

The Communalising of Punjab, 1980-1985

Author(s): Dipankar Gupta

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jul. 13, 1985, Vol. 20, No. 28 (Jul. 13, 1985), pp. 1185-1190

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4374587>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*

JSTOR

The Communalising of Punjab, 1980-1985

Dipankar Gupta

Any attempt to comprehend the problem of contemporary Punjab should begin by first accepting the reality that a new minority consciousness has emerged. In which case neither the ethnicised history of a community, such as the Sikhs, nor the mere existence of a communal party like the Akali Dal, can explain, singly or jointly, the specificity of this new phenomenon.

It is for anthropology and sociology to plumb the depths of this problem but only after the practitioners of these disciplines too realise the uniqueness of the event. For so many years these disciplines had only primitive communal givens to contend with and write about. This gave rise to the belief that communal mobilisations only occurred between certain culturally pre-ordained groups. It was as if every dyad of proven communalism was a pair bound by a very special and inherent tie of antagonism, such as between the Hindus and Muslims or between scheduled castes and upper castes.

Punjab over the last six years should have changed all that. It has demonstrated that communalism does not require that its passions be always traceable to hoary traditions in order to raise dust and settle it down with blood. The communalising of Punjab over the last six years provides the only active historical base for the comprehension of the problem.

THE tragedy of Punjab today is not the making of Punjab alone. The entire nation is party to it and is implicated by definition in the emergence of a new minority consciousness among the Sikhs. Yet such an awareness has never clearly surfaced because of the uncritical acceptance that communal practices are sponsored only by communal parties. Once this readily assimilable position is taken one has almost no qualms in ethnicising an entire population such as the Sikhs as being inherently prone to fundamentalist diktats. The possibility that Sikhs may have other identities too is relegated into the background. One has also, as a consequence, no qualms, no analytical bewilderment either, with the term 'Hindu backlash'. Unmindful of the communal swagger that this term validates it is freely used to explain the repeated and large-scale violations on the Sikh community by the non-Sikhs (primarily Hindus). The diacritica of this new majority consciousness should not have gone unnoticed.

THE NEW MINORITY

Any attempt to comprehend the problem of contemporary Punjab should begin by first accepting the reality that a new minority consciousness has emerged. In which case neither the ethnicised history of a community, such as the Sikhs, nor the mere existence of a communal party like the Akali Dal, can explain, singly or jointly, the specificity of this new phenomenon. It is for anthropology and sociology to plumb the depths of this problem but only after the practitioners of these discipline too realise the uniqueness of the event. For so many years these disciplines had only primitive communal givens to contend with and write about. This gave rise to the belief that communal mobilisations only occurred between certain culturally pre-ordained groups. It was as if every dyad of proven communalism was a pair bound by a very special and inherent tie of anta-

gonism, such as between the Hindus and Muslims (cow worshippers *versus* cow eaters), or between scheduled castes and upper castes (pollution *versus* purity). Punjab over the last six years should have changed all that. It has demonstrated that communalism does not require that its passions be always traceable to hoary traditions in order to raise dust and settle it down with blood.

This is perhaps the unkindest cut of all to scholarship but there is no social tragedy however great from which anthropology and sociology do not happen to benefit. Undoubtedly in this situation too these disciplines are privileged for Punjab in the last six years approximated a gigantic laboratory leavening communal passions over a slow fire. The resultant Hindu-Sikh communal dyad does not seem any the poorer, or feeble, in spite of its late nativity. The nationwide massacre of Sikhs in November 1984 should leave little doubt on this score.

That fateful day Indira Gandhi cast a long morning shadow as she walked through the opening that connected residence to party office. Home and office, domestic menials and party liege men, all merged into one which only an acute exercise in parallax separated. When she fell her shadow fell too, only it crumpled faster to form a shady and irregular hem around her. Her legacy too adjusted to this stone cold certainty within a matter of hours and stayed true to the shady fringe that hugged her to the last. In a tutored attempt at reflexive mourning the dark margins came to life and roamed at large, displacing national shock with private griefs, and bloodshed with a blood bath. Through every slain victim the body of the 20th century *Purusasukta*—or the communal nation state—was reconstituted amidst howls and arrhythmic chants of '*khoon ka badla khoon*'. It is at dark moments such as these that the term 'violation' draws deep into its etymological roots.

The massacre of the Sikhs in November 1984 was no thoughtless throw away curve. It completed the circle of communalism with such vigour that its involuted overflow darkened every space and publicly tainted the Centre.¹ The swiftness of the xenophobic stroke conveys the superficial impression that it was primarily reactive in character, thus justifying the wide circulation of the term 'Hindu backlash'. Even if one were to entertain the phrase 'Hindu backlash' for the time being with its reactive connotations then of necessity one must conclude that the score is now even: action-reaction, point-counterpoint. From the time of Operation Bluestar no opportunity was lost by the Centre to humiliate the Sikhs as a community,² and on each such occasion it has earned greater sympathy from the Hindus. The normal divisions between the Sikhs, such as between Jats, Mazhabis, urban Khatirs and Aroras, shaded off into a single identity because in the making of communalism subtlety is positively shunned.³ As a matter of fact it is the Sikh identity that is reactive as many Sikhs till the November massacres had other political and social identities as well.⁴ The fact that neither Hindu activism recognised it in deed, nor Hindu pacifism in words, signifies first the fact of Hindu communal consolidation *vis-a-vis* the Sikhs, and second, that Sikh communal identification is not a mirror image of Hindu communalism.

