

## **Rise of Sikh Militancy and Militant Discourses: an appraisal of the economic factor**

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The Sikhs are an enterprising and a dynamic community. They are able to adjust to diverse situations and circumstances and make a comfortable living wherever they may reside and as evident from their global dispersal. Yet a section of the Sikhs in the Indian Punjab were involved in militant violence from 1978 to 1992. It cost the state exchequer billions of rupees and resulted in loss of thousands of civilians and security personnel. Numerous public figures and political leaders including the then Prime Minister succumbed to their violence. This paper explores the links between the changes in the underlying economic and agrarian conditions of the Punjab peasantry and how militant discourses - as reflected in their vernacular pamphlets - translated these into political and religious rhetoric to mobilize support for Khalistan. This militant rhetoric is then related to academic research which attempted to understand the economic dimensions of the Punjab problem.

The Punjab militant movement has been characterized differently by individuals and political parties on the basis of their ideology. The Indian government led by the Indian National Congress (I) labeled it a 'separatist' (separation from India), 'disintegrationist' (breaking the integrity of the Indian nation), 'fundamentalist' (a la Khomeini of Iran), and a 'terrorist' movement. The then dominant party in opposition, Bhartiya Janata Party called it an 'anti-Hindu' and an 'anti-national' movement for Khalistan, a Sikh theocratic state. To the BJP, India is a nation of the Hindus and Sikhism a sect of Hinduism. The Communist parties called militancy an 'extremist', 'undemocratic', 'fascist', 'obscurantist', 'ethnic' and a 'fundamentalist' movement.<sup>1</sup>

But the Shiromani Akali Dal, a political party of the Sikhs and later the militants spearheading the movement did not believe in such characterization. They considered themselves 'fighting for a just cause' that meant their rights; against socio-economic and political discrimination; for freedom of belief, expression and action. The militant groups were crying aloud that they had a 'distinct goal', a 'clear self-perception' and a 'professed logic of violence' in their movement. Each one of these issues is a subject of an independent inquiry.

The present paper limits itself only to that dimension which is most objective, namely the economic factor.<sup>2</sup> It would help us transcend subjective self-proclamations as well as imputations by others. This attempt is made in two parts. Part one projects the socio-economic demands of the militants and the second part discusses the findings of experts on Punjab economy. A juxtaposition of the two parts/perspectives shows that the militants were not indulging in violence as an end in itself rather they were articulating concrete

material demands for Punjab, the Sikhs and other minorities too. It also alludes to the fact that a correct understanding of their grievances by the government could be a sure way to conflict resolution.

### **Part 1: Sikh Militants' Perspective**

Numerous militant groups were active in Punjab trying to establish an independent sovereign state of Khalistan where 'the Sikhs could experience a glow of their freedom.' Each one of these groups claimed to have a clear vision about the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the future society. But the present paper focuses only on the socio-economic issues raised in their proclamations – handouts, posters, booklets and press releases etc.<sup>3</sup> Khalsa proclaim that by:

Khalsa *raj* is meant a country or rule of pure people. Khalsa raj would be free from evil and evildoers. Pain and suffering would not be there in theory or practice. It would also be farther from economic and cultural exploitation. The Khalsa *raj* would be a truly democratic state.<sup>4</sup>

They made it clear that their struggle was not directed against the poor of any caste or religion. 'It is desirable that we must preach amongst the poorest of the poor and the lower castes, and among those who have been misled by the ideology of the *Brahman* and the *Bania*.'<sup>5</sup> It is suggested that 'the Hindu theory of Karma has made people timid, cowards and lazy. It has rendered them incapable of understanding what kind of spring could economic and social change bring in their lives.'<sup>6</sup> The *Brahman* and the *Bania* are the ruling reactionary forces that are out to destroy the Khalsa since they do not tolerate the rise of any revolutionary philosophy. In such a situation:

The Khalsa must win over the poor, and people of lower castes to his side who are slaves, both economically and socially. They must be made aware that the ideologies of *Brahman* and *Bania* are the cause of their ignorance, poverty and weakness.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, they impressed upon the lower classes and castes the need to realize that it is only Khalsa who could uplift them and ensure complete independence. The Panthic Committee, a powerful apex body of five militant outfits led by Dr. Sohan Singh, a former Director of Health, Punjab government also suggests that in Khalistan:

Lack of education and social backwardness will not be allowed to be an obstacle in their (lower castes/classes) way. Nor the monopoly of education will be allowed, as a tool, to snatch the rights of the illiterate as the children of the rich, and urban residents leave behind the rural and poor children. The rich enjoy the boons of nature much more than what is due to them while the

children of the rural and the poor remain victims of illiteracy, poverty, diseases and backwardness generation after generation.<sup>8</sup>

The *Sarbat* Khalsa, a congregation of the whole Khalsa, was held at Akal Takht on 26 January 1987. It adopted a *Gurmata* (a resolution adopted by all gathered in the presence of the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib) that reaffirms the self-perception of each militant outfit:

