹⁰⁹ The fierce Hindu resistance to a Punjabi state would become a rallying cry for Bhindranwale, as his followers

¹⁰⁵ “Constitution of India.” National Portal of India. Accessed June 2019. <https://www.india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india>.

¹⁰⁶ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 299.

¹⁰⁷ Deol, 183.

¹⁰⁸ Pranay Gupte, *Mother India: A Political Biography of Indira Gandhi* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 301, accessed June 10, 2019, Google Books, keyword: Mother India: A Political Biography of Indira Gandhi.

¹⁰⁹ Deol, 187.

would later take up the chant of “Raj Karega Khalsa” or “The Khalsa shall rule” in Punjab.¹¹⁰

The formation of a Sikh-majority state failed to translate into Akali political dominance. Sikhs rallied behind the Akalis as champions of Sikh causes, nevertheless, the Sikh electorate kept their political and religious affiliations separate, voting the Congress Party into power in Punjab in the 1966 general elections. The weakened Akalis sought a new cause that would revitalize a sense of social solidarity among Sikhs and thus strengthen their political power. They instilled a sense of discrimination in the minds of numerous Sikhs with a list of grievances against the Congress Party-led central government. This list included the forcible sharing of the newly constructed capital city of Chandigarh with Haryana, failure to merge Punjabi-speaking villages adjacent to Punjab into the Punjab state, and the unfair allocation of Punjab’s river waters to Haryana and other Hindu states.¹¹¹

In 1973, the Akali Dal formalized their grievances into the Anandpur Sahib resolutions, the first step towards an independent Sikh nation, named after Anandpur, the birthplace of the Khalsa, symbolically blending their religious and political ideologies.¹¹² While not asking outright for a separate country, these resolutions called for special treatments for Sikhs. Resolution Part II, 1(a) asks for “The areas that have been taken away from Punjab or have intentionally been kept apart... should be immediately merged, with Punjab, under one administrative unit.” The resolutions further continue, claiming “In this new Punjab, the Central intervention should be restricted to Defense, Foreign Affairs, Post and Telegraphs, Currency and Railways.” However, regarding Foreign Affairs, resolution Part II, Section 3 states, the Sikh foreign policy would “strive for good relations with all

¹¹⁰ Tully and Jacob, 20.

¹¹¹ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 349.

¹¹² Amarjit Kaur, “Akali Dal, the Enemy Within,” in *The Punjab Story* (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 2004).

neighboring countries, particularly where the Sikhs reside or where their religious shrines are found,” a clear reference to Pakistan, and claims, “...the foreign policy of Congress Government is useless and harmful...” Additional demands included the right to bear arms, removing land ceilings and distributing government lands to Sikh farmers, and bringing industries under government control. These resolutions constrained the central government’s dominion and empowered the Punjab government to frame a separate constitution with jurisdiction over other aspects of governance.¹¹³ Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party Prime Minister, rejected these secessionist demands outright. Sir Mark Tully, former India Bureau Chief of the BBC, writes, “No Prime Minister, let alone one with as firm a conviction as Mrs. Gandhi that India needed a strong central government, could ever accept those terms. To concede that demand would have meant threatening the unity of India.”¹¹⁴ To combat this growing threat, Indira Gandhi turned to her trusted advisors and political strategists in Punjab.

Wary of rising Akali influence in Punjab, Indira Gandhi’s advisor Zail Singh recommended Bhindranwale, already popular with the rural Sikhs through his sermons, as the perfect antidote to the moderate Akalis. During the early phases of preaching, Bhindranwale was uninterested in the linguistic politics or economic demands of Punjab and made no anti-government or anti-Hindu statements. His role was largely that of a social and religious reformer.¹¹⁵ But under the Congress political umbrella, Bhindranwale co-opted the Akali mantra of government oppression into Hindu domination and morphed the fight to implement the Anandpur Sahib resolutions from a social and economic conversation into religious discrimination and a fight for the survival of Sikh faith. This, coupled with the militaristic nature of Guru Gobind’s edicts, turned his followers from the path of non-

¹¹³ Shiromani Akali Dal, comp. Anandpur Sahib Resolutions. Accessed March/April 2019. www.panjabdigilib.org/webuser/searches/downloadPdf.jsp?file=PL-000811.pdf.

¹¹⁴ Tully and Jacob, 46.

