

Sikh Ethnonationalism and Its Contested Articulation During Militancy in Punjab

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This paper examines the evolution and construction of Sikh ethnonationalism from the beginnings of the faith to the period of militancy in Punjab in the 1980s/90s. While the militants enjoyed great community support immediately after Operation Bluestar and through the late 1980s, their version of Sikh ethnonationalism failed to resonate sustainably with the Sikh masses. In this paper, I highlight how militant violence pivoted from being politically oriented to being more indiscriminate in its targets. The Sikh masses, who eventually became victims of this violence, saw it as being at odds with Sikh values. I argue that this was the crucial reason for the militant version of Sikh ethnonationalism waning, and ultimately failing. This argument is demonstrated by examining the writings and editorials of various Sikh leaders, including some militant leaders who criticized the eventual degradation of militant violence and raised questions about its congruence with historical Sikh values and ethnonationalism.

Introduction

This paper examines the evolution and construction of Sikh ethnonationalism from the beginnings of the faith to the period of militancy in Punjab in the 1980s/90s. Specifically, it tries to answer why the particular construction of Sikh ethnonationalism espoused by the militants during the separatist movement of the 1980s/90s eventually failed to resonate with the Sikh masses of Punjab. This is an important question, considering the fact that the militants appeared to have significant community support immediately after Operation Bluestar and through the late-1980s.

I argue that the Sikh masses gradually turned away from the militant movement, as the nature of the violence changed from being politically oriented against the central government to becoming more indiscriminate targeting of the common masses in the rural areas. The rural Sikh masses found this type of violence to be at odds with historical Sikh ethos and values. In short, the militant movement eventually became repressive even to those people who initially supported it, and it misconstrued the stated Sikh cause. This argument is demonstrated by examining the writings and editorials of various Sikh leaders, including some militant leaders, who criticized the eventual degradation of militant violence and raised questions about its congruence with historical Sikh values and ethnonationalism.

The present paper is divided into three parts. The first section is an overview of the issue of Sikh ethnonationalism and identity from the beginnings of the faith to the period before militancy. It examines major catalysts in the evolution

and sharpening of Sikh ethnonationalism and identity, and takes note of the factors that kept the issue alive in the post-independence phase. The second section analyses how the issue of Sikh ethno-nationalism emerged to occupy center stage of Sikh politics during the period of militancy when, in a communally charged situation, issues related to Sikh culture, religion and identity were (re)constructed with new vigor by radical elements among the Sikhs. This phenomenon was endorsed by moderate Sikh leaders in some phases of the struggle as well. In the third part of the paper, I attempt to answer why radical Sikh elements could not succeed in recasting Sikh identity in their mold beyond what it had evolved into historically. I also try to explain why Sikhs, having initially provided great support to the movement then went on to recede away from the forefront of the movement. I attempt to map out Sikh perceptions of the movement at a stage when innocent killings, forced extortion, and other crimes became the dominant manifestations of the militant movement. In this section of the paper, I also analyze the writings and editorials of select Sikh leaders, including some militant leaders, who questioned the congruence of the violence with historical Sikh values. An examination of these sources helps demonstrate the main argument of the paper.

The Historical Evolution of Sikh Identity and Ethnonationalism

In general discourse, the origin of the Sikh identity is traced to the period of the first Guru, Nanak Dev, who is credited with the creation of a community of his followers, based on principles which were different from both Hinduism and Islam. However, some scholars hold that in the early period, Sikh traditions did not show much concern for establishing distinct religious boundaries. This process started only in the eighteenth century with the creation of a distinct code for the Khalsa Sikhs that mandated them to adhere to a new set of symbols (Oberoi, 1997, p. 24). This view holds that even the initiation of Khalsa did not put an end to the situation of religious fluidity among Sikhs, as diverse religious traditions continued to mark Sikh society for much of the nineteenth century. According to this view, it was towards the end of the nineteenth century that the Singh Sabha movement began perceiving diversity in Sikh identity with hostility and therefore undertook the task of recasting Sikh traditions (Oberoi, 1997, pp. 24-25). It was at this stage that the old pluralist model of Sikh faith was replaced by a more uniform Sikh identity. Even during the much acclaimed Sikh rule of Ranjit Singh such uniformity was difficult to achieve as a large number of people had embraced Sikhism not for any real commitment to the Sikh faith but out of sheer material considerations (Singh, Harbans, 1984, p.26). Therefore, the mixing of Sikh religious traditions with those of Hindus did not stop completely. In fact, towards the end of Sikh rule, under the cloak of Hindu-Sikh unity, Dogras and Brahmans gained control of Sikh institutions and even put Hindu idols in the Sikh shrines, which overtook the 'monotheism' of the Sikh Gurus (Singh, Sangat, 1999, p. 133). The Udasis, who exercised control over Sikh shrines, allowed such activities because they regarded Sikhism as no different from Hinduism in its social milieu (Singh, Sangat 1999, p.133). Maharaja Dalip

Singh (Ranjit Singh's heir) embracing Christianity in 1853 paved the way for proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries. With this background, the Singh Sabha Amritsar was formed in 1873, for restoring the purity of Sikhism and bringing apostates back into the Sikh fold. It took upon itself the task of articulating the 'inner urge of Sikhism,' giving it a decisive direction and awakening Sikhs about their past and virtues of their faith (Singh, Harbans, 1984, p.33). This led to a search for identity and self-assertion among the Sikhs.