This congregation of today proclaims for the information of the whole world that the Khalsa, who wishes the welfare of all, shall never attack the poor and the oppressed. The present struggle of the Sikhs is directed against those plundering and destructive raiders who have assaulted our principles, gurdwaras (Sikh religious place), Guru Granth (scripture of the Sikhs), our form/dress and truthful earnings... This assembly of *Sarbat* Khalsa strongly endorses the armed struggles of the peoples of the world, especially those in India who are fighting against the tyrant colonial rule for their rights and independence... to maintain their cultural existence and nationality. This congregation recommends the formation of all religious minorities front... to confront the Delhi government.<sup>9</sup>

The militants were not only crying for their freedom and problems but also took notice of the living conditions of the poor. They had identified agencies and institutions responsible for their poverty. Singh Khalsa stated categorically 'Our struggle is against anti-Khalsa powers like the big *Bania*, capitalists, feudal lords, big *Brahmans* (sic) and official informers.'<sup>10</sup>

The Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) with reputation as being the most dreaded militant outfit in the last phase (1989-92) also championed the cause of the poor who were getting poorer while the rich were growing richer. The poor peasant, however, gets exploited twice, initially at the time of selling his products and later while procuring essential commodities from the market. The BKI asserts:

The Hindu capitalism (sic) intends to squeeze the poor economically, like a lemon, to such an extent that they could think of nothing more than mere subsistence and keep begging at their doors. These capitalists are leading a luxurious life after having sacrificed the means of subsistence, the sons, youth, honor and dignity of the poor.<sup>11</sup>

Wassan Singh Zaffarwal of the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) also makes it clear that there could be no compromise with the *Brahmans* because they sit idle. The government of Khalistan will be based on the principles of Sikhism enshrined in the *Bani* (divine poetry in the Sikh scripture). He says forcefully: 'We will not create a society where a poor person sleeps on the road while his neighbor sleeps in a palace. We shall eliminate all remaining feudal and monopolist forces.'<sup>12</sup> Another leader of the KCF declares 'You cannot take

money from any poor person, ever. We are clear on that. However, we shall impose a tax of the Khalistan government on the wealthy. We won't be forcing money out of them. We shall tax them.<sup>13</sup>

Singh Khalsa also held similar views about the chief enemies of the poor people and the Khalsa. They stated 'The feudal lords, *Brahmans* and the money lenders are supported by Hindu colonialism (sic). They are filling their coffers by sucking the blood of people whom they have made their slaves both economically and politically.'<sup>14</sup> The exploiting classes are held responsible 'who are befooling and deluding us through caste, religion and social hierarchy to serve their own interests.'<sup>15</sup> That is why it is the duty of the Khalsa to acquire political power since no philosophy can live long without it.<sup>16</sup> Thus:

Without this political sovereignty both the Khalsa *Panth* (community) and the Sikh religion would be swallowed by the ideologies of the ruling elite like the feudal lords, *Brahmans* and *Banias*. And this sovereignty of the Khalsa cannot be obtained without an armed struggle.<sup>17</sup>

The militants' were critical of the systems of domination and exploitation of the poor. The Five Member Panthic Committee (FMPC) has stated in the *Document for the declaration of Khalistan*:

The Khalistan government would like to distribute the natural boons and meet the bare minimum needs on humane basis. Monopolist and capitalist tendencies will not be allowed to influence the government machinery and peoples' thinking.<sup>18</sup>

The Sikh Students Federation (SSF) also declared vociferously that the Sikh struggle is directed only against those blood-sucking leeches, wicked, tyrants, sinners, and destructive raiders who have made fatal assaults on their *Bani*, *bana* (costumes/dress), gurdwaras, culture and truthful earnings.<sup>19</sup>

The SSF then specifies the enemy:

Therefore, the main targets of the Sikh struggle at the present moment are the *Brahmanic* forces that have captured the Indian state. But this also includes those forces in Punjab who collaborate with the Central government for their economic interests and oppose the Sikh movement due to their political kinship with them. All such people, irrespective of their caste and religion are also included in the enemy camp and they would be dealt with accordingly.<sup>20</sup>

Identification of the enemy alone was not enough. The allies too were identified. Who could be their potential supporters? It has been mentioned above that the Panthic Committee specifically invited *dalits* (lowest menial Hindu caste) among other classes and minorities. Singh Khalsa also noted that if certain castes and classes opposed the Khalsa right from its birth:

....there are also such forces who have always helped the Khalsa. These forces include the peasants, workers, lower castes, middle classes and other dominated and oppressed people. These forces will help the Khalsa in future since the Khalsa has itself emerged from the oppressed people.<sup>21</sup>

The BKI questions if the Sikhs today have closed their eyes to the tyranny of the capitalists and decided to lead a life of comfort and luxury? How could such people be called Sikhs? Because, a Sikh is one who dies fighting for justice and protects the honor of the poor.<sup>22</sup> This organization doubts the possibility of a socialist revolution under the leadership of the 'so-called socialist revolutionary parties' and surmises if these were genuinely treading the socialist path. It is believed that true association of people cannot be raised on the 'foundations of atheism and hatred since it lacks sympathy for humankind. It could only be based on the pristine, social and spiritual principles of *Sri Dashmesh* (Tenth Guru of the Sikhs).<sup>23</sup> They stated 'It was a result of this association only that the Khalsa, who emerged from each backward class could overthrow the well entrenched Mughal empire established over centuries.'<sup>24</sup>