¹¹⁵ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, ii.

violence employed during India's independence movement and the Akali Dal's attempts for negotiated settlements, into armed militancy. A careful analysis of his speeches from 1981 onwards shows an escalating rhetoric towards a persecution complex and increasing calls for violence against Hindus, for injustices perceived and real. His attitude can be summarized in his speech where he asks his followers to choose "Guru's history or (Mahatma) Gandhi's history."¹¹⁶ While it is possible that Akali Dal's continued demands for Sikh privileges could have led to preferential treatments such as the ones enjoyed by Kashmiries in independent India under article 370, with similar provisions for state constitution, autonomy over internal affairs, special land rights etc, the entry of Bhindranwale escalated the fight from a demand for special rights to a fight against Hindu oppression and brought the simmering Hindu-Sikh tensions to a boil.

Rise of Bhindranwale

As Zail Singh attempted to raise Bhindranwale's profile, he searched for a religious and political cause for the Sikhs to rally behind. He found it in the Nirankaris, a heretical yet rich sect of Sikhs, who revered human Gurus, eschewing Guru Gobind's words of him being the last Guru.

Bhindranwale was extremely critical of the Nirankaris, calling them "Narkdharis" meaning those headed for Hell.¹¹⁷ In 1978, the Akali Dal government played into the hands of Bhindranwale by allowing the Nirankaris to hold a convention in the holy city of Amritsar. Bhindranwale led a group of protesters against the Nirankaris, and as the protest exploded into violence, 13 Sikhs were killed.¹¹⁸ Bhindranwale blamed the Nirankaris for

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 428.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁸ *Tribune News Service*. "Sikh-Nirankari Conflict Peaked with 1978 Clash." *Tribuneindia News Service*. November 19, 2018. Accessed June 23, 2019. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/sikh-nirankari-conflict-peaked-with-1978-clash/685446.html>.

the carnage, and constantly disparaged them in his speeches. Congress positioned Bhindranwale as the Sikh savior standing against the heretics and criticized Akali Dal for sacrificing Sikh principles on the altar of political power. Bhindranwale's disclaimers against desiring political office and his personal caring of the sick and wounded increased his stature in the Sikh community.

In 1980, when Nirankari Guru, Baba Gurbachan Singh, was killed, Bhindranwale emerged as the prime suspect, but political pressures from Congress Party leaders led to his acquittal. Bhindranwale continued his harassment of the Nirankaris with impunity, backed by Indira Gandhi's central government. Even though the Congress Party reclaimed power in Punjab from the Akali Dal in 1980, Indira Gandhi wished to avoid the emergence of a strong Sikh Congress leader in Punjab, choosing to centralize her political power. Her central government did not intervene in the rising communal tensions between moderate Akali, heretic Nirankari and extremist Bhindranwale sects of Sikhs, as she likely felt Bhindranwale was unknowingly doing her dirty work for her. This led to Bhindranwale gaining a feeling of invincibility and seeing himself as the Sikh liberator. An emboldened Bhindranwale chose to expand his rhetoric to target Hindus and demand for Sikh rights. As Avinash Singh says "the genie was out of the bottle and it was hard to put back in."¹¹⁹

As tensions rose in Punjab, Bhindranwale claimed the police discriminated against Sikhs by staging crimes and falsely blaming the Sikh community. His appeal to defend the faith, even by violent means, resonated with the youth of Punjab, most notably the All India Sikh Students Federation. His followers soon expanded their targets, attacking not only the Nirankaris, but Nirankari sympathizers and liberal Akalis. He began to fashion himself as the protector of the Sikh realm, claiming he would reward the killers of Nirankari leaders with gold.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Avinash Singh, "Recollections of Bhindranwale."

¹²⁰ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 287.

The first victim of his anti-Hindu rhetoric was Lala Jagat Narain, the chief editor of the Jullundur chain of papers, whose open support of the Nirankaris and the Arya Samaj in their criticisms of Bhindranwale placed him directly in the terrorists' line of fire. On September 9, 1981, Narain was shot dead, prompting the Congress Party Chief Minister of Punjab, Darbara Singh to order Bhindranwale's arrest as the prime suspect.¹²¹ During Bhindranwale's arrest, fighting broke out, resulting in a fire that destroyed copies of his written sermons, his prized possessions, several of which were irreplaceable. Bhindranwale blamed central and state Congress governments for this destruction and severed ties with the Congress Party. One could argue that the burning of his sermons, which he considered as his children, was a blow to his ego, and turned the agitation from communal to personal. He credits the day of the burning of his sermons as the catalyst to Sikh awareness, claiming "September 14 marks the awakening of this Nation."¹²² Bhindranwale agreed to surrender, but not before stirring the 75,000 strong crowd into a frenzy with his speech, saying, "I am going to wed my bride, death. If the Chief Minister of Punjab, Darbara Singh, and Indira, the Queen of Hindostan have some granthi (reader of Sri Guru Granth Sahib) to read the marriage prayer, they can send him to the jail ... I am going there fully prepared for it," turning a simple arrest into a bid for martyrdom.¹²³

