

Separatist Movement in East Punjab: Factors of Failure

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the factors behind the failure of the Khalistan Movement in East Punjab. It examines why the Khalistan Movement, in confronting the Indian leadership, today appears less forceful than it was in the late 1980s or early 1990s. The study highlights such factors as the time of emergence of the basic idea of a separate state, the language issue, the methods employed by the activists and the militants, as well as changes in counter-movement tactics, the division of the movement into factions, and the policies of the Indian leaders. Due to all these reasons, even continuing discontent over various issues and the perpetual presence of separatist elements do not ensure the success of such separatist movements in East Punjab.

Introduction

Since the emergence of the two states out of British India in 1947, separatism has been a challenge for India as well as Pakistan. Pakistan faced a separatist movement of ethnic Bengalis in East Pakistan and India has had to deal with a separatist movement among the ethnic Sikhs in East Punjab. Both these movements met with the different fates, notwithstanding their many similarities in the elements and

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natures. This paper deals with the factors affecting the results and final outcome of the Sikh separatist movement. In general, the success of a separatist movement is often affected by ethnic struggles, cooption, the military strategy adopted by a country in regard to the movement, and political bargaining. All such factors will be considered in various sections of this article.

When colonial rule ended in India, the Sikhs of Punjab were demanding their own independent state in the case that partition became inevitable, but still had ties with the Indian National Congress' leadership and staunchly opposed the idea of Pakistan.¹ These were the post-partition conditions and arrangements which developed into the separatist movement in Punjab and forced the separatist activists to forge friendship with the old rivals.

The idea of Khalistan is rooted in the slogan *Raj kre ga Khalsa, Aaki rahey na koe* [Punjabi: Pious people will reign and their enemies will be no more] which, like that of a united Bengal, had originated during the talks for the partition of India. At that time the scheme of carving out Azad Punjab was ratified by Shiromani Akali Dal's Resolution of June 1943.² Therefore, the Sikhs had raised their demand for a region to be recognised purely as a Sikh province. After independence the Akali leader, Master Tara Singh, claimed that the only way to prevent the Sikh identity from drowning in modernism and Hinduism was to demand official recognition as a separate nation. Other Akali leaders also consistently warned Sikhs of the dangers of Hindu communalism.³ But the earliest ideas of forming a separate Sikh state, within post-partition India, were put forth by

1 Tai Yong Tan, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (Routledge: Gyanesh Kudaisya, 2000).

2 Note on Master Tara Singh, Brief prepared for the Cabinet Delegation's interviews with the Sikhs, IOR: L/PJ/10/33, Cabinet Mission Sikhs, British Library London.

3 Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), 38.

Sardar Kapur Singh and described in his book *Sachi Sakhi* [Punjabi: true friend].⁴

Those Sikhs who were not satisfied with the constitutional arrangements of the Indian leadership, and who sought to preserve the Punjabi identity, were quickly disenchanted with the new Indian state. This became evident in the comments on the Indian Constitution made by Hukam Singh, a Sikh representative in the Indian Constituent Assembly (CA), when he declared:

Naturally, under these circumstances, as I have stated, the Sikhs feel utterly disappointed and frustrated. They feel that they have been discriminated against. Let it not be misunderstood that the Sikh community has agreed to this [Indian] Constitution. I wish to record an emphatic protest here. My community cannot subscribe its assent to this historic document.⁵

The Sikh community, in order to protect Punjabi identity, had first of all to struggle for a province in which they might make up a majority.

A rift between the state and the Punjab Sikhs in India first arose, and later intensified over the language issue⁶ when Sikhs demanded the adoption of Punjabi for Punjabi-speaking areas. The States Reorganization Commission refused to recognize Punjabi as a language that was distinct grammatically from Hindi, and on linguistic grounds rejected the demand for a Punjabi *suba* [Punjabi: province] or state.⁷ Depriving Punjabi of a separate status as a recognized language outraged the Sikhs more than had the dismissal of their demand for a separate province. "While others got

4 Ishtiaq Ahmed, *State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Pinter, 1996), 134.

5 Gurmit Singh, *History of Sikh Struggles* (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1992), 110-111; see also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalistan> on 6 December 2008 at 12:54 UK Time

6 S. Mahmud Ali, *The Fearful State: Power, People and Internal War in South Asia* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 92.