The advent of the Arya Samaj in Punjab in 1877 heralded an era of Hindu-Sikh antagonism out of which emerged assertions of Sikh identity distinct from Hindu identity. The center of the discord was Swami Dayanand's book *Satyarth Prakash* (1874), which contained derogatory language regarding Guru Nanak and his followers. He used the term *Guru Dhurta* which is interpreted as rogue, cheat, fraudulent, crafty, cunning, dishonest and mischievous; the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib were described as *mithya* (falsehood) and Sikhism a *jal* (snare) (Singh, Ganda, 1977, p.326). Guru Nanak was depicted as illiterate, self-conceited and hypocritical and the Sikhs were dubbed as arrogant and slaves to lust (Singh, Ganda 1977, p.326). Dayanand considered Sikhism as one of the innumerable cults of Hinduism and held that the founder of the Sikh faith might have noble aims but had no learning (Jones, 1977, p.332). Describing the worship of Guru Granth Sahib as idolatry, the Sikhs were accused of being idolaters. Such proclamations further intensified the urge among the Sikhs to distance themselves from the Hindus.

In 1898, following the death of the Sikh leader Dyal Singh Majithia, his widow contested the transfer of ownership rights of his property to a trust, which he pledged during his lifetime, claiming that Hindu law of inheritance invoked for this transfer was not applicable because her husband was a Sikh, and not Hindu. The Punjab High Court's ruling that Majithia was a Hindu set off an intense debate over the status of Sikhs. Lala Thakar Das and Bawa Narain Singh responded to these debates by declaring that Sikhs were Hindus (Jones, 1977, p.345) in their works with identical titles *Sikh Hindu Hain* published in 1899. Refuting such claims Sikh scholar Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha argued in his book *Hum Hindu Nahin* (1899) that the Sikhs were different both from Hindus and Muslims and had their own distinct identity (references to this work are from Grewal 1999, pp.231-51). To the view that the Sikhs were Hindus because they had emerged from the Hindus, he responded by pointing out that Christianity emerged from Judaism and Islam from both Christianity and Judaism; however they were both universally accepted as separate religions. If most of the Sikhs were converts from Hindus, so were Indian Muslims and Christians, who ceased to be Hindus after conversion to the new religion (Narang, 1983, p. 117). Refusing to accept the view that Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life for the sake of Hindus because the Guru himself was a Hindu, he argued that Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life not for a sect but for the principle of fighting oppression. The Sikhs had their own religious scripture in the form of Guru Granth Sahib, as well as conceptions of *Karma* (destiny), *Upasna* (worship) and *Gian* (spiritual knowledge). The notion of equality, discarding of caste-based

distinctions and the denouncing of Hindu social order, were the key factors that imparted Sikhs a distinct identity.

When the Sikhs retreated to the forests during the Mughal period to escape the atrocities committed against them, the Udasi Mahants gained control of Sikh religious places and continued to commit sacrilegious acts in these places. During the British rule, irrigation facilities were extended to the land under the possession of Sikh religious places, and this increased the income as well as the corrupt practices of the Mahants. In this situation the Chief Khalsa Diwan was formed in 1902 to preach Gurbani and to safeguard the political rights of the Sikhs. In 1905, it succeeded in getting Hindu idols removed from the Golden Temple. The Khalsa Biradri was formed in 1908 with a view to modify Sikhs' attitude towards the untouchables (Barrier 2000, p.76). In 1909, with the efforts of Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Anand Marriage Bill, which legitimized Sikh marriage ceremonies, was passed (Barrier, 2000, p.77).

In 1916, under the Lucknow Pact, the Congress conceded 50% representation to the Muslims in Punjab province. However, the Punjab unit dominated by Arya Samajists did not endorse a demand for similar representation from the Sikhs, contending that Sikhs, being part of Hindus, were not entitled to separate electorates (Singh, Sangat, 1999, p.158). The Sikh demand was later responded to with the enactment of the British Act of 1919, which provided separate electorates to the community (Brass 1974, p.319). However, following the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, the Sikhs resolved to seize control of Sikh religious places from the British-supported Mahants. This urgency followed Aroor Singh, the manager of the Golden Temple, offering a Siropa (robe of honor) to General Dyer, who had ordered the shooting of innocent people in Jallianwala Bagh. These developments led to the creation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in November 1920, to conduct the religious affairs of the community and manage Sikh shrines. This was quickly followed by the formation of the Akali Dal, which is now the political wing of the Sikhs, in December 1920. The Sikh struggle for the control of Gurdwaras resulted in the passing of the Sikh Gurdwara Act in 1925. In 1928 Sunder Singh Majithia, while presenting the Sikh case before the Indian Statutory Commission, argued forcefully that religiously and socially the Sikhs were a distinct community from the time of the Gurus, and therefore their interests were not identical to those of any other community (Brass, 1974, p.284).