The SSF is not only apprehensive of external threats to the Sikhs from the Indian state and Hindu communalism, but is equally aware of those opportunist Sikh leaders 'who either belong to the rich class or ally with them. They are not remotely related to the Sikh principles and its way of life by way of their socio-economic status and life style.'<sup>25</sup> These leaders are in league with the capitalist class for their economic greed and political interests which have gone deep into their blood. Such Sikhs are responsible for the weaknesses and internal decay in the movement. This aspect becomes more glaring when it is compared with the earlier periods in Sikh history. The Federation argues 'So long the Sikh movement was guarded by the poor and the oppressed forces it remained in perfect health and high spirits with respect to its aims, objectives and principles.'<sup>26</sup>

The Five Member Panthic Committee also proclaimed that this struggle of the Khalsa is not directed against any religion, community or caste. Its targets are those evil forces who have chained Sikhs to slavery through force, deceit and cleverness. They argued 'These *Brahmanic* rulers of Delhi who have been practicing treachery, deceit, tyranny and force against the Sikhs for the last 44 years are the foremost enemies of the Khalsa *Panth*.'<sup>27</sup> This statement identifies three types of enemies: (i) Officers in the security forces and bureaucracy who appear to be *Singh* (a baptized Sikh) but are in fact subservient to the *Brahman*. (ii) Political leaders or workers who have Sikh appearance but are mentally in league with the Delhi rulers and in practice too take sides with them. (iii) The Sikhs who are not only morally corrupt and degenerated but also indulge in criminal and anti-*Panthic* activities.<sup>28</sup>

The Operation Bluestar and the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi in November 1984 and elsewhere<sup>29</sup> have removed the veil from the face of the 'tyrant and the killer communal Hindus' and 'Now it is not enough to identify the tyrants and the killers, but they should be eliminated following the Guru's command. The

Khalsa has been created only *to destroy the tyrant* and the tyranny, and *for the protection of the poor* (emphasis in original).<sup>30</sup> Therefore, 'O'Khalsa adorn yourself with weapons following the command of the Tenth Father and bring the present (Sikh/Akali) leadership on the right track to fight against tyranny. And if they refuse to oblige then O'Khalsa remove these obstacles on your way to liberation.'<sup>31</sup> Khalsa *raj* or Khalistan will never be served on a platter. Thus, the battle is inevitable following the dictum that 'No one gets an empire in donation it has to be acquired with one's strength.'

The BKI is optimistic that such battles will usher Sikhs towards green pastures:

The sacrifices of the martyrs will not go waste... We *must make such a country/ nation where the Khalsa is supreme, which has its own constitution, flag and Nanakshahi currency and where we can enforce the principle of 'Welfare of all' following the principles of the gurus. In such a country the religious people, the poor and the workers could be protected from the exploitation of the tyrant and cruel capitalists and monopolists, so that they may lead a happy life of self-respect with dignity and honor* (emphasis in original).<sup>32</sup>

Once again in 1991, this organization reiterated its stand for the creation of a 'new society'. The BKI states 'A new era is about to begin on the land of Khalistan. This new milieu will have exhaustive debates on the Khalsa culture, Khalsa vision, Khalsa rule and Khalsa society which will help us construct a beautiful model for the economic, political and social structural aspects of Khalistan.'<sup>33</sup>

But, the BKI and other militant groups are apprehensive about the realization of their vision of a 'new society' within the framework of the Indian Constitution. The BKI holds that it is the biggest hurdle in the creation of Khalistan and that 'There is no place for Khalistan in this cartload of papers.'<sup>34</sup> The Sikhs have already waited too long since 1947. There is no alternative but to reject this Constitution. It is cautioned that 'If we start any struggle without rejecting the Constitution, our struggle is bound to lose direction.'<sup>35</sup> But what kind of a struggle? It has to be an armed struggle that must have harmony and co-ordination with the peoples' struggle for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Khalistan. It is further suggested that the given moment is most suitable to launch their struggle as 'the international situation is in our favour and India too is a victim of serious economic and political crises.'<sup>36</sup>

The KCF and the KLF are also cognizant of the international situation and advise their sister organizations to understand changes that are taking place throughout the world. 'It is so very necessary today as it had never been before.'<sup>37</sup> It is in view of such developments that these organizations are bound to take their struggle to the international level and 'It is clear from India's intervention in Sri Lanka's Tamil problem that one sovereign state could intervene in the affairs of another sovereign state. Therefore, we would be wholly justified in accepting assistance from some foreign country.'<sup>38</sup>