7 Kapur Singh, *Sachi Sakhi* (Amritsar: SGPC, 1993), 95.

States for their languages,” observed Sardar Hukam Singh sadly, “we lost even our language”.⁸

The method adopted for the movement seeking a separate Punjabi province was the organization of mass protests and demonstrations. In order to obtain a division of the Punjab on a linguistic basis, Akali Dal launched its first major campaign in August 1950, and its agitation and propaganda continued thereafter for over two decades.⁹ As a result of these tactics, 12,000 Sikhs were arrested for demonstrating in 1955, and 26,000 in 1960-61.¹⁰ When an Emergency was imposed in India on June 26, 1975 the resistance was open and often violent only in the Punjab. Grasping the opportunity presented by popular opposition to legislation on birth-control, Harchand Singh Longowal led Akalis in organising demonstrations which kept the activism alive.¹¹

Conflict between the Sikh leaders and those of other provinces started when the trifurcation of Punjab led to three competing demands for the river waters of the earlier undivided Punjab, and the central government stepped in and “assumed the powers of control, maintenance, distribution and development of the waters and the hydel power of the Punjab Rivers.”¹² This further increased tensions between Sikhs and the Government of India.

The existence of what Gurharpal Singh has termed conspiracy theories — theories asserting that an external state rival is conspiring to promote secessionist tendencies — were prominent in discussions of the Khalistan

8 As quoted in Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 320.

9 Deol Harnik, “Religion and Nationalism in India: The Case of the Punjab, 1960-1990” (unpublished Ph.D. Diss., The London School of Economics, 1996), 180.

10 Rajiv A. Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 213.

11 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 98.

12 Gurdev Singh, *Punjab River Waters* (Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies, 2002). <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/Sikhism24.asp> (last accessed, May 12, 2004).

Movement. The influence of external forces, with deep-rooted interest in the disintegration of India was mooted by Indian leaders in 1984.¹³

Throughout the period, 1967 to 1980, India's central political party, the Congress, had remained stronger than Akali Dal, a representative party of the Sikhs. During these years the Akali Dal managed to obtain not more than 30 per cent of the total votes in the five elections held for the Punjab legislative assembly.¹⁴ Similarly, in the elections to the lower house of India's Parliament in 1980, the Congress won twelve out of thirteen seats from the Punjab. Even after creation of the Punjabi *Suba* in 1980, the Akali Dal managed to come to power only by forming a coalition government.¹⁵ Otherwise, unlike East Pakistan and elsewhere, in the Punjab the rival groups had different faiths and therefore Punjabi movement readily exploited the Sikh community's religious sentiments. Religious meaning was infused into language identification, and the movement consolidated the process of linguistic differentiation on the basis of religious tensions between the Hindus and Sikhs.¹⁶

Despite these festering grievances, a formal expression of Sikh demands finally came through a resolution – the Anandpur Resolution of October 1973.¹⁷ This called for a

13 Gurharpal Singh, "Understanding the Punjab Problem," *Asian Survey*, 27 (December 1987), 1270.

14 Kapur, *Sikh Separatism*, 217.

15 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 190-91.

16 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 192.

17 The resolution was adopted by Akali Dal in October 1973 and set forth three broad categories of demands. First, the Punjab was to be given full jurisdiction over its own administration and law, and the central state should be restricted to the management of foreign policy, defense, currency, and general communications. Second, the Sikh-populated Punjabi-speaking areas that were outside of, though contiguous with the Punjab, should be merged with the Punjab state. These included Chandigarh, areas in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. Third, the culturally regular recitation of Gurbani on government broadcast facilities, instruction of Sikhism in the schools, and the enactment of an All-India-Gurdwara Act. The last was meant to give control of all the Sikh Gurdwaras and their funds throughout India to the Akali Dal. The earlier act gave control only over the Gurdwaras in Punjab. Fourth, economically commercial agriculture in the