The political association between the Congress and the Akalis initiated in the wake of two parallel movements, the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-25) and Non Cooperation Movement (1920) did not last long. The Akali leaders were unhappy with the Nehru Report of 1928, which recommended the abolition of separate electorates in Punjab. The Congress leadership in its Lahore session in December 1929 tried to pacify the Sikhs by assuring that "no future Constitution of India shall be acceptable to the Congress that does not give the Sikhs full satisfaction" (Duggal, n.d., p.18). Mahatma Gandhi reiterated the same pledge on 15 July 1934 when the Khalsa Darbar deputation met him in Lahore (Singh, Sangat, 1999, p.202). The situation changed drastically in 1940

with the Muslim League's resolution of 1940 asking for the creation of a separate state for the Muslims. The Congress also altered its position regarding the demand for a separate state for Muslims. Mahatma Gandhi, who had resolved that Pakistan could be created only over his dead body, became inclined towards the C. Rajagopalachari Formula (1944), which stood for conceding the demand for Pakistan in return for the Muslim League's support for independence. The Sikh leadership concluded that their interests would not be safe in the proposed Islamic state and wanted a system to protect the religious and political rights of the community. The Akali Dal's resolution of 22 March 1946 for a Sikh state can thus be construed as a strategy for protecting and promoting the religious, cultural, economic and political rights of the Sikh nation (Kaur, Rajinder, 1992, p.47). Taking note of the sense of insecurity among the Sikhs, Nehru while speaking at Calcutta on 7 July, 1946 assured that "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" (Singh, Kapur, n.d., pp.3-4). Again in the opening session of the Constituent Assembly on 9 December 1946, Nehru promised to provide adequate safeguards for the minorities in India which he said "was a declaration, a pledge and an undertaking before the world, a contract with the millions of Indians and therefore in the nature of an oath which we must keep." (Singh, Gurmit, 1991, p. 284).

In the midst of promises and assurances of the Congress Party, the Akali leader Master Tara Singh decided to tie the Sikhs' destiny with that of India. In February 1948 he put forth the demand for the right to self-determination for the Sikhs within the Indian union so that they could maintain and preserve their cultural, linguistic and religious identity. He claimed that Sikh culture was different from Hindu culture and therefore the Sikhs wanted a province where Sikh culture and tradition could be safeguarded. He wanted "the right of self-determination for the Panth in religious, social and political matters" (Rai, 1965, p.225). In November 1948, the Sikh members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly submitted a memorandum to the Constituent Assembly seeking that fifty percent of the seats in the Punjab legislature, five percent in the central legislature and forty percent of positions in the government services be reserved for the Sikhs, or else the Sikhs should be allowed to form a separate province comprising those districts of Punjab in which they would be a numerical majority (Sarhardi, 1992, p.166). The Congress refused to accept religion-based demands on the plea that India was a secular state. It was a big setback for the Sikh leadership to find the Sikhs being clubbed with Hindus under Art 25(2) (b) of the Constitution, which they viewed as a denial of their separate identity. On 26 November 1949, Sikh representatives in the Constituent Assembly, Hukam Singh and Bhupinder Singh Mann, refused to sign the Indian Constitution as in their assessment the document was not acceptable to the Sikhs (Longowal, n.d., p. 4).

Thus, the political journey of the Sikhs in independent India did not start on a smooth note. The Sikh leadership, who carried grievances from the pre-independence era, were not pleased with the manner in which constitutional

arrangements were used to settle issues pertaining to them, and with the treatment meted out to them by the central government under the Congress party. As a result, the notion of Sikh identity was at center stage of community politics while Punjabi identity was pushed to the background (Brass, 1974, p.323). Under these circumstances, it should be no surprise that the concept of a language-based province caught the imagination of the Sikh leadership. When the Hindus disowned Punjabi in favor of Hindi as their mother tongue in the 1951 and 1961 censuses, the Sikh leadership sensed a trap being laid to reduce them to a linguistic minority, besides being a religious minority. There arose two streams of cultural nationalism in Punjab, anchored to the religious identities of the Sikhs and Hindus. The Sikh leadership thought that creation of a Punjabi language-based province could help them preserve Sikh culture and protect their faith. Master Tara Singh is reported to have said in 1955 that the Sikh religion could be saved through the attainment of political power in the Punjabi speaking region (quoted in Nayar, 1966, pp. 108 & 36-37). The Hindu leaders viewed the demand for a language-based province as camouflage for attaining Sikh hegemony and eventually Sikh sovereignty. The Arya Samaj contended that Sikhism could not be justified as a separate religion under the new circumstances. These elements went on to argue that Khalsa was created for the protection of Hindus from Muslims, a rationale which became redundant after the Muslims were evicted to Pakistan and therefore, Sikhs should revert back to the Hindu fold (Sarhadi, 1970, p.160).