THE LIBERAL AND LEFT PREDICAMENT

The communalising of Punjab over the last six years provides the only active historical base for the comprehension of the problem. The close infighting, feints, and counter-moves making for the dense minutiae of these short years have also had the contrary effect of spreading confusion because the reportage on these events pivoted around the vivid prototype of the Sikh provocateur. Even among those resolute liberals and deli-

berate secularists who are still not willing to 'blame the victims' for the 'backlash' it is difficult to find a complete, unabashed, unquestioning, and irrevocable partisanship with the victims and potential victims. Unused also to viewing victims of communal violence as anything but poor, helpless and the traditionally persecuted, they feel that they are somehow being cheated by the sheer prosperity and the confidence of the Sikhs. So every time they raise a voice for this new minority it is hollowed by a dubiety they are unable to position. This adds to the concentricity of the Punjab problem as the victims categorically spurn the patronising hand up.

There is, however, one cultural factor which has also contributed to this unification of the Sikh sentiment. Sikh religion is a very young religion and still retains much of the vigour of youth. It is a participatory religion in which there is one principal text, the *Granth Sahab*, uniformly recognised five principal *takhts*, and hardly any significant doctrinal emendations or conflicting schools of interpretation. The gulf between the laity and the hierarchy is nowhere as wide as in most other religions. The congregation do not sit back in awe and incomprehension but intone silently but knowledgeably with the *granthis* and *ragis*. But even this cultural factor does not stand alone. Sikhism has also been a vehicle in recent years for the assertion of the community's economic affluence. To be a Sikh was to be economically prosperous, independent, and enterprising;⁵ and that is why many bleeding heart liberals are not sure whether they should bleed with the Sikhs or not.

For the left political formations too it would have been so convenient if only the Sikhs had been poor, helpless, and had sought patronage. The left could then have reflexively, and with a clear conscience, stood by the victims without being in two minds as they are today. Confused by the concentricity of the Punjab problem, confused too by the vigour and unanimity of the Sikh response they erroneously believe that the current intransigence in Punjab is an independent outcome of Akali politics. But this is certainly the lowest common denominator. If one works one's way through the positions that the left has taken over the years *a propos* of the Punjab, one finds that, on this issue at least, the entire gamut of left politics is quite rudderless. Several discordant voices pulling in different directions can be heard from the ranks of even the CPI(M). Many leftists, particularly in the CPI, even found words of praise for the Operation Bluestar which killed hundreds of innocent pilgrims in order to claim the lives of approximately fifty militants led by Bhindranwale.⁶ Many among them also considered the Anandpur Sahab resolution as one potent with mischief which only reveals that they have either not read the resolution, or did not like the confident look of the Sikhs. The full story of the needless massacre at the Golden Temple

has yet to be written, but in the following pages we will have occasion to return to a consideration of the Anandpur Sahab resolution only to show how its non-reading coupled with persuasive misinformation and disinformation by the Centre has created the chimeric image of the Sikh fanatic.

Still the left, particularly the Left Front government in West Bengal, gave evidence of what no-questions-asked-anti-communalism can be when they put a quick end to the anti-Sikh saturnalia in West Bengal. It must be remembered that anti-Sikh violence began in Calcutta even before the country knew that Indira Gandhi was dead. It was kicked off only after Rajiv Gandhi left West Bengal on hearing of his mother's death on a privileged basis. The rest of India, true to the old adage, thought of massacres the day after. This is why the accomplishment of the West Bengal government on this score is unparalleled. It cannot be equated with the other non-Congress states because there were no riots in these states in the first place and also because the Congress partisans here were nowhere as powerful as they were in West Bengal. The success of the Congress in the 1984 parliamentary elections in West Bengal should demonstrate that.

THE CRUCIAL YEARS: 1980-85

Even if we take the years 1980 to 1985 as the active historical base for comprehending the communalising of Punjab, one must of necessity also be willing to move vertically and horizontally, and co-mingle various levels of India's polity and society to provide perspective to the last six years. One must, for instance, take into account the constraints under which the new political masters of India must function as micro chips of the old block; one must also be able to fathom why the promise of breathing on the open spaces of the 21st century must be accompanied by ethnic marginalisation. There was an opportunity earlier during the partition of learning some truths on issues such as these, but it was pushed aside in the euphoria of political independence and on the mistaken notion that there was something very special about Hindu-Muslim antagonism.

So history has obliged by repeating itself with the communalising of Punjab. It has again demonstrated the feasibility of making points with blunt instruments. But it would be a mistake to think that when history repeats itself then it is always as a farce the second time around. Be that as it may, the political centre stage today does not depict a single-act tragedy, or farce, but a vignette from a performance of epic proportions where climaxes heap upon climaxes leading exhaustingly to a wasted donouement. The donouement when it comes will reveal the waste, the tragedy, and possibly the farce too, but right now the unbridled need for climatic highs is still deliciously recalling the foreplay.