The four militant organizations - KCF (Panjwar), KLF (Budhsinghwala), BTFK (Chhandran) and the SSF (Bittu) - also made a strong and fervent appeal at the Anandpur Sahib convention in September 1991 to reject the Constitution of India which was referred to as a 'thief's mother' and the 'root of all problems.' They argued 'This heap of garbage looks nice on the *Brahman's* shoulders only.'<sup>39</sup> They also stressed on the suitability of that moment to launch a direct action which of course was to be undertaken as a last resort. They suggested that 'First of all we must remember that this battle is being fought on our own land. Therefore, we will exhaust all channels of the diplomatic world so that the war could be avoided. But we will not digress an inch from the path of obtaining an independent and sovereign Khalistan.'<sup>40</sup> These organizations also impressed upon the urgency of direct action:

The international situation is so congenial, splendid and appropriate that if the Khalsa now failed to shape its diplomacy to these conditions or failed to avail of the contradictions of the world (sic) in its favour, then we must understand that we have ourselves prolonged the period of our distress.<sup>41</sup>

These organizations also cautioned the Government of India that if tyranny against Sikhs continued then the country would meet the same fate as Russia, once a superpower. They also issued a warning to all the countries of the world, the IMF and other international financial institutions that 'they must sign loan agreements with India on this understanding that *the people of Khalistan will not be a party to their repayment* since not a fraction of these loans has been invested, on the land of Khalistan. And, we do not need it either'<sup>42</sup> (emphasis in original). On the contrary:

The brave farmers of *our country*, Khalistan are feeding the empty stomachs of crores (one crore = 10 million) of *Hindustanis* (we are not). These countless *Bhai Ghanaiyas* in the service of humankind will maintain this tradition even after the recognition of Khalistan by the Indian government.<sup>43</sup>

The SSF is not swayed by its religious affiliation alone in articulating the interests of Sikhs and the Punjab. It is equally concerned about other communities. It is fully conversant with the socio-political situation of India. It argues that due to the communal behavior of Indian rulers, the people have been 'compelled to launch struggles in one form or another for their economic, political, social and cultural independence.'<sup>44</sup> The SSF names all those Indian states where such struggles for liberation have taken varied forms to fight against the:

imperialistic exploitation and neocolonial suppressive rule of the Indian rulers. At certain places especially in Nagaland and Tripura, the people have already taken to an armed struggle for their freedom as a result of state terrorism that is continuing there for several decades.<sup>45</sup>

The SSF is also concerned with the status of the cultural and linguistic minorities and other nationalities, the tribal people and *dalits* who are being exploited economically by the capitalists and both politically and culturally by the ruling class. They likened India to a 'prison' from which all such exploited and oppressed minorities would like to escape. All such classes are interested in establishing a political system in which they could realize their economic, political, social, religious and cultural aspirations without any intervention from outside. 'Thus, the Sikhs are inclined to extend support and hand of friendship towards those struggling classes.'<sup>46</sup> It is argued that the above mentioned minorities could obtain democratic rights only:

If the present Centre-oriented aggressive state administration is forcefully uprooted and a new federal structure is raised that ensures democracy and complete self-determination to the states in the true sense of the term.<sup>47</sup>

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, often considered as the fountainhead of militancy, was also not simply bothered about religion and religious demands. He was concerned about the social, political and economic problems of the Sikhs as well, but only articulated them in religious terminology. Most often these demands of the Sikhs and the Punjab were clubbed under one term 'injustices'. Juergensmeyer substantiates that 'Since the larger struggle is the more important matter, these specific difficulties are of no great concern to Bhindranwale; they change from time to time. And it is no use to win on one or two points and fail on others.'<sup>48</sup> Pettigrew also notes that Bhindranwale's words were a religious expression of a broad-based rural discontent and anger.<sup>49</sup> In an interview to a monthly journal Bhindranwale remarked rather simplistically that 'the Punjab and the peasant are synonyms. The former will flourish only if the latter flourishes. And only then the business of Hindu brothers will grow, otherwise it will collapse.'<sup>50</sup>

## **Part 2: Research Findings of the Economists**

It will become clear from the following discussion that the demands raised by the militants, though articulated in a religious frame, were substantively material. The experts on the Punjab economy have enough economic and statistical data to show a distinct decline in its dominantly agricultural economy. The Johl Committee report confirms that except for an increase in per hectare income during 1977-78 and 1978-79, there has been a decline in returns from farming in Punjab. There is even evidence of a decline in the real income per hectare from 1978-79 onwards.<sup>51</sup> In 1981, 59.1 percent of the total workforce is employed in agriculture which contributed 73 percent of the total wheat procured by the central government. This sector together with livestock, contributed 49.04 percent to the state domestic product at 1970-71 prices.