Enraged Sikhs took matters into their own hands. Three Sikhs on motorcycles shot at Hindus in Jullundur, killing four and injuring twelve.¹²⁴ The next day, a similar attack killed one Hindu and injured 13 others in the town of Taran Taran near Amritsar.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Sreekant Khandekar. "Bhindranwale's Arrest in Connection with Lala Jagat Narain Murder Case Hit Headlines." *India Today*. October 28, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19811015-bhindranwales-arrest-in-connection-with-lala-jagat-narain-murder-case-hit-headlines-773307-2013-10-30>.

¹²² Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 274.

¹²³ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 274.

¹²⁴ Tully and Jacob, 69.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Soon after, a train was derailed near Amritsar and an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked to Lahore.¹²⁶ These incidents demonstrated the extent and influence of Bhindranwale's charisma to India and the Sikh diaspora. On October 15, 1981, merely a month later, Bhindranwale was released for lack of proof. Soon after his release, he and his supporters drove around Delhi in a victory rally, brandishing illegal weapons.¹²⁷ As Ramachandra Guha notes, this further cemented his position as an invincible hero who could even take on the government, and win.¹²⁸

A popular fable at this time depicts Bhindranwale outsmarting a Hindu court by requesting to swear on the Hindu scripture rather than on Guru Granth Sahib, pointing to Article 25 of the constitution, under which Sikhs are considered Hindus.¹²⁹ When the court rejected his plea, claiming that Bhindranwale could lie, should he swear on a Hindu scripture, he responded, "Either change the Constitution or change the book."¹³⁰ Soon journalists from major Indian newspapers and foreign press correspondents were clamoring for his interviews. He began to exhort his followers to indulge in violence, offering protection, saying "whoever insults Guru Granth Sahib should be beheaded instantly... whoever beheads... I shall fight any legal case against him."¹³¹ Bhindranwale's acolytes increased brutal attacks against Hindus, chanting the slogan "Raj Karega Khalsa" or "Khalsa shall rule." They left the heads and entrails of cows in Hindu temples,

¹²⁶ Michael T. Kaufman, "Sikh separatists hijack Indian jetliner to Pakistan," *The New York Times*. September 30, 1981. Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/30/world/sikh-separatists-hijack-indian-jetliner-to-pakistan.html>.

¹²⁷ Avinash Singh, "Recollections of Bhindranwale."

¹²⁸ Ramachandra Guha, "The Bhindranwale Cult: How Politics Allowed an Obscure Preacher to Challenge Indian Democracy," *Scroll.in*. January 03, 2017. Accessed June 23, 2019. <https://scroll.in/article/732426/the-bhindranwale-cult-how-politics-allowed-an-obscure-preacher-to-challenge-indian-democracy>.

¹²⁹ Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 11.

¹³⁰ Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 11.

¹³¹ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 62.

even claiming responsibility for this affront.¹³² As his followers grew in number, he encouraged arming themselves with guns, as the replacement to swords, claiming “the first path is of peace and the other is of the sword.”¹³³ Bhindranwale demonstrated the size of his base to his skeptics, claiming, “He who is a Sikh of Guru Granth Sahib ... should raise his arms. This was the pledge I got from the stage. They were 115,000.”¹³⁴ He asked his supporters to defy the government’s attempts to limit gun licenses, saying, “If the name of a person is ‘Singh,’ and he has a superior weapon in his possession.... and he...throws them into the lap of an oncoming cap-wearer [Hindu] why was he born into the home of a Sikh?”¹³⁵ Given access to arms and a target to attack, young Sikhs flocked to Bhindranwale in droves, drawn to his charisma and message. Bhindranwale tapped into the same religious sentiments driving modern Islamic movements such as the Taliban and ISIS.