In order to prove that the Sikhs were a minority vis-a-vis Hindus and thereby sabotage the Akali demand for a Sikh majority state, communal Hindu organizations like the Arya Samaj, Jan Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha, demanded the formation of a larger Punjab by inducting areas from adjoining states (Rai 1965, pp. 287-88). As the State Reorganization Commission (SRC) constituted in 1953, did not concede the Sikhs' demand for a language-based province, their leaders dubbed the report of the Commission as a death-knell for the community. Master Tara Singh declared it 'a decree of Sikh annihilation' and regarded it a calamity greater than that of 1947. "The catastrophe of 1947 finished thousands of Sikhs. But the report of SRC wipes us from the face of the world" (Akbar, 1985, p.151). The present state of Punjab carved out in 1966 on the basis of Punjabi language, after a long-drawn peaceful agitation by the Akali Dal, left a lingering grievance in the minds of the Sikhs that they were treated differently by the central government on the issue of creation of states on a linguistic basis. Moreover, even after the creation of the present state of Punjab, the Akali Dal could not secure political power on a regular basis, which many believed was the real motive behind the idea of creating a state where the majority of the people spoke Punjabi. Therefore, a search for an effective alternative political agenda continued. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1973 which stood for securing state autonomy and a true federal structure was seen as a desperate attempt on the part of the Akalis to establish an enduring support base among the Sikhs. The Sikh prayer which read, *Raj Karega Khalsa Aki Rahe Na Koi, Khwar Hoi Sab Milainge Bache Saran Jo Hoi* (The Khalsa shall rule, no refractory shall exist. In humiliation the refractory shall submit and those who

seek refuge shall be protected), was perceived to be of a secessionist mold. The Sikh ideologue Kapur Singh's interpretation of the litany to mean that the Sikhs are *Raj Jati*, destined to rule, was fiercely contested. His view that the Anandpur Sahib Resolution only reasserted the political goal of the Sikhs to establish pre-eminence of the *Khalsa*, as ordained by the Tenth Guru, served as a continuing factor in distancing the Sikhs from the Hindu community (Bombwall 1987, p. 159).

The Radical Manifestation of Sikh Ethnonationalism in the 1970s and 1980s

The era of political turmoil in the Indian state of Punjab started with the armed clash between the followers of the Sikh preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and Nirankari sect in Amritsar on 13 April 1978. This incident, which continued to have ramifications in the state for a large part of the 1980s and early 1990s, unfolded with a background of a long history of Sikh grievances extending from the pre-independence period and well into the post-independence era. The fulcrum of the Punjab militancy, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, was taught Sikh theology in a religious seminary called Damdami Taksal where he rose to be chief of the body in 1977. As a Sikh religious preacher, he earned a certain amount of respect among Sikhs, especially those who were baptized. He attached immense value to Sikh symbols and did not take to non-adherence kindly. He was opposed to the Nirankaris because of their perceived acts of sacrilege and their concept of a "living Guru," which had no place in the Sikh faith. The clash between Bhindranwale's followers and Nirankaris on Baisakhi day in April 1978, proved to be a turning point in the history of Punjab. The episode was followed by attacks and counter attacks from both sides. The animosity resulted in the murder of the Nirankari chief, Baba Gurbachan Singh in May 1980. Bhindranwale was implicated in this case, although he did not stand trial. He was also the prime suspect for the assassination of Lala Jagat Narain in August 1981, who was the chief of Jalandhar-based newspapers known for their anti-Sikh stance. The Akali Dal launched the *Dharm Yudh Morcha* (righteous war) in August 1982, terminating an earlier agitation initiated regarding the distribution of river water in April 1982. It was at this stage that Bhindranwale overtook the *Dharm Yudh Morcha* launched by Akalis. Thereafter, Akali politics became radicalized, bringing issues related to Sikh religion and history to the forefront because Bhindranwale, after having emerged as the central figure of radical politics, appealed to the Sikhs invoking Sikh honor, which as he repeatedly argued, was denied to the Sikhs in independent India.

The rise of Sikh ethnonationalism is mostly seen in the context of the agrarian crisis resulting from distortions caused by the Green Revolution, coupled with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's politics of using 'divisive national and ethnic issues,' distorting the federal system by regularly dismissing opposition-led state governments and curtailing civil liberties and democratic process during the "state of emergency." All this led her "into confrontation with opposition parties, especially regional ones representing various 'minority'

groups along India's periphery" (Chima 2015, pp.38-39). While portraying Mrs. Gandhi and her party as the prime culprits for problems of the state of Punjab, the Sikh leadership adopted radical lines on the ethnic affairs of the community. The allegation of step-motherly treatment meted out to Punjab, which figured prominently in the Sikh leadership's mobilization rhetoric, appeared real to the vast majority of Sikhs. This became possible because the agrarian crisis, which assumed serious proportions, unleashed economic hardships on small and marginal farmers. This turn of events was attributed to the Congress party that had ruled at the center during this time period. The issue of water distribution became another key mobilizing factor. Punjab's farmers felt cheated when it was decided that about three quarters of the water flowing through their rivers was to be diverted to neighboring states. This water diversion deprived many farmers of the revenue that they believed they could have earned by selling surplus water (Chima 2015, p.45).