It helps to look back into the past to com-

prehend how the current passions were stoked, provided we use history and not let history use us. The past lends itself to the present with different degrees of valency: the recall subserving current obsessions. Many commentators of the Punjab situation have viewed the recently finished Sikh identity as an outcome of Sikh traditions and history with the present only offering another occasion.⁷ As a matter of fact such unflexible uses of history are lit by spontaneous communal impulses so bright that the scholar-commentator often mistakes them for flashes of erudition. It is true that Sikh lore makes a great to-do about martyrdom, *peeri-meeri*, and so forth; and it is also true that the Akali Dal constantly returns to these evocative symbols. There are no doubts, least of all for Longowal, that the Akali Dal is a communal party, but there are grave doubts if the people of Punjab were politically always communal. If communalism were confined to the communal parties then the sluice gates of xenophobia could be jammed fairly effectively. It is only when it spills over that the circle of communalism darkens: the Centre and the periphery are equally tarred.

If one were to examine the career graph of the Akalis then it would become obvious that far from the graph depicting a steady curve riding high on lore, myths, history (mythstory), it actually features both peaks and troughs. If one wishes to go back to pre-Independence Akali politics the record would seem even shabbier. In 1946 when Master Tara Singh, prodded by the mythstory of the Sikhs, incomprehensibly lipped the demand for a separat Sikh state he found his constituency quickly leaving the room to have a hearty laugh outside.⁸ He hurriedly withdrew this demand and was only able to re-establish himself much later during the partition by demonstrating his solidarity with India. If in those days this was accomplished by anti-Muslim bigotry, today it is accomplished by anti-Sikh xenophobia.

Incomprehensibly too, to the unreflecting scholar-commentator, some of the most outstanding Sikh Congress leaders of the past four decades had begun their political careers as Akali partisans. Their conversion to Congress did not make them apostates, nor were they declared *tankhaiya*. Swaran Singh and Pratap Singh Kairon are perhaps the best known among such men. Yet these notables did not cease being Sikhs, or even cease subscribing to the sectarian Sikh folklores and mythstory. If the Sikhs were really unable to distinguish between temporal and spiritual authority (as enunciated by the *peeri-meeri* duo) the Congress would never have won as resoundingly as it has in the past with Sikh votes, and neither would the Akali party have been in near disgrace in the 1980 elections. In the Sikh majority district of Ludhiana, for instance, the Congress won nine out of 12 seats in 1980.

CHANDIGARH, WATER AND TERRITORY: TAKE OFF OF A SECULAR MOVEMENT

If there is a historic cut-off point for the current tensions communalising Punjab then it is 1980. That is the time around when the sluice gates of communal passions around Punjab were gradually being oiled and un-jammed, and kept in readiness to be flung open. History stood by in attendance with its records and accomplishments, but in order of the most recent first. Not Guru Gobind Singh, nor the *gallughara* (literally, blood-bath) of Abdall, nor even the Akali *jathas* of the 1920s, got precedence. Like memory the past stretched slowly backwards from the present. Chandigarh, territorial disputes, and the sharing of river waters were the main issues then. Ironically the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur seems all important now. Five years of Congress rule inclusive of Operation Bluestar and the Sikh massacres of 1984 mnemonically revived the past, pushed away the present, and filled in the concentricity of a new communalism.

The demand for Chandigarh as the capital of Punjab; the demand that the sharing of river water between Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan be adjudicated by the Supreme Court; and the demand that territorial disputes between Punjab and its neighbours be decided by the territorial tribunal, were among the principal demands of the Anandpur Sahab resolution. This resolution was passed in 1978 when the Akalis and Punjab in their grip and also a finger in the sticky Janata pie in the Centre. Yet, the adoption of the Anandpur Sahab resolution did not signal mass communal excitement in 1978. All the Akali Dal did was to file a case in the Supreme Court on the issue of inter-state distribution of water. What is more, the Akalis showed no enthusiasm to implement any of the ethnic demands contained in the Anandpur Sahab resolution. Paradoxically the Congress(I) while refusing to take heed of the secular elements in the Akali resolution were quick to recognise and make concessions on ethnic issues. The most remarkable being the publicised willingness of the Congress(I) to constitute a separate Sikh code bill, thus amending Article 25 of the Constitution.⁹

SOURCE CREDIBILITY OF AKALIS

Why did the Anandpur Sahab resolution come to mean so much in the years following 1980? After all the Akalis were defeated in Punjab a scarce two years after the resolution was formally adopted. The majority of elected legislators in Punjab after the 1980 elections were Sikhs, but not Akalis. But by 1982 Sikh opinion began to give the Akali Dal a source credibility which it perhaps lacked even in 1978. To comprehend this and to plumb the depths of the communalisation of Punjab the period since 1980 deserves closer scrutiny.