consolidation of the Sikh-populated, Punjabi-speaking areas within Punjab and emphasized a linguistic identity. Furthermore, it demanded greater decentralization of the state so as to establish full provincial autonomy with the Centre confined to the areas of external affairs, defence and communication. It called as well for increased Punjabi recruitment for the India's armed forces. Other demands included the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, the industrialization of Punjab, and the control of all Indian Gurdwaras be handed over to Sikhs. Nonetheless, the Akali leaders tacitly denied that the Anandpur Sahib Resolution envisaged an autonomous Sikh state, or Khalistan.¹⁸

The demands of Sikhs for more provincial control evolved into a secessionist programme and in 1981 Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was able to take hold of the leadership of the Khalistan Movement. In August 1982, the movement was at its peak. Akali Dal, the largest political party of Sikhs in Punjab, had ties with Bhindranwale, and they jointly launched protests against the federal government of India. As is often happens elsewhere, the element of militarism was evident in the protests and meetings. Bhindranwale had set up his base in Darbar Sahib, at the Akal Takht in Amritsar, the most sacred religious site of Sikhs. Discontented Sikh ex-servicemen organized themselves to demand greater representation for Sikhs in the Indian Army, and a convention was organised by the Akali Dal at the Darbar Sahib on December 23, 1982. It was attended by 5,000 Sikh ex-servicemen, of whom 170 were above the rank of colonel.¹⁹

In 1984, a military operation against the Punjabi Sikhs seemed increasingly inevitable, with the focal point being the

Punjab be made more profitable; a favourable price for agricultural produce set, giving the Punjabi farmer access to the "entire country as a single food zone;" the provision of increased and cheaper irrigation facilities; and greater capital investment. Maya Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security, and Separatism in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 125.

18 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 194-95.

19 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 204.

base of Bhindrawale in Darbar Sahib. Yet because this military operation named "Blue Star" involved the holiest place of the Sikhs, the consequences could be very weighty in that this intervention could create anti-India hatred among the Punjabis. Indeed, after the Indian forces stormed the Golden Temple, Operation Blue Star ended by increasing dramatically separatist sentiments, and hundreds of Sikh soldiers in the Indian army revolted, broke into armouries, killed their commanding officers, and headed for Amritsar or Delhi to avenge this collective dishonour.²⁰ Sikhs also answered back with the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984. But there was no single response and the deaths of Sikhs during riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination, in which more than 5,000 people, mostly Sikhs, were killed,²¹ further increased separatist feelings. Ultimately, on April 29, 1986 an assembly of the separatist Sikhs at the Akal Takht declared an independent state of Khalistan. In fact, this declaration fulfilled the demand of the militant Akalis under Jagjit Singh Chauhan, who had broken away after the elections of 1971 and demanded an independent state of Khalistan.²² The Secretary Chauhan's National Council of Khalistan, Balbir Singh Sandhu, had repeated it on June 16, 1980. Charges of external interference undermined these efforts and they failed to receive support from all the large Sikh parties, except the National Council of Khalistan and the Dal Khalsa.²³ In the Punjab it took two years to achieve this reaction, but the Khalistan Movement, as a form of Sikh militancy, was effectively over by 1990s.²⁴ Although an insurgency lasted

20 *Keesing's Record of World Events* p. 33223 OPL 327 social science, Ali, *The Fearful State*, 106.

21 Tavleen Singh, 'Terror Winning in Punjab Agony,' *The Sunday Times*, London, December 7, 1986; Ali, *The Fearful State*, 107.

22 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 95.

23 J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, in *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 218-19.

24 Documentation, Information and Research Branch, Immigration and Refugee Board, DIRB-IRB. India: Information from four specialists on the Punjab, Response to Information Request #IND26376.EX, 17 February, 1997 (Ottawa, Canada).

for some years and if, at present, support for an independent homeland may remain strong among the separatist Sikh leaders, the situation by and large remains peaceful.²⁵ It seems, in fact, that the movement is very weak, if not actually dead.