However, about the time of the start of the *Dharm Yudh Morcha* (holy war), certain uncharitable incidents hurt Sikh sentiments so badly that the Sikhs abandoned the normal Akali rhetoric, centering on the politics of agitation, in favor of a Sikh ethnicity-based agenda. The explanatory framework constructed around the politics of agitation, including economic miseries of Punjab, territorial disputes with neighboring states, and water-related issues does not adequately explain the politics of the ethno-religious agenda that resulted in militancy in the state for a large part of 1980s and early 1990s. The process started in 1981 with the All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) demanding that Amritsar be declared a holy city and smoking be banned in the walled city. In response to this, some Hindu organizations took out a procession through the city, shouting the slogan '*Kachha, Kanga te Kirpan, Sab ko bhejo Pakistan*' which means that those wearing Sikh symbols ought to be driven out to Pakistan. In 1982, on their way to Delhi for the Asian Games, some Sikhs were humiliated in Haryana under state Chief Minister Bhajan Lal's plan to 'teach Sikhs a lesson' (Dang, 1987, p.238). February 1984 witnessed the smashing of a replica of the Golden Temple and a painting of Guru Ram Das at the Amritsar Railway Station, and there were instances of humiliation of Sikh women and sacrilege of Sikh shrines in Haryana. The Sikhs felt that they were a threatened minority within their own state. These incidents allowed Bhindranwale to assume the mantle of the savior of the Sikhs. He repeatedly asserted that the Sikh faith was the target of the Hindu majority. In fact, a time was reached when only community-related issues occupied Sikh minds; a time when territorial problems, water disputes and the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab had all receded to the background, and even the Anandpur Sahib Resolution appeared to have become irrelevant. The credentials of the Akali Dal and SGPC as spokespersons of the Sikhs came to be challenged by Sikh militant organizations (Singh, Kuldip, 1988, p.13). Bhindranwale asserted repeatedly that the "Sikhs were second class citizens and slaves in India and that they must fight for their independence" (Dang 1987, p.238). He openly preached violence as a strategy for redressing Sikh grievances and even declared, "whosoever insults the Guru

Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book) should be killed there and then” (Pettigrew, 1987, p.16).

The sense of grievance among the Sikhs increased manifold after the army attack on the Golden Temple – codenamed “Operation Bluestar” – in the first week of June 1984. The prominent Sikh historian Khushwant Singh equated the Sikh tragedy with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and argued that it could become turning point in the history of the Khalistan movement (Singh, Khushwant, 1984). The desecration of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht left a seemingly permanent impression of being an isolated and a separate people in the Sikh collective memory (Singh, Khushwant, 1984). Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was execrated not only by Sikh militants but also by the great majority of Sikhs, “as arch persecutor of the Sikh religion” and the Sikhs came to regard the right of armed rebellion as an integral part of their religion (O’Brien, 1988, p.9). After the killings of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere in the country in November 1984, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards, the Sikh community’s collective psyche was further wounded, and its sense of security lost (Mathew 1985, p.260). The involvement of the state in teaching Sikhs a lesson made the situation grim, as the Sikhs felt they had become second-class citizens. Never before had references to ‘discrimination’ and ‘suppression’ invoked Sikh sentiments as they did after these events (Singh, Kuldip, 1988, p.34). Their realization of being a minority assumed unprecedented proportions and they found themselves as people discriminated against and suppressed in their own state, and whose patriotic credentials were suspected as never before (Singh, Kuldip, 2002, p.265). Events came to such a pass that many Sikhs began to perceive the Indian state as being representative of the hegemonic Hindu majority (Singh, Kuldip, 2005, p.206). The magnitude of the wounds to the Sikh psyche could be gauged from emotional outbursts of the community such as “Sikhs are slaves in India,” the only aim they were left with was to “break the shackles of ... slavery” and that the “poseur, deceptive, liar and cheater rulers of India are scared of the sacred Gurbani of the Sikhs and their dress” (AISSF, 1985, p.1). These elements alleged that the targets of Hindu communalists and the government “has been the religious places of the Sikhs and the holy book “*Shri Guru Granth Sahib*” and that, “the solitary aim of the government is to destroy the Sikh tenets and their proud inheritance” (AISSF, 1985, p.1). The *Gurmata* (resolution) passed at the *Sarbat Khalsa* (a general Sikh congregation for deciding socio-political affairs of the community), held on the festival of Diwali on November 1, 1986, reiterated that the “Hindu government was continuing its horrendous attack on Sikh tenets and Punjab” and that the government wanted to “crush the sacred-most rich religious inheritance of the Sikhs” (*Gurmata* 1986). On the other side, a widespread feeling seemed to emerge that Sikhs are an irrational, sectarian and bloody-minded people, and extreme communalists who were out to destroy the fabric of Indian unity and this, too, became an additional factor in Sikh alienation (Alam, 1987, p.82).