Akali Dal realized the growing influence of Bhindranwale and in a move of political opportunism, in 1982, launched a Dharm Yudh Morcha (religious war) with his support, to fight for implementation of the Anandpur Sahib resolutions. And while the Morcha continued, Akali leaders neither condemned these senseless killings in the language they deserved to be condemned nor had the courage to denounce Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale’s vitriol, however, contrasted with the nonviolent attitudes of most Sikhs, including the Akalis. Outraged by the Akalis’ pacifism, Bhindranwale broke rank with the Akalis and shifted his headquarters to a guesthouse in the Golden Temple complex in July 1982.¹³⁶

Gandhi, misled by advisors, believed her party had Bhindranwale under control and ignored his destabilizing activities, while outwardly negotiating with the Akalis and

¹³² Tully and Jacob, 80.

¹³³ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 197.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³⁶ Tully and Jacob, 81.

Bhindranwale for peace and autonomy.¹³⁷ Bhindranwale torpedoed all compromises with violence, exhorted every Sikh to kill thirty-two Hindus, and exploited government support to increase his power.¹³⁸

Height of Bhindranwale's Power

By now, Bhindranwale was firmly established as a Sikh savior fighting against the “Hindu” government led by “Hindu Pundits’ daughter,” Indira Gandhi.¹³⁹ Yet, he continued to paint himself as the oppressed underdog championing for Sikh rights with no desire for political power. He frequently cited incidents involving the mistreatment of individual Sikhs, spinning them as representations of the “Hindu” government’s treatment of Sikhs as a whole: “A young daughter of the Sikhs was stripped naked and... paraded through the village. Has it ever happened to a Hindu?”¹⁴⁰ Soon, ordinary Sikhs were falling under his spell and spouting violent rhetoric, such as the Sikh father whose young sons were imprisoned, threatening the police saying, “...make arrangements for your families and your children...If you shoot the two boys dead...we shall exterminate your families. If I do not do it the Sikh Nation will surely do it after me.”¹⁴¹

Bhindranwale rejected the compromises the Akali Dal was making with the central government of Indira Gandhi to stem the rising tide of violence in Punjab. Using the parable of a Sikh who breaks into a Hindu merchant’s house to retrieve the money he is owed, Bhindranwale said “If a Sikh steals, it is bad; if a Sikh commits robbery, it is bad; if a Sikh kills someone it is bad; but for a Sikh to take what is due to him is not a sin ... It is worth it even

¹³⁷ Ibid., 73-80.

¹³⁸ Khushwant Singh, “Oh, That Other Hindu Riot of Passage.”

<https://www.outlookindia.com/>. November 14, 2004. Accessed April 23, 2019.

¹³⁹ Tully and Jacob, 87.

¹⁴⁰ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 108.

¹⁴¹ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 12.

if one has to sacrifice one's life for it."¹⁴² He claimed the Anandpur Sahib resolutions were not about economic considerations, rather they were Guru Gobind, the creator of Khalsa's mission, assigned by God.¹⁴³

In 1982, with the Asian Games on the horizon, the central government took the situation in the Punjab seriously for the first time. 1,500 Sikhs planning to protest near the games were arrested. Additional security checks for Sikhs were instituted in Delhi, and even Sikhs in police and army were not exempted. This marked the first time every Sikh felt discrimination in India. Bhindranwale successfully exploited this opportunity, claiming "at the times of the Asian Games, the Sikh is told he cannot come to Delhi from Punjab, but Challi Rams (a derogatory term for Hindus) can do so openly. A Sikh from America could not come, but a Hindu from America could. This is slavery."¹⁴⁴ He referenced the Punjabi Suba movement as another instance of Hindu hegemony and Sikh oppression, asking his congregation whether "...to speak the Hindi language, even one Hindu had to go to jail for an hour...to get a Punjabi-speaking state, fifty-seven thousand of you have to go to jail."¹⁴⁵ Bhindranwale soon fashioned himself the sole champion of Sikhs, questioning the Akali Dal's motivation, claiming, "people are going around the stool (chief minister's chair), sometimes it's the Jan Sangh (Hindu-orthodox party), at others Congress, or the Akalis..."¹⁴⁶ He claimed the Akali Dal's pacifism was antithetical to the principles of Sikhism that demands defense of faith by violent means if necessary.¹⁴⁷

He also continued to evolve his position on the matter of a Sikh state, or Khalistan. He initially opposed the thought of Khalistan, as raised by the Sikh diaspora under the leadership of Jagjit Chauhan, claiming the Hindu-Sikh unity against Indira

¹⁴² Ibid., 8.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 344.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 333.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 330.

¹⁴⁶ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 341.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 427.