The increasing source credibility of the

Akali Dal can be traced to two factors. First, the apparent transparent honesty of the Akali demands. Chandigarh, the Akali Dal demanded, should be given to Punjab as it was built as the capital of Punjab at a site where the majority language was Punjabi. The Akalis further urged that disputes over water and territory be handed over to superior adjudicating bodies and that the Dal would accept the decision of these bodies. In spite of the apparent honesty of the Akali demands, that alone would not have given it its source credibility. At this point we must take into account the second factor which enhanced the Dal's credibility, viz, the fact that the Congress never squarely faced the Akali demand. The Centre put off any consideration of the major issues by (a) calling the Anandpur Sahab resolution secessionist; (b) by withdrawing from the Supreme Court the case that the Akalis in 1978 had filed on water disputes; and (c) by linking Abohar and Fazilka with Chandigarh. The last meant that the only way Punjab could get Chandigarh would be if it gave Abohar and Fazilka to Haryana in return which are deep in Punjab. The transfer of these regions to Haryana would entail the construction of a corridor, not unlike Danzig. Instead the Akalis contended that all territorial disputes be handed to the appropriate commission/tribunal, and the matter be decided as in all territorial disputes, on the principles of contiguity and village (not block or district) level language enumeration.

Instead of responding to this position openly, the Congress(I) kept talking of Abohar, Fazilka, corridor, Chandigarh, all at once. To make matters worse, after their accession to power in Punjab the Congress(I) in 1980 withdrew from the Supreme Court the case on water distribution that was filed by the earlier Akali Dal government. When the Congress(I) withdrew the case the only reason it gave was that the Akalis were being unneighbourly and unpatriotic in moving the court.¹⁰ If this were the case surely the Supreme Court would have given the same judgment and the well curved Akali sail would then have hung limp.

None of these three major demands made by the Akalis were ethnic or communal. They were straightforward regional and secular issues. West Bengal, Karnataka, or Andhra Pradesh could have come up with similar demands. But unlike these states, also known for the strength of their regional political formations, the party sponsoring these demands in Punjab was a communal party, the Akali Dal. Also unlike any of the issues actually raised by West Bengal, or by any other non-Congress(I) state, there was no ambiguity in any of these three issues raised by the Akalis since 1980. Not one of these could be reasonably controverted: at least the Congress(I) did not exert itself to do so. On the contrary it insisted on com-

munalising these demands by raising the bogey of Sikh separatism. This immediately struck a responsive chord in Hindu hearts uneasy with forebodings of another partition.

I would further contend that the issues of water, territory, and Chandigarh were not equally important nor equally transparent in their honesty in the eyes of the Sikhs. Though each of them merited a 24-carat status, it was Chandigarh that was the real solitaire—shone to resplendence by the heaviest of Congress(I) handlings. For a long time, till actually Operation Bluestar, it was the unassailable Akali position on Chandigarh that helped the Dal to get its act together *vis-a-vis* the Centre. Though the Anandpur Sahab resolution also talked of reworking Centre-State relationships this aspect received no salience with the people. With time, however, as the Centre tossed about the issues of Chandigarh, water, and territory, instead of firmly grappling with them, the validity of redefining Centre-State relationships found vindication and objectification in the eyes of an ever growing number of Sikhs. Surely and rapidly the Akali Dal kept gaining in source credibility such that it was even emboldened to talk in terms of *Dharam Yudh* (religious war) on August 4, 1982 even though a large number of Sikhs still thought it to be quite irrelevant. Operation Bluestar and the November 1984 Sikh massacres completed the communal circle. *Dharam Yudh* suddenly became the most relevant issue.

FROM SECULAR TO COMMUNAL: HEIGHTENING OF MINORITY CONSCIOUSNESS

If Operation Bluestar was designed to smash communal extremism, nothing could have been a greater failure. Secular and regional issues went into the shade and Sikh opinion consolidated as never before behind its religious ramparts. It is not as if Sikhs objected to the necessity of using the army to weed out criminal elements from the Golden Temple. In fact they would have favoured a police action in the Golden Temple as early as in 1982 when A S Athwal, the DIG of Police, was allegedly murdered by extremists. The groundswell of Sikh hostility to the army action of June 1984 grew as it did primarily because the brutality of Operation Bluestar resulted in the deaths of a large number of innocent pilgrims. Bluestar was followed by similar operations in other gurudwaras too, where again, as in Dukhniwaran Sahab in Patiala, a large number of devotees lost their lives. That Bhindranwale is near canonisation in the minds of many Sikhs today is because Bhindranwale's blood mingled with the blood of at least 400 pilgrims who died during Bluestar. Other factors such as the over use of force, mortar, HASH, and tanks which devastated large portions of the Temple fell in line and stoked

this initial anger further. The scale of and the devastation wrought by Operation Blue-star even horrified some loyal Congress(I) members.¹¹ When the Blue-star showed no signs of a flagging momentum, and was followed by large-scale harassment of Sikhs, young and old, men and women, more recalcitrants slipped behind fundamentalist ramparts and ideologically barricaded themselves. The November 1984 massacres successfully nationalised this tendency among Sikhs. The enemy was no longer the Congress(I) government but the Hindu *sarkar*. The source credibility of the Akalis became unassailable and their communal prognostications took on a clairvoyant character.