The Sikh militant movement used martyrdom as a symbol to construct a particular version of Sikh identity. The self of the Sikh emerged as that of a

martyr whose sacrifice fed the community (Das and Bajwa, 1994, p.247). The punishments that defiant Sikhs were said to have received from Mughal emperors were invoked to emphasize the facet in the Sikh identity of being ready to protest against injustice. The perusal of the literature published by the militants in the preceding pages brings this out clearly. The politics of identity influenced the behavior of the militants who wanted to create a “homogeneous community and anybody opposing the project was the enemy and to be eliminated” (Judge, 2005, p.98). In pursuance of such an agenda, the Khalistan Commando Force in 1987 announced a thirteen-point social reform program. This radical outfit, among others, used this program to warn baptized Sikhs against using intoxicants, persons who sold and distilled liquor, those Sikhs who trimmed their hair and beards, butchers killing animals for meat, public servants who took bribes, persons who gave or accepted dowry, persons who sang lewd songs and wrote pornographic literature, those who took more than 11 guests for marriage parties, Sikhs who sat before the holy book Guru Granth Sahib under the influence of liquor, those who visited Radhasoamis and Sant Dhesianwale, those who believed in Jagrata (a Hindu religious ceremony) and bought property of Hindus, persons running liquor shops and Sikh preachers consuming liquor, those who sold tobacco and tobacco products and opium and, lastly, those who threatened and looted houses of the Sikhs (All India Federation of Organisations for Democratic Rights, 1987, pp.36-37). The social reform program failed miserably. While there was a temporary withdrawal from such practices, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the Sikhs on the whole accepted their dictates with faith and commitment. Thus, the radicals failed to create a homogeneous Sikh community according to their mold. Sikh symbols and traditions were revived in some cases, but this happened largely because of the partisan role of Hindu communal organizations and the repressive, and at times communal, response of the state.

There is a view which holds that while smaller political/religious organizations played an important role in defining the Sikh political agenda, long-term mass mobilization could have been possible only with the active support of major components of the Sikh political system (Chima, 2015a, pp. 283-84). Thus the sustained mass mobilization of the Sikhs could have been possible only if the dominant Akali Dal and the Sikh religious body Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the key elements of the Sikh political system, emerged as critical instruments in such a drive. However, as noted earlier, during the phase of militancy Bhindranwale was able to capture the agenda of Sikh ethnonationalism despite having no dominant hold on the Akali group or the SGPC. In this view, Bhindranwale, despite not controlling the Sikh political system formally, achieved de facto control. This process was also facilitated by major components of the Sikh political system – that is, the dominant wing of the Akali Dal and the SGPC. While conceding that at times relatively smaller players may be, or rather, have been able to influence the Sikh political agenda, the importance of the issue to the community would largely determine the ability of smaller players to affect the agenda. The dominant factions could not brush aside core issues pertaining to religion, to Sikh honor,

or acts amounting to refusal to recognize Sikh separatism, even if they were raised by smaller organizations. It can be readily seen from the recent (June-October 2015) incidents of desecration of the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, that smaller organizations were able to occupy center stage because the issue appealed emotionally to common Sikhs. Thus, the dominant elements of the Sikh political system could not lag behind in upholding a cause so crucial to the Sikhs. This was equally applicable during Bhindranwale's time and the same pattern is discernible even in the modern moderate phase of the Sikh political agenda.

The Contestation of Sikh Identity and Ethnonationalism during Militancy, and the Eventual Decline of the Movement

Thus, the radical elements failed to create a homogenous Sikh community of their imagination. The badly wounded and gravely alienated Sikh mind, so receptive to Sikh ethnic issues during the peak of militancy in Punjab, ceased to lend an ear to this rhetoric in a very short span of time. This section analyzes this trend. Broadly, it can be argued that human agencies may not be able to create or sharpen ethnic consciousness at their own will. It is implausible to suggest that leadership can mold the perceptions of its followers any time they want and in any manner they want. "Were it possible to build nations through human agency, surely the world would have been full of them" (Brar, 2002, p. 17). More specifically, it can be argued that after launching the Dharam Yudh Morcha, Bhindranwale was successful in convincing the common Sikhs that agitations led by the Akali Dal had failed in achieving Sikh goals, thus implying that it was not possible for them to get justice in the usual course. After the mainstream Akali Dal and the SGPC submitted to Bhindranwale's brand of politics, it was easier for him to present himself as the true custodian of the Sikh cause. From there on, he successfully appealed to many Sikhs in the name of Sikh honor and by invoking past Sikh sacrifices. The implication of his appeal was that, since the Sikhs were not receiving justice in independent India, they had to make similar sacrifices for the Sikh cause as in the past. Ironically the mystery surrounding the exact circumstances leading to Bhindranwale's death during the attack on the Golden Temple in 1984 did not permit him to acquire the status of a martyr for many years after his death. The Akal Takht and the SGPC finally declared him a martyr in 2003, and the Damdami Taksal in 2005. But, the leadership that succeeded him was unable to invoke sacrifice and honor among the Sikhs as Bhindranwale had done during his lifetime. The radicals were divided into several groups with no unified command, and indulged in acts in which no well-meaning Sikh could take pride; the movement was therefore bound to collapse, and with it the agenda of Sikh ethnic issues was destined to lose direction.