The small and marginal farmers did experience some rise in their income levels in the beginning but that however could not be sustained. Numerous small and marginal landholdings have become non-viable. A survey conducted

in 1974 reveals that small farmers (below 5.0 acres) were running an annual loss of Rs. 125.00 per capita, the middle ones (between 5.0 to 10.0 acres) were making an annual profit of Rs. 50.00 and those above 20 acres of land were incurring profit of Rs. 1200.00 per capita. As Gill writes:

With the rise of development crisis in agriculture, the small and marginal farmers are finding it difficult to survive. Between 1970-71 and 1980-81 large numbers of such holdings have disappeared...the decline is 25.3 percent. This decline is contributed solely by marginal and small holdings. The marginal holdings declined by 61.9 percent, and small holdings declined by 23.3 percent.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover the rate of return of wheat cultivation per quintal, the dominant crop of this region along with rice, declined from 24.50 percent in 1970-71 to 1.32 percent in 1977-78. According to Gill 'As a consequence net income per hectare from wheat cultivation at 1970-71 prices declined from Rs. 328.00 in 1971-72 to Rs. 54.00 in 1981-82.'<sup>53</sup> Over the last several years the price system has moved against agriculture from 100 in 1970-71 to 81.8 in 1980-81. The fall is sharp and consistent from 1974-75.<sup>54</sup>

The contradiction between agriculture and industry referred to above pertains to the integration of rural agricultural production with urban market economy. The Sikhs constituted 69.37 percent of rural population in 1971 and the Hindus comprised 66.39 percent of urban population. The second contradiction pertains to the emergence of capitalist farmers:

This class is using government machinery at the state level to promote its interests. While using government machinery at state level it comes into conflict with class in control of government machinery at central level. Against the growing assertion of this class it finds powers of administration at state (read province) level being continuously eroded by the Central Government.<sup>55</sup>

On the basis of this study the author concludes:

Emerging contradictions have provided an objective basis of the current crisis in Punjab. These contradictions are the product of capitalist development in the specific situation of the regional economy of the state. *In the absence of this objective basis, present crisis was not possible.* The role of external factor is secondary to the situation (emphasis added).<sup>56</sup>

The decline in economy is also reflected in the writings of Pritam Singh. He argues:

That Punjab may be on the road to a decline in its relative position among the major Indian states is suggested by the annual average percentage growth of State Domestic Product at constant prices between 1960-70 and 1984-85... Gujarat and Haryana surpassed

Punjab during these 15 years and Andhra Pradesh was catching up.<sup>57</sup>

He also doubts Punjab's potential to sustain economic development based on its dependence of agriculture:

Over 84 percent of Punjab's geographical areas and about 93 percent of its total cultivable area is under cultivation. With forest area of only about 5.65 percent of the total area in Punjab, and cropping intensity having reached as high as 175.7 percent, the bubble of Punjab's agriculture is about to burst.<sup>58</sup>

A decade or so earlier, a study conducted by Bhalla and Chadha about the income distribution in Punjab agriculture during the early 1970s reported an increase in overall prosperity of the peasantry as a result of the green revolution, although its effects have been differential. The gains have been proportional to the land holdings. They noted:

It is striking to note that about one-third of the marginal farmers (tilling less than 2.5 acres of land) are living below the poverty line. It is ironic that despite a tremendous advance in technology, many of the marginal farmers in Punjab are still unable to eke out a minimum living. It is equally disturbing that about 24 percent of small farmers (tilling between 2.5 to 5.0 acres of land) are also living below the poverty line.<sup>59</sup>

The situation has not improved over these years. Sukhpal Singh notes that around 34.07 percent of the marginal farmers were living below the poverty line in 1990-91. He observes 'It is further found that the condition of marginal farmers was worse than that of agricultural laborers in the state both in terms of per capita income as well as consumption.'<sup>60</sup>

Bhalla and Chadha had also commented on the dismal state of Punjab economy. According to them 'Unfortunately, however, in spite of putting in very hard labor both in farm and non-farm activities quite a few amongst them are not able to save themselves from the clutches of poverty. It is indeed a disquieting feature of the Indian agrarian situation...'<sup>61</sup> Finally, summing up their analysis they suggest that all problems of rural poverty cannot be solved within agriculture. Bhalla and Chadha argue that 'One of the main reasons for rural poverty is overpopulation in agriculture combined with inequality in land distribution. It is, therefore, essential to withdraw labor force from agriculture to non-agricultural occupations and industry.'<sup>62</sup> They suggest that the real solution of rural and urban poverty lies in rapid industrialization and diversification of the Punjab economy.

The dwindling agricultural economy and rising disaffection of the farmer, coerced the government to appoint an expert Committee under Johl, a noted Punjab economist.<sup>63</sup> The Committee submitted its report based on the twin considerations of raising the profit margins of the Punjabi farmers and ensuring a raised per capita availability of food grains to the people in the rest of the

country. The Committee suggested immediate diversification of agriculture, and recommended the government to assure prices and procurement support to the farmers who were getting squeezed economically since the early 1970s.

Gill notes that Johl developed these ideas further and spelled out four basic factors for the need to diversify agriculture and economy: (i) Fragile eco-system as a result of excessive pollution of soil, water and air; (ii) Over-dependence of farmers on wheat and paddy has created an uncertain market situation due to delayed announcement of procurement prices and dampened demand for Punjab grains; (iii) that 38 percent of landholdings below two hectares cannot engage even an average size family on itself and ensure its essential requirements of health care and education; and the last but not least important is (iv) the problem of educated unemployed youth in rural areas.<sup>64</sup>