Gandhi during the emergency of 1977 as evidence of Sikhs wishing to remain a part of India.¹⁴⁸ But he soon changed his tune, calling Hindus ungrateful, and claiming Sikhs to be a distinct nation.¹⁴⁹ By 1983, he became ambivalent towards Khalistan, claiming to neither support nor oppose it.¹⁵⁰ In 1984, he was firmly in support of a separate Sikh Nation, claiming that while Hindus gained freedom in 1947, Sikhs had yet to be freed, throwing his support behind the movement.¹⁵¹ He claimed it was the duty of Sikhs to throw off the yoke of slavery from their necks.¹⁵² He placed the burden of keeping India united on the shoulders of the Indian government, claiming, “We are not in favor of Khalistan nor are we against it... We wish to live in Hindostan. We wish to live as equal citizens. The Center [central government] should tell us it wants to keep us or not.”¹⁵³

By 1983, the conflict in Punjab was steadily escalating as the number of violent incidents surged. Bank robberies, bus and train burnings, and bomb explosions became daily occurrences, as did the killing of police and government officials.¹⁵⁴ On April 25, 1983, a Bhindranwale follower shot a senior Punjab police officer in the back inside the Golden Temple. For two hours, his body lay on the steps as the police negotiated access into the temple to take the body away. As this news spread across the country, Indira Gandhi’s Congress government was criticized as a failure for allowing the situation to escalate.¹⁵⁵ On October 5, 1983, a group of young Bhindranwale supporters boarded a bus, separated the Sikh and Hindu passengers, and shot and killed six Hindus.¹⁵⁶ This incident led Indira Gandhi to impose Presidential rule, granting her near total control over Punjab. But Bhindranwale ignored this

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 171.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 327.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 399.

¹⁵² Ibid., 362.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 211.

¹⁵⁴ Tully and Jacob, 93-95.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 98

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 104-105

display of power, repeating the same attack a month later, this time killing four passengers.¹⁵⁷ In response, the Indian Parliament, press, and public demanded the arrest of Bhindranwale.

Evading capture, Bhindranwale relocated into the Akal Takht fort of the Golden Temple complex, the seat of former Sikh rulers, styling himself the self-proclaimed protector of Sikhs. Once ensconced in the temple with his followers, he began to fortify his position and started stockpiling arms. Bhindranwale also continued his speeches, warning Sikhs that Indira Gandhi would attack the Golden Temple. He commanded Sikhs to respond with violence against Hindus in the event of an attack, saying, “when you come to know the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) has been attacked...in the cities and towns near you, no one without a turban should be seen... Have mercy over the Muslims.”¹⁵⁸

However, Bhindranwale truly believed that “Bibi,” as he disparagingly called Indira Gandhi, would never violate the sanctity of the holiest Sikh shrine.¹⁵⁹ With Bhindranwale controlling Akal Takht, the need for decisive action was indisputable, but Gandhi’s cabinet, concerned about Sikh uprisings and civilian casualties, vehemently opposed a prolonged siege or a guerilla raid.¹⁶⁰ Operation Blue Star, a military operation to “swiftly clear out the Golden Temple and capture maximum militants, weapons and ammunition” was the only viable option.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 418.

¹⁵⁹ Sekhar Gupta, “On His Death Anniversary, Remembering the Most Interesting Man I’ve Met: Bhindranwale,” *The Print*. June 06, 2018. Accessed May/June, 2019. <http://theprint.in/opinion/on-his-death-anniversary-remembering-the-most-interesting-man-ive-met-bhindranwale/66987>.

¹⁶⁰ “The Untold Story before Operation Bluestar,” *India Today* (June 06, 2019). Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20140210-operation-bluestar-indira-gandhi-singh-bhindranwale-army-800031-1999-11-30>.

¹⁶¹ K. S. Brar, *Operation Blue Star: The True Story* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers Distributors, 2006), 77.

Operation Bluestar

Major-General Brar, a decorated Army officer and veteran of Indo-Pak war of 1971 and a Sikh himself, assumed command. In his book, *Operation Blue Star, the True Story*, he recounts that entering the Golden Temple complex was a “last resort,” but was necessary to “stop the country being held to ransom any longer.”¹⁶² Bhindranwale was “the enemy,” and had “seized control of the Temple.”¹⁶³ On June 3, 1984, Indian army surrounded the Temple. The terrorists ignored repeated calls to surrender and to release trapped pilgrims. On June 5, after a rejected ultimatum, the army stormed the Temple. On the morning of June 5, Amritsar woke to the cracking of machine-gun fire as the army launched its assault.