This is what source credibility is all about. Once an individual or an organisation wins absolute credibility on certain issues, thereafter, that individual or organisation is deemed in the public eye as a source of unimpeachable credibility such that its other pronouncements are subscribed to without scrutiny.¹² Exhortations towards martyrdom, towards traditional obeisance to the temporal authority of the *takhts*, towards the defence of Sikh religion and traditions; in short exhortations towards *Dharam Yudh*, began to possess a credible ring. It is not as if the past heavily burdened the present in 1980, but rather it is the manner in which the Centre reacted to the Akali demands, which were initially secular that mnemonically revived tradition as an ideological rationale for activism. If, however, we fail to take note of this and argue instead that Sikh religious consciousness was from the beginning the motivating factor then we would be making a superficial use of history, and in objective terms 'blaming the victims'. It needs reminding that every community is capable of creating a history full of glory, sacrifice and martyrdom. The Tamils of Sri Lanka next door are doing it right now. The Druze, the Palestinians, the Iranians, the Bengalis, the Maharashtrians, to name a few at random, have all demonstrated this capacity in recent times.

HINDU COMMUNALISM AND SIKH COMMUNALISM

The gradual consolidation of Sikh opinion around the Akalis did not produce Hindu communalism. The two proceeded apace but were pointed in different directions. While the various Sikh factions tilted at the Centre, Hindu communalists organised against the Sikhs. The communalism of these two communities are still not mirror images of each other. Most incidents of communal violence on the streets, such as the recent ones in Hoshiarpur district, or the earlier ones in Patiala, Ambala and Panipat, as well as the Sikh massacres in November, have occurred where the Sikhs are in a minority. Rural Punjab where Sikhs are a majority is tense, thanks to the ruthless persecution of Sikh youth, but there has been no major communal incident in Punjab

villages. It hardly needs repeating that from the early years of this century a significant section of the Hindu community in Punjab has rallied behind the Arya Samaj to deny Sikhism its separate identity. The gurudwaras too were under Hindu mahants who made every effort to efface them of any special significance to Sikhism. Hindu idols were installed in the gurudwaras to convey the impression that the Sikhs had no special claim to these shrines.¹³ The Sikh resentment of this was obvious and understandable. This explains why it was necessary to take Hindu idols away from the gurudwaras in 1905 to appease the Sikhs. But the Sikhs even then were against that brand of Hindu communalism that was aimed against them and not against Hinduism as such. This is what allowed Gandhiji to talk to the leaders of the Akali movement of the 1920s like a school master.¹⁴ Neither did Master Tara Singh receive mass approbation for his advocacy of an autonomous, sovereign Sikh state in the 1940s. This strain still characterises Sikh politics even though it has become much communalised. Already stress lines are developing and there is not much time before the mirror cracks from side to side and Sikh communalism becomes a mirror image of the Hindu one.

Time is indeed running out. Perceptions and counter-perception—not issues—seem to be fuelling passions increasingly. The perceptions among Hindus that the Sikhs are out for another partition is an outcome of a non-reading of the Anandpur Sahab resolution aided in no small measure by the Congress(I)'s deliberate policy to misrepresent the situation. The radio and the television flood out by sheer cusecs. of verbiage any possibility of a fair assessment of the Anandpur resolution. The view has gained ground that the resolution is every bit as reticent as Hindu communalism would wish: that in fact it is a mirror image of Hindu communalism. The fact that the Anandpur Sahab resolution of 1978 nowhere makes the claim that Punjab should be under the sway of *khalsa ka bol bala* (or Sikh fundamentalist diktat) will come as a surprise to many. The volume, consistency, and intensity of government misinformation and disinformation on Punjab tightly interwove with the popular perceptions of the Sikhs among the Hindus to give the Congress(I) an unprecedented number of seats in the Lok Sabha elections of 1984.

UNDERCUTTING OF MODERATES

This Hindu communalism is no backlash. The raw material of popular Hindu perceptions was carefully worked upon by the Congress(I) such that in Punjab today one has two completely distinct views, one Sikh and one Hindu, on almost everything. In the years 1980 to 1984 the government portrayed the Anandpur Sahab resolution principally as a religiously inspired secessionist document, when in reality it was far from that.

From 1980 to 1984 the government refused to talk to Akali leaders breaking off talks on one pretext or the other. On three instances in these years the Akalis were ready to negotiate but had to return to Punjab in humiliation. The talks were still-born because of the abortive tactics of the government. On one occasion on the eve of a slated round of talks P C Sethi suddenly announced that there would be no talks till normalcy was restored. This lofty pronouncement was made without even pausing to consider why talks should be held regarding the restoration of normalcy if normalcy prevailed anyway. The fact that there was no public condemnation of Sethi's position at the national level is symptomatic of the success with which the government had won the credibility of the non-Sikhs. On a second occasion Bhajan Lal's Haryana erupted with anti-Sikh riots in several districts on February 14, 1984 forcing the Akalis to return to Punjab. On a third occasion on February 18, 1984, on the eve of another round of talks, the police unnecessarily created an incident in front of the Golden Temple thus forcing the Akalis again to return to Punjab. But what is perhaps unknown to many is that on the eve of the inauguration of the Asiad in 1982 an agreement was actually arrived at between the Congress(I) and the Akalis, where even Harkishan Singh Surjeet of the CPI(M) was involved. While the Akali leaders, such as Prakash Singh Badal, and Congress(I) mediators were toasting this event and waiting for the official declaration from the cabinet, Indira Gandhi suddenly announced that the agreement was not acceptable to her. This not only dumbfounded the Akalis but several Congress(I) members too.