Such findings of the experts seem to suggest that the cry of discrimination against the Sikhs and Punjab by the protagonists of the 'Sikh cause' was not without substance. Similarly, the militants issuing threatening commands to the commercial banks in Punjab, against siphoning out their deposits to other states were also not baseless. The economists have shown that the advance-deposit ratio in Punjab during 1975-1991 remained between 32.5 to 44.6 percent which is much below the minimum level of 55 percent prescribed by the Reserve Bank of India. If this limit has been adhered to by the banks, an additional investment of Rs. 1404.50 crores would have been made in the province by the end of 1991. As Gill has argued:

On the other hand, if advance-deposit ratio had achieved (an) all India level then additional investment would have been equivalent to Rs. 2496.93 crores. Thus banks have been collecting funds from Punjab and investing in states with higher advance-deposit ratio such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Union Territory of Chandigarh, Kerala etc.<sup>65</sup>

Punjab also suffers losses not only in terms of export of bank capital but also because of export of food grains. As Gill writes:

The second factor contributing to outflow of resources from Punjab has been adverse terms of trade between food grains exported from Punjab and manufactured goods purchased from other areas of India... Prices of food grains in India have grown at slow pace compared to prices of manufactured products after 1975-76.<sup>66</sup>

Over all these years the net barter terms of trade between the two commodities remained between 83.29 and 96.11, if 1970-71 is taken at 100. This indicates that purchasing power of food grains in terms of manufactured goods has fallen and remained low during 1976-77 to 1991-92. On the basis of such an unfavorable net barter terms of trade it is estimated that:

the state of Punjab suffered a loss in earnings from state's contribution of wheat and rice to the central pool to the extent of Rs. 2280 crores during 1980-81 to 1991-92... In the absence of this

drainage of resources, the rate of capital formation in the state in general and in agriculture would have been higher than the existing level.<sup>67</sup>

The above discussion lends at least some credibility to the fact that the hue and cry raised by Punjab farmers and their discrimination by the central government were not altogether baseless. The militants issued stern commands specifically to the banks, and labeled Punjab a 'colony of the Centre', which has been reserved to produce wheat and rice only for the rest of India. It is estimated that in the year 1990-91 alone, despite government's declaration of economic plans and subsidies to the terror stricken state, Punjab incurred a total loss of Rs. 727.80 crores. It includes Rs. 401.80 crores on account of adverse terms of trade and Rs. 326.0 crores shifted through lower advance deposit ratio to other states by the commercial banks.<sup>68</sup>

But simple industrialization of Punjab (as for instance suggested by Bhalla and Chadha) and diversification of agriculture as recommended by the Johl Committee do not seem to solve the problem entirely. Nevertheless, changing the nature of the economy and the value system of farmers would together go a long way in resolving the contradictory characteristics of this region. As noted above, the Punjab model of economic development combines small-scale industry with agricultural capitalism. As Gill has argued:

The rate of industrial growth in the state on the average has been higher than that of Indian economy as a whole. But its nature and character is such that it absorbs largely migratory labor. In fact wages are very low and working conditions so unattractive... Thus the cultivators being released by the capitalist development in agriculture are not being absorbed outside it and are experiencing redundancy.<sup>69</sup>

Pettigrew also gives primacy to land relations and the agrarian situation in the state for the rise and growth of guerrilla violence. She notes that 'Shortages of power, frequent cuts and a generally discontinuous supply ensured that farmers would never be free of state control.'<sup>70</sup> Summing up the discussion she states:

On account of the above, all agrarian interests saw the injustice of Indian central government planning and policy and witnessed its effects on their production. Hence here began in the 1970s a non-violent campaign for autonomy... Its political expression was the Anandpur Sahib Resolution<sup>71</sup> of 1973 which sought to rectify many economic grievances of the Punjab as a region... Only as this movement for socio-economic redress went unheeded did it broaden to include other issues and developed a national colouring.<sup>72</sup>

Pettigrew also links up the Indian government's newly formulated policy for army recruitment as a factor in the Punjab violence. She quotes at length the ex-servicemen's memorandum to the Governor of Punjab that condemned the new recruitment policy and expressed strong fear that 'since the government of India

would not establish any industry in the Punjab, being a border state, Punjabis...would be reduced to total dependence on agriculture.<sup>73</sup> Pettigrew notes that the central government investment in Punjab also fell from 2 percent in 1980 to 0.8 percent over the next ten years, and the former continued to return to Punjab as investment only one-third of what it borrowed. Thus, 'the state's centralization policies, particularly its control over the productive process, were an important source of gathering discontent.'<sup>74</sup> Gill, arguing in a similar vein also notes:

The Central Government intervenes in the pricing of various commodities under regulated prices system and has capacity to change relative price system. Over the last several years the price system has moved *against agriculture* and in favor of industry under the pressure of Indian monopoly bourgeoisie which has decisive influence over the Central Government. The terms of trade have moved against agriculture from 100 in 1971-72 to 85.48 in 1990-91. The *fall is sharp and consistent from 1976-77* (emphasis added).<sup>75</sup>