Operation Blue Star was a miscalculation of epic proportions by the government. The army severely underestimated the resolve of Bhindranwale’s fanatics and the enormity of the weapons cache. The Golden Temple and the Akal Takht buildings were heavily fortified with sandbags, machine guns and holes in the sacred marble for gunner positions held by the militants.¹⁶⁴ Restrictions on damage to the Golden Temple greatly hindered the army’s fighting ability. Repeated charges into the Akal Takht led to numerous casualties as machine gun fire decimated soldiers brave enough to break cover. The militants destroyed an armored personnel carrier with a rocket launcher, an unexpectedly sophisticated weapon for a militant group.[8] Singh recounts witnessing paratroopers landing in the temple pool and being electrocuted by a strategically placed live wire.[9] In General Brar’s words, the area in front of the Akal Takht had been turned into a “killing ground.” The army’s blitzes proved futile, but retreat was not an option. According to Mark Tully, “the news that Bhindranwale ... had forced the Indian army to withdraw would certainly leak out somehow. That would have disastrous

¹⁶² Tully and Jacob, 155.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Tully and Jacob, 162.

consequences in the villages of Punjab and among Sikhs in the army.”

After twenty-four hours of fruitless bloodshed, Brar made the unfortunate yet inevitable decision to deploy the thirty-eight-ton Vijayanta tanks to bombard the Akal Takht, the symbolic center of Sikh temporal power, to rubble.¹⁶⁵ Raging fires burned precious manuscripts and artifacts to ashes. The tank barrage forced Bhindranwale into the open, a target for grenade shrapnel and carbine bullets.¹⁶⁶

The next day, the army entered the bullet-ridden Akal Takht and discovered Bhindranwale’s shrapnel scarred lifeless body.¹⁶⁷ Bodies of over 5,000 soldiers, extremists and pilgrims littered the entire complex.¹⁶⁸ Bhindranwale’s remains, and those of other militants, were cremated according to Sikh tradition.¹⁶⁹ The army and government, in an extreme use of force, recaptured the Golden Temple and decimated Bhindranwale’s militant organization.

The Aftermath

In March 1983, Bhindranwale had said “Khalistan will certainly be created the day that the police come in [the Golden Temple] and wish to engage in some improper activity.”¹⁷⁰ Bhindranwale’s prediction proved nearly prophetic—the immediate aftermath was the closest India came to the creation of Khalistan.

¹⁶⁵ Brar, 98.

¹⁶⁶ Gupta, “On His Death Anniversary.”

¹⁶⁷ Brar, 113.

¹⁶⁸ Giani Singh Sahib and Harbir Singh Bhanwer, “Eye-Witness Account of Operation Bluestar - Operation Bluestar,” *Gateway to Sikhism Foundation*. Accessed June 18, 2019. <http://www.allaboutsikhs.com/operation-bluestar/eye-witness-account-of-operation-bluestar>.

¹⁶⁹ Asit Jolly, “The Man Who Saw Bhindranwale Dead: Col Gurinder Singh Ghuman,” *India Today* (June 24, 2012). Accessed June 18, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20120625-jarnail-singh-bhindranwale-col-ghuman-758812-2012-06-15>.

¹⁷⁰ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 77.

Operation Bluestar outraged all Sikhs—from extremists to moderates—as an assault on Sikh faith, triggering widespread distrust of the government and rekindled the movement for the Sikh homeland, Khalistan. Khushwant Singh noted that “only a miniscule proportion of Sikhs subscribed to Khalistan before the temple was stormed.”¹⁷¹ A triumphant Gandhi, disregarding advice to “impart a healing touch to a wounded nation,” antagonized the Sikhs further by praising the military. She engendered public mistrust through whitewashed, heavily censored accounts of death and devastation on government-controlled TV and radio.¹⁷² As Sikh hostility against the government intensified, Gandhi, perhaps to minimize the perception of anti-Sikh bias, retained her Sikh security guards—a fatal decision. On October 31, 1984, as Indira Gandhi headed to an interview with British actor Peter Ustinov, Gandhi’s bodyguards Beant Singh and Satwant Singh opened fire with submachine guns, imparting mortal wounds.¹⁷³ Beant Singh perished in the escape attempt and Satwant Singh was executed by the government of India.¹⁷⁴

Enraged at Gandhi’s assassination, Hindus rioted, targeting Sikhs and their property. Local police swiftly suppressed the violence, except in India’s capital, Delhi, where law enforcement was complicit in Sikh massacres by Hindus, with support from Congress leaders, giving ample credence to the notion of a government conspiracy against Sikhs.¹⁷⁵ Mobs lynched, burned and hacked Sikhs to death, cleansing entire neighborhoods of Sikh

¹⁷¹ Ahsan I. Butt, “India’s Strategies against Separatism in Assam, Punjab, and Kashmir, 1984-1994,” *Secession and Security*, 2017, 98-109, doi:10.7591/9781501713958-006.