All this was cutting into the moderate and majority section of Sikh opinion. While Longowal and the Akali Dal were gaining in source credibility they were not really prepared to carry out a fundamentalist drive. The moderates were thus shoe-horned into a dilemma by the force of their own latent potentialities. Each rebuff by the Centre gave respectability, *albiet* 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. The Akali Dal is careful to play only a limited risk game of communalist politics. However, the Akalis at this juncture chose unwisely not to conduct an ideological war against Bhindranwale for a dubious kind of united frontism which publicly overlooked the enemy at the door step. Yet they could not help but constantly look back over their shoulders to protect their flanks against militant depredations. As a consequence the Akalis had only a blurred image of the Centre's moves and an incomplete grasp of the 'Bhindranwale effect'. After Operation Blue-star they were made to pay dearly for

this. The meeting at Khatkar Kallan in March 1985, to commemorate Bhagat Singh's death anniversary is illustrative of this situation. Unaware of the public mood after long months in detention following Bluestar, Longowal began his speech by asking the gathering to consider issues "with a cool head". The hostility with which the *kesari* turbaned crowd created to this prefatory comment compelled Longowal to change gears instantly and adopt a shrill and belligerent attitude. As a consequence he had also to swallow his bile and refer to Bhindranwale as a *Sant* and a martyr. Neither did this position him advantageously *vis-a-vis* the Centre. All the latter had to do in this situation was to gloat to the rest of India with a: "I told you so".

If there was any pride (*izzat*) left among the Sikhs after the massacre of their numbers in the Operation Bluestar even that was being forced out into the streets. First, the Sikh library and museum in the Golden Temple complex was set on fire a full two days after Bluestar was officially concluded. Then again instead of allowing the SGPC to rebuild the Akal Takht and the bullet marked sanctum sanctorum and re-cover its shame, the government handed the task to an interloper from a renegade Sikh sect, the Buddha Dal, which further aroused the ire and resentment of the Sikh masses. This was followed by the arrest and torture of hundreds of Sikhs reminiscent of the Naxalbari operation a decade ago. The crucial difference with the anti-Naxalites operation however is that in this case it is enough to be a Sikh to be worthy of suspicion. Other identities do not matter.

The country's military and para military forces have come down heavily on the restless Sikh youth, both in the countryside and in urban areas. The youth who were already frustrated with the tapering-off of the green revolution were immediately incensed. Because of the pressure on land, and the decreasing returns on agriculture, they were now on the look-out for scarce jobs in urban areas, in the Middle East, and elsewhere. The number of schools and colleges that came up in Punjab after the state was redemarcated, especially after 1969, is evidence of the growing need among Sikh youth for formal education as a passport for other economic opportunities. They had already lost their privileged position in the army after the British left. All this makes for a very volatile and inflammable situation. It is often believed that resentment can only be furthered by absolute deprivation and to that extent the believers of such a position are at a loss to understand why the economically prosperous Punjab should demand more water and employment opportunities. But as a matter of fact economic deprivation is quite as often viewed relatively as well. The fact that the first thrust of the green revolution set off a standard of living and a scale of emulation which became dif-

ficult to sustain as the years went by should also be remembered. The increasing costs of agricultural inputs, the rush to buy mechanised agricultural implements which in many cases only increased the household's financial liability, queered the pitch a good deal and rubbed off some of the shine generated by the first few years of the green revolution.¹⁵ The Sikh cultivators, of course, saw the problem as an economic one, so much so that the Bharatiya Kisan Union was able to hold a large rally even after the Bluestar operation in Punjab. Yet this has not been able to counteract the extant suspicion among the Sikhs that it is the Sikhs alone who are being singled out for persecution. The manner in which the Akali Dal slowly gained charisma and source credibility as mentioned earlier bred and fed this suspicion till it became an unshakable faith.

ARMY DESERTIONS: COMMUNALISING PROCESS IN A MICROCOSM

The 'desertions' of Sikh troops is another indicator of the level of alienation among the Sikhs today. Here too we find in a microcosm the national forces at work in the communalising of Punjab. Not once has it been mentioned that in Ramgarh, from where maximum desertions took place, as many as 20 out of 23 officers left their position in the Sikh Regimental Centre and sought refuge with their families elsewhere. It was only after the officers left their posts and left their troops leaderless that mass anxiety gripped the soldiers—some of whom were just raw recruits. On the following Sunday when it is the custom that every officer of the Sikh Regimental Centre, accompanied by his family, attend the regimental gurudwara along with the soldiers, there was not a single officer present.¹⁶ Neither did the officers ever hold a *darbar* with the soldiers on this issue. Past practices should have made the holding of *darbar* an occasion to explain to the Sikh troops the compulsions of the Bluestar operation which would have helped to assuage their feelings. The first desertions that took place was the desertion of these officers. It is a fact too that Sikh soldiers everywhere were disgruntled and disaffected after the Bluestar operation, but wherever their officers stood by them and provided leadership 'desertions' did not take place. What fear, what propaganda took hold of the minds of the non-Sikh officers to desert their posts will never be known with certitude, but certainly the army command succumbed as much as did the nation at large to the persuasive typification of the blood thirsty, disloyal, extremist, and secessionist Sikh.