Vandana Shiva locates Punjab crisis in the failure of Green Revolution. In her own words, 'The present essay presents the other side of the Green Revolution story - its social and ecological costs hidden and hitherto unnoticed. In doing so, it also offers a different perspective on the multiple roots of ethnic and political violence.'<sup>76</sup> Later, she extends her logic to explain social conflicts in the whole of South Asian region. She states 'the most "successful" experiments in economic growth and development have become in less than two decades, crucibles of violence and civil war.'<sup>77</sup> Pettigrew also provides a similar explanation when she states 'The story of the rise and fall of the guerrilla movement is essentially and materially a story of what happened to a community of farmers as they experienced the effects of a process of economic change known as the Green Revolution.'<sup>78</sup>

Shiva argues that this Revolution is based on the expansion and intensification of irrigation from surface as well as ground water because of the 'shift from water prudent crops such as millets and oilseeds to mono-cultures and multi-cropping... and the replacement of old varieties of wheat with new varieties.'<sup>79</sup> This enhanced the intensity of irrigation from 20-30 to 200-300 percent. The hybrid varieties are water thirsty crops, even though 'the comparative yields of native wheat varieties and the HYV varieties (sic) is 3,291 and 4,690 kg/ha respectively in Punjab. The productivity with respect to water use is therefore 620.90 and 293.1 Kg/ha/cm. respectively.'<sup>80</sup>

The intensive irrigation has not only decreased productivity but also caused ecological disruption. It has drastically destabilized the water balance throughout the region. Joshi and Singh suggest that the water table is receding at the rate of 0.3 to 0.5 metre per year due to increase in tube-well irrigation.<sup>81</sup> Other areas of Punjab have been affected by water logging and salinity. It is estimated that an area of about 2.86 lakh hectares has a water table depth of less

than 1.5 metre even in the month of June. The water table further rises by 0.5 to 1.2 metre during the monsoon season. Shiva concludes:

Yet the Punjab experience brings home the point that even the Green Revolution was bounded by ecological limits, and by attempting to break out of them, it further increased those limits, generating new levels of scarcity, insecurity and vulnerability.<sup>82</sup>

The militants too raised their voice much in line with the findings of the social scientists mentioned above. Not one, but all militant organizations have used such arguments in favor of their logic of violence. They were also critical of the processes of development, and of state's intervention hence discrimination against Punjab, and its people. It is interesting to note that Sukhdev Singh Sukha and Harjinder Singh Jinda, who were later sentenced to death for assassinating the Army Chief, wrote to the President of India from the prison cell as follows:

You also retained the initiative and powers for Punjab's economic development. The path of development that you adopted was one-dimensional and directionless. It resulted into the imbalance of economy.

Your design is to keep our industrial development at your will and never let us be self-reliant. You want to see us standing as beggars at your door. There is hardly any Agro-Industry in the Punjab. Heavy industry is totally non-existent. We want to keep our capital safe for our development, but you are exploiting us as if we were your colony.<sup>83</sup>

### **Conclusion**

A juxtaposition of the above discussion in two parts reveals that the militants' grievances were essentially based on material problems of Punjab and its dependence on the agricultural economy. Since their articulation was manifestly cloaked in religious and rural idiom, it led to obfuscation of region and religion giving chance to detractors to call it communal and fundamentalist. The research findings of the economists however dispel such doubts as they clearly reflect on the nature and causes of the above crisis. If the Government had appreciated the militants' stance and cared for the detailed, and well researched reports of the economists and other social scientists, the violent conflict could have been resolved without loss of men and material.

### **Notes**

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Political Science Association conference at Winnipeg, 3-5 June 2004 and later at the Summer Conference of the Association of Punjab Studies (UK) held at Oxford on 25 June 2005. Acknowledgements are due to Michelle Hopkins, James Busumtwi, Pritam Singh, Shinder Thandi and many more.

2. The author is aware that it does not amount to economic reductionism. The social phenomenon is too complex to be reduced to a mono-causal explanation. This particular movement is a result of numerous factors. For details see Birinder Pal Singh, *Violence as Political Discourse: Sikh Militancy Confronts the Indian State*, (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2002).
3. The statements of the Sikh militants have been translated from Punjabi by the author. Important terms are given in parenthesis. Care has been taken during translation to remain close as possible to the original Punjabi word, in both letter and spirit, even if it meant writing bad English.
4. Singh Khalsa, *Khalsa Raj*, (Punjabi), (publisher unknown, 1985), p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
8. Five Member Panthic Committee (FMPC), 'Khalistan Ailaan Di Dastavez' (Punjabi), *Sant Sipahi*, June 1986, p. 26.
9. *Gurmata*, 26 January 1987, p. 3.
10. Singh Khalsa, *Khalsa Raj*, p. 32.
11. Sukhdev Singh Babbar, *Vangaar*, (Punjabi), (Babbar Khalsa International, date unknown), p. 14.
12. Zaffarwal in Joyce Pettigrew, *The Sikhs of Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerrilla Violence*, (London: Zed Books, 1995), p. 154.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
14. Singh Khalsa, *Khalsa Raj*, p. 45.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
18. FMPC, 'Khalistan Ailaan....', p. 26.
19. Sikh Students Federation, 'Mojuda Sanwidhanak Dhanche Andar Sikhan Di Mukti Nahin Ho Sakdi', (Punjabi), *Jantak Paigam* (57), October 1989, p. 27.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
21. Singh Khalsa, *Khalsa Raj*, p. 44.
22. Babbar, *Vangaar*, p. 14.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
25. Sikh Students Federation, 'Mojuda Sanwidhanak Dhanche ...', p. 24.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
27. Paramjit Singh Panjwar et al., 'Kharku Jathebandian Wich "Bhra Maru Jang"', (Punjabi), *Punjabi Tribune*, (Chandigarh), 4 July 1991.
28. *Ibid.*
29. In 1984 two incidents that shook the Sikhs and alienated them from the Indian state were Operation Bluestar and the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere following the assassination of the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi by her Sikh security personnel. The Sikhs were hunted out and torched, killed and stabbed allegedly at the instance of certain Congress leaders while the police stood by as silent witnesses or were seen as actively supporting the killers. It left about 5000 Sikhs dead. The Operation Bluestar was the codeword