¹⁷² Tully and Jacob, 165.

¹⁷³ William E. Smith, “Indira Gandhi: Death in the Garden,” *Time* (November 12, 1984). Accessed June 18, 2019.

<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,926929-1,00.html>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Manoj Mitta, “Disarming Tactics,” in *When a Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and Its Aftermath* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, an Imprint of Roli Books, 2008).

males.¹⁷⁶ After three days of unmitigated violence, 3,000 deaths, and mounting global scrutiny, the Indian government disavowed the rioters and forced the police to protect the Sikhs.¹⁷⁷ Indira Gandhi's political successor and son, Rajiv Gandhi, attempted to justify the violence claiming, "when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it shakes a little (*Jab koi bada ped girta hai to aas paas ki dharti hilti hai*)."¹⁷⁸

Incensed by the riots, extremist Sikhs engaged in guerilla warfare for an independent homeland, Khalistan. Rajiv Gandhi negotiated a peace accord with the Akali leader Harchand Longowal in July 1985, granting increased autonomy to Punjab in exchange for suspending hostilities.¹⁷⁹ Sikh terrorists rejected the accord, assassinated Longowal and escalated the agitation with a distressing surge in civilian casualties. Gautam Chaudhary, who lived through the insurgency, recalls, "When night fell, we were afraid."¹⁸⁰

The Indian government enacted draconian military measures to combat the growing Khalistan threat, incarcerating,

¹⁷⁶ Manoj Mitta, "Block 32," in *When a Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and Its Aftermath* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, an Imprint of Roli Books, 2008).

¹⁷⁷ Barbara Crossette, "India's Sikhs: Waiting for Justice," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 2 (2004): 70-77. doi:10.1215/07402775-2004-3009.

¹⁷⁸ IndianExpressOnline, "Rajiv Gandhi's Speech Justifying 1984 Riots," *YouTube* (November 19, 2015). Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k847hOowO70>.

¹⁷⁹ "Sikh Leader in Punjab Accord Assassinated," *Los Angeles Times* (August 21, 1985). Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-08-21-mn-1021-story.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Gautam Chaudhary, "Living through the Punjab Insurgency," Interview by author (March 23, 2019). This interview with a current Fremont, CA resident who grew up in Punjab during the height of terrorist sentiment and lost his uncle in a Sikh terrorist attack, highlighted the first-hand experiences of Hindus in Punjab. He shared his personal experiences of living in a dormitory with Sikh students who carried machine guns, and of being stopped by the police and threatened to be arrested as a terrorist, despite being a Hindu, unless he paid a bribe. I also learned that these attacks succeeded in their goal, disrupting everyday life, and creating an "atmosphere of fear" in the days following an attack.

torturing, and killing thousands of mostly innocent Sikhs over the course of eleven years. The Khalistan movement spread to Canada, the U.S., and the U.K., as Indian Sikhs sought asylum overseas to escape persecution.¹⁸¹ In June 1985, Air India Flight 182 from Montreal to Delhi exploded, killing 329 passengers, the worst aviation tragedy prior to 9/11. Simultaneously, in the Tokyo Airport, luggage from Vancouver tagged for another Air India flight detonated, killing two employees. Both explosions were engineered by a pro-Khalistan terror group in Canada in retaliation for Operation Bluestar.¹⁸² The Punjab insurgency claimed over 17,000 lives before declining in India by 1995 through aggressive police action.¹⁸³

However, resentment over Operation Bluestar has not lessened in the Sikh diaspora.¹⁸⁴ In 2012, the general in charge of Operation Bluestar barely survived an assassination attempt in

¹⁸¹ Simrat Dhillon, "The Sikh Diaspora and the Quest for Khalistan: A Search for Statehood or for Self-preservation?" 2007, 5. Accessed June 18, 2019, http://www.ipcs.org/issue_briefs/issue_brief_pdf/1787132181IPCS-ResearchPaper12-SimratDhillon.pdf.

¹⁸² Canada, Privy Council, "Air India Flight 182: A Canadian Tragedy," by The Honorable John C Major, C.C., Q.C. (2010), 182. Accessed June 18, 2019, <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/371132/publication.html>.