The forcible imposition of the social agenda by the radicals did not carry the approval of the Sikhs in general, who took pride in the democratic spirit of community congregations of the Sikh Gurus, even in the most difficult and testing times. Also, the democratic credentials of the SGPC, the body managing

Sikh religious affairs, are globally recognized despite all the limitations that an electoral system in a country like India normally carries. However, the social reform program of the radicals and the means deployed for its implementation were not accepted by the Sikhs, as these were seen to be at odds with the Sikh ethos and therefore worthy of being rejected. Much more damaging to the militant movement in Punjab, however, were the nefarious acts attributed to the radicals. There came a stage when violence was targeted mostly at civilians, whereas the movement had previously been targeted primarily at the Indian government. Ironically, the horrendous activities committed by the 'militants' have not been given the attention they deserve as a major factor in the downfall of militancy. Julio Ribeiro, who was Punjab police chief from 1986-89 and was credited with the idea of 'bullet for bullet,' writes in his autobiography that people with criminal pasts were recruited for penetrating militant groups (Ribeiro, 1998, pp.348-49). These recruits were paid and provided with logistical support to carry out their tasks and there came a time when they began to prey on law-abiding rich citizens. More recently, he again wrote that when "terrorism raised its ugly head in Punjab in the 1980s, smugglers who would have been put out of business by terrorist gangs, joined the ranks of the later" (Ribeiro, 2016). In this situation, the Sikhs who gave overwhelming support to the movement in the hopes that it would improve their lives became victims of the crimes associated with the movement without realizing who was perpetrating them. Thus, it was only a matter of time before this support was withdrawn and the Sikhs turned hostile towards those who engaged in this violence.

The perusal of the literature of the period makes clear that the Sikhs perceived the movement disapprovingly after it had reached a stage of lootings, rapes and killings of Hindus and the Sikhs who opposed it. It is true that widespread fear and a sense of insecurity became the stark reality of the era, and that the state of affairs did not permit open and free expression of views against such acts, even though there was widespread disapproval of what was going on under the garb of a Sikh struggle. But still, there is credible evidence to suggest that people with diverse backgrounds from within the community disdained what was going on. Leaders of the Akali Dal, representatives of Sikh religious bodies and even some sections of militant organizations deplored these activities and called them violations of the Sikh religion as well as the established traditions of the community.

The acting Jathedar of the Akal Takht, the Sikh temporal authority, Prof. Darshan Singh, issued statement as early as 1st October 1987 in which he differed with the Panthic Committee (an umbrella group for various militant organizations, but with uncertain authority or scope) on the issue of innocent killings (Daily Ajit, 2nd October 1987). He opposed the Panthic Committee, as he did not approve of the killings of innocent people or the people of one particular community. As the Akal Takht chief, he appealed to the Sikhs to ensure that the members of Panthic Committee did not flout the traditions of the community. This disapproval and condemnation from the person who was installed as the Akal Takht Jathedar by the radical elements sent a loud and clear

message. Shortly after this, on 18 October 1987, the celebrated Punjabi novelist Jaswant Singh Kanwal wrote that the success of the militant movement in Punjab had become suspect in view of the fact that the support of the people for the movement had dwindled. This happened because “innocent Hindus and Sikhs [had] been killed, which is against human values and principles of Sikhism” (Kanwal, 1987). He said that even though those killed by the militants were police informers and traitors in their eyes, people always sympathized with those who were killed. Clearly pleading that such killings were against Sikh principles he asked the militants whether it was possible for them to omit reference to *Sarbat da Bhala* (may all be blessed) from the Sikh prayer. Jagdev Singh Talwandi a radical Akali and president of a breakaway group of the Akali Dal was also reported to have said in November 1988 that the killings of innocent people were against the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and a crime against humanity (Daily Ajit, 23 November 1988).

Even members of the Panthic Committee and militant outfits like Babbar Khalsa condemned the killings of innocent people. During celebrations of the festival of Holi in March 1988, 35 Hindus were killed and 30 were injured in a terrorist-related incident. Following this, on 4th April, 1988 Gurbachan Singh Manochahal and Wassan Singh Jaffarwal, both members of the Panthic Committee, condemned this bloodshed and attributed it to agents of the government. They claimed that the government carried out these acts to sully the reputation of the militants (Singh, Sarabjit, 2002, p.104). Wassan Singh Jaffarwal, in an interview originally published in a Lahore-based Urdu newspaper and reproduced by a Punjabi newspaper in June 1989, deprecated the acts of killings of innocents and threatening people for the purpose of extortion (Daily Ajit, 1st June 1989). While he justified the path of taking up arms to avenge the elimination of innocent Sikhs and the attacks on the sacred Harmandir Sahib, he denounced the slaughter of innocent Hindus. He accused the agents of the government of committing such acts, and for collecting extortion money. He claimed that his outfit, on the contrary, had punished such elements and that “their fight was against Hindu imperialism not the common people.” He accused the government of planting their agents in the militants’ organizations (Daily Ajit, 1st June 1989). Another militant outfit, Babbar Khalsa International, in a statement to the press published in a Punjabi newspaper, described the elimination of innocent people and the people of one community as a heinous crime. Its chief, Sukhdev Singh Babbar, said that such atrocities were against Sikh principles. He said “some fake militants under the patronage of the government are collecting money from the people in the name of Babbar Khalsa, thus bringing bad name to the organization” (Daily Ajit, 25 September 1989).