This continues to be evident during the court-martial proceedings too. While the soldiers under trial pleaded guilty to desertions, the prosecution is still not happy. The army prosecution wants to prove that these undertrials conspired and that the conspiracy was led by their JCOs and NCOs.

The prosecution is unwilling to accept that the soldiers acted spontaneously out of grief and anger and that they were provoked by the desertion of their officers. To accept this would weaken the case against the soldiers and the accusing finger would point instead at the government and the army brass. Hence the long hours of torture and deprivation to compel the prisoners to commit perjury. So far they have held out by reliving in their minds the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur.

CENTRE STRIKES BACK: ETHNICISATION IN REVERSE

Since Independence India has constantly been embroiled in tensions between the Centre and the federating units. This has emboldened political scientists to put down in print that the cultural variations in India will soon bring down the fragile unity in the Centre which embodies the nation state. A closer inspection at the points of conflict between the Centre and the federating units however reveals that cultural factors *per se* have never put any tension on the political unit of this country. In fact, it would be wrong to believe that the current tensions between the Centre and several states is actually the final efflorescence of the earlier movements of cultural assertion. If anything there have been three distinct phases involving three distinct kinds of political problems over this entire period with reference to unity and diversity, or cultural primordialism and political cohesion.

The first phase was with the demand for unilingual states. This was followed by nativist or 'sons of the soil' movements. This in turn, after a gap of several years, was followed by regional movements which demanded a re-working of Centre-State relationships. It would be incorrect to assume that the last is the logical culmination of the first, or that any of these political phases ever questioned the Indian Union.

The most cultural of the above three kinds of political manifestations was the linguistic movement demanding unilingual states. This movement actually demonstrated the possibility of a nation state celebrating its differences and thus questioning both the inevitability or the inherent superiority of the western type of nation state.

The nativist movements too always turned to the Centre for help and looked upon the Centre as the prime adjudicating body, much as the linguistic movements had done before them. The Centre yet again played the role of the arbitrator but not before it had gained some advantages for itself. Only with the regional movements of the 1970s and 1980s do we find, for the first time, purely secular and economic issues being raised to the forefront, and it is only now that the Centre seems most maladroit.

During the linguistic movements the Centre had to preside over the re-shaping of

the administrative structure and boundaries of its constituting elements but as it did not have to deny the linguistic demands of any major linguistic group by acquiescing in the linguistic demands of another, we witnessed, as was mentioned above, a celebration of differences which defied the western model (which is also the RSS model) of a nation state. The nativist movements too provided no major challenge to the Centre for the ruling party in Delhi was never threatened by nativist movements. On the other hand, the latter was always willing to be co-opted into the former. There could be no better example of this than the Shiv Sena of Bombay. But with regional and secular movements the ruling party at the Centre, more particularly the Congress(I), was for the first time faced with a political formation that was hostile to it. Now was the time for the Centre to strike back. And the Centre struck back ethnically. It ethnicised secular issues in order to marginalise its opponents, one by one, from the national mainstream. The fact that the demarcation of state boundaries is superimposed by linguistic and/or religious markers provided the temptation for the regional political formations to lapse into the ethnic slot the Congress(I) was pushing them into. While Farooq Abdullah and N T Rama Rao came perilously close to it, the Akali Dal blundered straight into it.

The Centre's policy of ethnicising regional demands in Punjab was aided not merely by the fact that it was the Akali Dal that was playing the leading agitational role, but also because the Congress was able to place a communalising catalyst in the shape of Bhindranwale. It may be recalled that Bhindranwale's candidates were wiped out in the SGPC elections in 1979. But Bhindranwale was able to overcome this humiliation with the help of the state government. He was arrested for the murder of Lala Jagat Narain in 1981 but then the government dramatically released him. The manner in which he was arrested and released created an aura around Bhindranwale. The 'Sant' had made it known that the police could arrest him only after he had spent a week in meditation in his hermitage, and he laid down the further condition that only proper *khalsa* Sikhs with open beards should be sent to take him into custody. The government acceded to this unprecedented request, and that too to a man who had, at that point, no standing in the Sikh community. His release soon after from prison added dramatically to his charisma. It was hard to believe that only a year back his candidates supported by the Congress were routed in the SGPC elections.

From then on Bhindranwale's prestige kept soaring. He bucked the Akalis to a pace and to a style of politics they were just not in the shape for. Sikh fundamentalism which did not figure even during the Master Tara Singh-led Punjabi Suba movement began to gain salience with the emergence of Bhindranwale. Operation Bluestar almost canonised him and for a while it seemed that

Longowal had thrown in the towel. But he rolled with the punch and is finding his feet again.