¹⁸³ Romesh Silva, Jasmine Marwaha, and Jeff Klingner. "Violent Deaths and Enforced Disappearances During the Counterinsurgency in Punjab, India." *Ensaaf*. August 24, 2018. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://ensaaf.org/publications/reports/descriptiveanalysis/>.

¹⁸⁴ Tarunjit Singh Butalia. "State of Modern Khalistan Movement." Telephone interview by author. March 28, 2019. Professor Singh is a founding trustee of the Sikh Council for Interfaith Relations. He is a member of Board of Trustees of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. He has served on the board of the National Religious Coalition Against Torture. My interview with him helped provide more context towards the current state of the Khalistan movement, especially in India and overseas. To combat the first wave of pro-Khalistan sentiment, the Indian government responded through oppression. However, this oppression only served to privately increase anti-Indian and pro-Khalistan sentiments. And the Sikhs in the diaspora, with memories of operation Bluestar, continue to feel the pro-Khalistan sentiment. I would like to extend my gratitude to him for providing me with my key primary source, the book of Bhindranwale's speeches.

London.¹⁸⁵ In 2014, the British government accidentally disclosed former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's approval for Secret Service advice on the Golden Temple raid.¹⁸⁶ Outraged Sikhs in the U.K., in violent demonstrations, demanded full government disclosure regarding British involvement in Operation Bluestar.¹⁸⁷ In 2017, a Nevada man was imprisoned for supporting pro-Khalistan terror groups.¹⁸⁸ Sikhs for Justice, a Sikh advocacy group, is planning to submit the results of a worldwide Khalistan referendum in 2020 to the United Nations. The governments of the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. have permitted the referendum to proceed over the Indian government's protests, citing free speech rights.¹⁸⁹

Conclusion

Bhindranwale's success can largely be attributed to his charismatic rhetoric and lack of strong Sikh leadership in post-independence India. This investigation has discussed the feelings of

¹⁸⁵ "Indian Lt-Gen Kuldeep Singh Brar Attackers Jailed," *BBC News* (December 10, 2013). Accessed June 19, 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-25316370>.

¹⁸⁶ Phil Miller. "Revealed: SAS Advised 1984 Amritsar Raid." *Stop Deportations*. January 19, 2014. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://stopdeportations.wordpress.com/2014/01/13/revealed-sas-advised-1984-amritsar-raid/>.

¹⁸⁷ Nicholas Watt, Jason Burke, and Jason Deans, "Cameron Orders Inquiry into Claims of British Role in 1984 Amritsar Attack," *The Guardian* (January 14, 2014). Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/14/david-cameron-inquiry-british-role-amritsar-attack-sas>.

¹⁸⁸ "Reno Man Sentenced To 15 Years for Conspiracy to Provide Material Support To Terrorists," *The United States Department of Justice* (March 08, 2017). Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-nv/pr/reno-man-sentenced-15-years-conspiracy-provide-material-support-terrorists>.

¹⁸⁹ Rahul Kalvapalle, "Sikh Group Plans to Hold Khalistan Referendum Polling in Canadian Cities in 2020," *Global News* (October 04, 2018). Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4439381/khalistan-referendum-2020-sikhs-for-justice-canada/>.

marginalization and isolation felt by Sikhs due to a rise in Hindu-Sikh tensions that had begun under the British, escalated through the Punjabi Suba movement and Arya Samaj preachings, and finally came to a head with the Anandpur Sahib resolutions. The Akalis' focus on political power created a power void Bhindranwale was uniquely suited to fill. His initial speeches, which focused on a return to orthodoxy provided the young Sikhs—many of whom felt abandoned and neglected—a righteous path to follow and a community with which to identify. Bhindranwale's focus on a Hindu-led Congress Party government as the source of Sikh woes provided his disciples a clear target for their resentment. The central government's response to Bhindranwale's actions only exacerbated tensions, providing Bhindranwale additional ammunition to claim anti-Sikh prejudice. Bhindranwale's raw charisma led his followers to use violent means to defend the faith, the Golden Temple and the Sant(saint) himself. The aggressive response by Indira Gandhi's government to Bhindranwale's direct challenge to national integrity resulted in India's biggest tragedy since partition. In the end, Bhindranwale delivered the right message at the right time, leading to the buildup and eventual explosion of Hindu-Sikh tensions, and unleashing a tragedy of epic proportions for India and its Sikh community.

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