What did the Leadership Do?

In the first phase of Sikh Movement, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian leadership made use of the tool of cooption. One of the more vituperative members of Akalis, Hukam Singh, who had accused Nehru of spearheading Hindu chauvinism, was persuaded to join the Congress and became the Speaker of the Indian Parliament, a reflection of Delhi's success in "buying off" the opposition.²⁶ On the language issue, the Nehru-led Indian leadership was not accommodating to Punjabi, and the Nehru government's attitude towards the Hindu agitators, who favoured a Hindi-only language policy, remained fundamentally affable. In a letter of June 1967, addressed to Swami Atma Nand, a leader of Hindi Samiti, Nehru wrote:

Can you believe that any of us, who are devoted to Hindi, can do anything which is injurious to the growth and development of our national language? Can you believe that this Regional Formula, in the slightest degree, comes in the way of the growth of Hindi? I think, people living in the north should learn at least one South Indian language, and if possible more Indian languages.

The obduracy of the local pro-Hindi agitators, intertwined with the Hindu chauvinism of the central leaders, led the Akali Dal to revive its own agitation.²⁷

Nehru was conscious of the possibility that acceptance of the demand for a Punjabi-speaking province might lead the Sikhs to demand full separation, and therefore refused to permit formation of a separate province for Sikhs. His principal concern was to prevent a further partitioning of India, and to preclude the rise of communal hatred. He

25 Ram Narayan Kumar and Georg Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle: Origin, Evolution and Present Phase* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1991), iv.

26 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 93.

27 Kumar and Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle*, 181.

suspected that the demand for a Punjabi *Suba* was actually a thinly-veiled demand for a Sikh province, a demand Nehru would not concede. He therefore supported the Reorganisation Commission²⁸ in its refusal to approve the division of Punjab on the basis of language and told a London *Times* correspondent that he would not permit creation of a Punjabi speaking state, even if he had to face a civil war.²⁹ Arguing that the Akalis' demand was communal, he remained resolutely opposed until his death to the creation of a Punjabi *Suba* or state. Speaking in Parliament, he said: "There is no doubt that (Punjabi *Suba*) has grown up not as a linguistic issue but as a communal issue".³⁰

In order to appease the movement, the Indian government adopted the technique of prolonged negotiations and compromises. Thus Akali Dal's Punjab *Suba* agitation of 1955 was terminated by negotiations with the Congress in Punjab and a regional formula adopted by which the work of the state legislature was assigned to separate regional committees organised according to language. The Akali Dal agreed to work with this formula, and both to merge with Congress in contesting the 1957 elections, and in the Punjab legislature. But dissatisfaction with implementing the formula and the unwillingness of the Punjab government under Partap Singh Kairon to enhance the status of the Punjabi language, led to the prolonged agitation in 1960.³¹ Nehru also involved Sant Fateh Singh, who died of fasting in December 1960, and Master Tara Singh, in continuing rounds of futile talks.³²

Indira Gandhi, influenced by the gallant role of Sikh troops and the mainly Sikh rural population of the Punjab in the war with Pakistan of 1965, and seeing the Akalis as potential allies in her fight against the Congress Party's

28 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 93.

29 Kumar and Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle*, 182.

30 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 39-40.

31 Brass, *Language, Religion*, 321.

32 Kumar and Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle*, 182.

bosses, went further than her father had thought of doing. She agreed to the formation of a Punjabi-speaking state.³³ Yet this attempt at accommodation was then mishandled because it was not a deliberate effort to appease the movement, but was motivated by Indira Gandhi's own political concerns. Even so, it further encouraged the Sikh Movement, whose frustrating experience in the state government between 1967 and 1971 motivated the Akali Dal to raise the tortuous issue of centre-state relations. The federal government had engineered defections from Akali Dal to bring down its administrations within the Punjab. It had also infringed upon the autonomous powers of the provincial government even in areas of administration that elsewhere in India were constitutionally within the purview of the provinces. This convinced radical Sikh delegates like Chauhan to tour abroad to present this "true plight" in June 1971.³⁴