Fortunately for Punjab, Longowal is not allowing the ghost of Bhindranwale to act as an *eminence grise* any longer. To this end he has publicly distanced himself from the faction led by Bhindranwale's father and Jathedar Talwandi. Fortunately too for Longowal he was able to assert his leadership over the Akali Dal on June 9, 1985 in Manji Sahab. Fortunately too, there are many economic, sectional, and old-fashioned idealist interests left in Punjab which together, for different reasons, want the tangle to be sorted out fast and to unmake the communalising of Punjab. But unfortunately every day of procrastination only succeeds in communally titillating the environs, every instance of unwarranted police or paramilitary atrocity only aggravates the situation further. The Sikhs are not yet used to subservience. Their economic strength and prosperity allow them the extravaganza of defying the victimisers. But once the mirror image of Hindu communalism is reflected in Sikh communalism, then in the final climax of wargasm the fundamentalist Sikhs will ride the Congress(I) and turn the clock back for a long time to come. Well, might many say, good riddance like they said to Pakistan in 1947. But just think of the devastation of lives, the profligate expenditure of mortality, and yet another crippled limb that will never grow again like the heads of cabbages and kings do. We are all prepared after a fashion, to expect a wasted denouement, but one is never prepared enough for an irrevocable and avoidable disaster.

Notes

[I have greatly benefited from discussions with Gautam Navlakha. I alone am, however, responsible for the shortcomings of the paper.]

- 1 See, "Who Are the Guilty?", People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), New Delhi, 1984.
- 2 See, "Black Laws in Punjab", People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), New Delhi, 1985.
- 3 Scheduled Caste Sikhs such as the Mazhabis are known for their anti-Jat Sikh, and hence anti-Akali Dal, political preferences. For instance, over 90 per cent of the left organisation, the *Khet Mazdoor Sabha*, is made up of Mazhabi Sikhs. Giani Zail Singh was also successful in mobilising a large number of Ramgarhia Sikhs into the Congress(I). He himself is a member of this community. However, the Operation Bluestar seems to have obliterated these differences. The best illustration being the Scheduled Caste origins of both Satwant Singh and Beant Singh, the assassins of Indira Gandhi. It is also undeniable that the Delhi Sikhs who were in the past with Congress(I) openly supported opposition candidates in the 1984 parliamentary elections.
- 4 For a moving account of this, see Baljit

Singh Malik, 'To Dare to Belong', *Lokayan*, New Delhi, 1985, Vol 3, No 1, pp 29-41.

- 5 Richard Fox, 'Urban Class and Communal Consciousness in Colonial Punjab: The Genesis of India's Intermediate Regime', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1984, Vol 18, pp 459-90; see especially pp 480-84.
- 6 The CPI(M) in two separate resolutions first praised Operation Bluestar and then criticised it. In the first resolution on June 3, 1984 they blamed the Akali Dal alone. The second resolution of June 6, 1984 they blamed both the Akali Dal and Congress(I). (*Statesman*, June 12, 1984). Even H S Surjeet of the CPI(M) charged the Akali Dal for separatist tendencies (*Times of India*, March 25, 1984). The CPI has been more unambiguous and consistent. It publicly proclaimed great relief that the Operation Bluestar had taken place (*Times of India*, June 7, 1984) and has not found it necessary to modify this position since.
- 7 Sudhir Kakkar, 'Legend as History', *Times of India* (1984). M J Akbar also inclines towards an identical argument in his book, "India: The Siege Within", Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985; see especially pp 173-200.
- 8 Christopher Shackle, "The Sikhs", published by Minority Rights Group (Report No 65), London, 1984, p 7.
- 9 The Centre declared its agreement to amend Article 24 of the Constitution as a gesture of goodwill on March 31, 1984 (*Times of India*, April 1, 1984).
- 10 See also Government of India's "White Paper on Punjab" of July 11, 1984.
- 11 Swarn Singh of the Congress(I) said on record that the Operation Bluestar was not necessary, "especially when other solutions were available". He went on to say that the sanctity of the Golden Temple was first defiled by the extremists and then by the government. "Two wrongs", he added, "do not make a right!" (*Amrit Bazar Patrika*, June 17, 1984).
- 12 For an understanding of source credibility see, James A Davies, 'Sociology of Attitudes', in Talcott Parsons, ed, "Knowledge and Society", Voice of America Publication, 1968, p 25. I have tried to demonstrate the utility of this concept in greater detail elsewhere with reference to the Shiv Sena movement in my book "Nativism in a Metropolis: The Shiv Sena in Bombay", Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 1982, pp 140-146.
- 13 Shackle, op cit, p 7.
- 14 See M K Gandhi, "Collected Works", published by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1960-67, Vol 18, p 356; Vol 19, p 402; Vol 23, pp 229-30.
- 15 According to one estimate the rate of return on wheat for Punjab farmers fell from 27.28 per cent in 1972-73 to as low as 10.89 per cent in 1978-79. In 1977-78 it was an unbelievably low as 1.32 per cent. See Sucha Singh Gill and K C Singhal, 'Punjab: Farmers Agitation—Response to Developmental Crisis in Agriculture', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1984, Vol 19, pp 1728-32; see p 1729.
- 16 These facts came to light in the military court-martial proceedings as Jabalpur on June 3, 1985.