The year 1990 saw the bloodshed of migrant laborers, and other people of the Hindu community, and the high-profile murders of Chief Engineer M. L. Sikri and Superintendent Engineer Avtar Singh Aulakh, both associated with the construction of the Sutlej Yamuna Link canal. This invited comments from Captain Amarinder Singh, a key Akali leader at that time. In an emotional piece in the local Punjabi newspaper, Captain Singh wrote, “have we forgotten the

purpose for which the Khalsa Panth was created? It was for fighting cruelties and repression, protecting poor and weak, safeguarding religious beliefs of people during oppressive regime of Aurangzeb. Today the situation is that the militant organizations under the leadership of the Panthic Committee, who have taken to arms in the name of the Khalsa Panth, are engaged in activities which are totally contrary to Guru Gobind Singh's directive to the Khalsa Panth" (Captain Singh, 1990, translated by authors from original Punjabi). While deploring the fact that the Sikhs remained silent on these issues for long he pointed out that "now the time has come to speak and come in the open. Never in the past have we remained silent spectators like this... if we continue to be so we shall be running away from the teachings of the tenth Guru. To be cowardly and silent while facing bullets is not our inheritance" (Captain Singh, 1990, translated). He pointed out that a few militants were playing into the hands of the intelligence agencies of Pakistan, the country whose army was forced to surrender by a Sikh commander in the 1971 war, and that Pakistan was instigating Sikhs against the Indian government so that the valiant Sikh community could be eliminated at the hands of the Indian army. He claimed that the "Sikh majority wanted this madness to come to an end. It is the need of the time that people should unite to oppose armed outfits."

Dr. Sohan Singh, a member of the Panthic Committee, reacted to the views of Amarinder Singh in an antagonistic manner. He described the Captain's views as those of an impotent person and sick mind, which merely pretended to adhere to Sikh principles, and said that his description of Sikh struggle flowed from his Brahminical mindset. He claimed that "Amarinder Singh was power hungry, [and] was talking of democracy because he wanted elections to be held so that he could become the Chief Minister. He wanted to sell the martyrdoms of thousands of Sikhs for reaping benefits in the elections [...] Captain is scared of the might of the Indian army [...] and wanted Sikhs to disassociate from the Sikh struggle" (Singh, Sohan, 1990, translated by the authors from original Punjabi). In this piece, Sohan Singh denounced moderate politics and upheld the militant path, but he did not touch on the factors that made the militant movement unpopular among Sikhs, and eventually forced the community to distance themselves from the movement. However, in the early 1990s, which was the period of the last leg of militancy in Punjab, numerous statements appeared under the name of diverse militant organizations denouncing innocent killings, extortion and other heinous crimes.

Conclusion

In the background of a long history of Sikh grievances Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale emerged as the fulcrum of militancy in Punjab, largely because he successfully exposed the Akali Dal's failure in settling Sikh issues to the community's satisfaction. In the process, he created a rationale for his brand of militant politics, which resorted to violent methods to fight for the Sikh cause. With the mainstream Akali Dal and SGPC yielding to Bhindranwale's brand of politics, there came a time when he was seen as the real custodian of the Sikh

cause by a vast majority of the Sikhs. At this juncture, he invoked Sikh honor and Sikh sacrifices to make a case for the use of violence for the cause of the community, with an emphasis given to ethnonational idioms. The militants groups following him could not uphold this ethno national agenda because they were divided into several groups with no unified command, indulging in acts which no well-meaning Sikh could countenance. Any movement led by such elements was destined to collapse, and consequently, the people's acceptance of this brand of militant politics was transitory. There is reasonable evidence to suggest that the militant movement was overwhelmed by the acts of lootings, rapes and killings of Hindus, and the Sikhs quickly became disapproving of the movement. Disapproval and condemnation, as examined in the article, came from diverse sections of the Sikhs, despite the prevailing fear and sense of insecurity virtually eliminating the chances for free and spontaneous reaction against such acts. The leaders of the Akali Dal, representatives of Sikh religious bodies, and even some sections of militant organizations denounced these activities and called them violations of the Sikh religion and the well-established traditions of the community. The very Sikhs who initially gave overwhelming support to the movement, believing that it was for the betterment of the community, became its victims without knowing who was perpetrating these crimes. The Sikhs became hostile toward those to whom these activities were attributed to, and the support base of the movement crumbled completely. This is what explains the sudden, but surely not unexpected, downfall of the militant movement and its goals in Punjab.

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