for army action on the Golden Temple to flush out the militants. Army Tanks were also used in this action leading to much destruction.

30. Babbar, *Vangaar*, p.17.
31. Ibid., p. 21.
32. Ibid., p. 22.
33. BKI, '*BKI Wallon Sandesh*', (Punjabi), *Jantak Paigam*, October 1991, p. 19.
34. Ibid., p. 19.
35. Ibid., p. 19.
36. Ibid., p. 19.
37. Labh Singh and Gurjant Singh Budhsinghwal, '*Eh Jang Sadi Jitt Naal Hi Mukkegi*', (Punjabi), *Jantak Paigam* (58), November 1989, p. 26.
38. Ibid., p. 26.
39. Paramjit Singh Panjwar et al., *Ehu Benati ...*, (Punjabi), (publisher unknown, 1991), p. 3.
40. Ibid., p. 6.
41. Ibid., p. 3.
42. Ibid., p. 5.
43. Ibid., p. 5.
44. Sikh Students Federation, '*Mojuda Sanwidhanak Dhanche ...*', p. 23.
45. Ibid., p. 23.
46. Ibid., p. 27.
47. Ibid., p. 27.
48. Mark Juergensmeyer, 'The logic of religious violence: The case of the Punjab', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), 22 (1), 1988, p. 71.
49. Joyce Pettigrew, 'Take Not Arms Against the Sovereign', *South Asia Research*, 4, 2 (1984), p. 113.
50. '*Sant Bhindranwale Nal Interview*', (Punjabi), Editor. *Qaumi Rajniti*, August, 1983, p. 49.
51. Vandana Shiva, *Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*, (Goa: Other India Press, 1992), p. 179.
52. S.S. Gill, 'Socio-economic Contradictions Underlying Punjab Crisis', in Gopal Singh (ed) *Punjab: Past, Present and Future*, (Delhi: Ajanta, 1994), p. 295.
53. Ibid., p. 296.
54. Ibid., p. 296.
55. Ibid., p. 298.
56. Ibid., p. 299.
57. Pritam Gill, 'Punjab's Economic Development and the Current Crisis' in Gopal Singh (ed), op. cit., p. 311.
58. Ibid., p. 311.
59. G.S. Bhalla and G.K. Chadha, 'Green Revolution and the Small Peasant: A Study of Income Distribution in Punjab Agriculture', Vol. II, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XVII, No. 21, 22 May 1982, p. 876.
60. Sukhpal Singh in S. S. Gill, *Economic Development and Structural Change in Punjab: Some Policy Issues*, (Ludhiana: Principal Iqbal Singh Memorial Trust, 1994), p. 77.

61. G.S. Bhalla and G.K. Chadha, 'Green Revolution and the Small Peasant', p. 877.
62. Ibid., p. 877.
63. S.S. Johl et al., *Diversification of Agriculture in Punjab*. Report of the Expert Committee submitted to the Government of Punjab, May 1986, pp. 44-54.
64. Gill, *Economic Development...*, pp. 84-5.
65. Ibid., p. 64.
66. Ibid., p. 64.
67. Ibid., p. 65.
68. Ibid., p. 73.
69. Gill, 'Socio-economic Contradictions...', p. 295.
70. Pettigrew, *The Sikhs...*, p. 5.
71. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
72. Ibid., p. 6.
73. Ibid., p. 7.
74. The *Anadpur Sahib Resolution* is 'The Draft of the New Policy Programme of the Shiromani Akali Dal'. It is a regional political party of the Sikhs. Without giving details of the Draft it would suffice to mention that the 'Economic Policy Resolution No. 3' occupies the largest space (pp. 8-11) compared to the Remaining resolutions, (pp.12-15).
75. Gill, 'Socio-economic Contradictions...', p. 295.
76. Shiva, *Violence of Green Revolution*, p. 12.
77. Ibid., p. 190.
78. Pettigrew, *The Sikhs...*, p. 55.
79. Shiva, p. 125.
80. Ibid., p. 128.
81. Gill, *Economic Development...*, p. 82.
82. Shiva, p.142.
83. H.S.Sukha and H.S.Jinda, 'Text of Sukha-Jinda's Letter to the President', *The Tribune*, (Chandigarh), 28 July 1990.