To suppress the movement, Mrs. Gandhi followed her father in using the technique of negotiating and giving a concession verbally, but then withholding it in practice. On the issue of Chandigarh, she at first hesitated over the difficult decision of allocating it to either Punjab or Haryana. Temporarily, or so it was said, Chandigarh was to be administered by the central government, but at the same time it was to host the state assemblies and secretariats of both Punjab and Haryana.³⁵ Then in 1969, before Darshan Singh Pheruman set himself alight while campaigning for Chandigarh, she announced that Chandigarh would be awarded to the Punjab. But Mrs. Gandhi never implemented this award herself,³⁶ and instead transferred this responsibility to the two neighbouring and competing states.³⁷

33 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 42-43.

34 Kumar and Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle*, 213-14.

35 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 44.

36 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 44-45.

37 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 96.

Her father's policy of maintaining full political control by dividing the rival groups and making use of the communal tactic backfired on Indira Gandhi. During the early 1970s, the aggressive communal policy of Giani Zail Singh, then chief minister in the Punjab with Indira Gandhi's support, combined with already existing dissatisfaction over the Chandigarh issue, forced Akali Dal to draw up the Anandpur Resolution in October 1973.³⁸ As Indira Gandhi's popularity grew across India, the Congress Party leaders in Punjab undertook aggressive efforts to divide Sikhs and to consolidate their own hold over state politics.³⁹ Zail Singh went out of the way to appease the religious sentiments of the Sikh community. His conduct of government was marked by an increasing adherence to Sikh rituals. As a result of all this, the Akalis had look constantly for issues that might improve their standing in both Sikh society and in election results.⁴⁰

Thus threatened, Akali Dal had little choice but to raise the ante; it started demanding even a greater control over the affairs of Sikhs. Indira Gandhi countered with a combination of repression and further attempts to divide Sikhs.⁴¹ She saw the Anandpur Resolution as an Akali attempt to restore its credibility as the sole champion of Khalsa interests by further radicalizing Punjabi politics. Therefore, she labelled the secessionists as seditious and defended her denunciation of the Resolution with sophisticated legal and constitutional arguments. These measures paid little heed to Sikh sensibilities and made no attempt to persuade Punjabis that Delhi was concerned with an India without discrimination. Sikh peasants, who were most concerned with the water issue, suspected that for

38 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 45-46.

39 Atul Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? The Rise and Decline of Self Determination Movements in India", in Amrita Basu and Atul Kohli (eds.), *Community Conflicts and the State in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

40 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 127.

41 Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate," 22.

political reasons Delhi was teaming up with their Hindu neighbours to deprive Sikhs of what was rightfully and historically theirs and Indira Gandhi made no effort to convince the Akalis otherwise.⁴²

Under the triangular leadership of Prakash Singh Badal, Harchand Singh Longowal and Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the Akali Dal had restored tranquillity to the Punjab. But Indira Gandhi and her closest advisers planned to visit retribution on their most intransigent rivals and the Akalis were high on a vindictive hit-list.⁴³ In this political game, Indira Gandhi thought that if she could use Sikh militants to further split the ranks of the Akalis into moderates and extremists, victory would be hers.⁴⁴ On the advice of Zail Singh, Indira Gandhi's son Sanjay promoted Bhindranwale in order to discredit the traditional Akali leadership, so as to break up Akali Dal and permit Congress to take control of Punjabi politics in 1977.⁴⁵ The Congress publicity machine now projected Bhindrawale as the hero of the attack on the Nirankari Convention in 1978.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in that April in an effort to undermine Khalsa loyalty to the Akalis, Zail Singh sponsored the creation of the extremist Dal Khalsa, which proclaimed as its objective the establishment of an independent Khalistan.⁴⁷

Indira Gandhi's quest for full political control over both the states and rival political forces resumed on her return to power in January 1980. Two months later she resumed the practice of toppling opposition governments and declaring presidential rule in no less than nine states.⁴⁸ The increasing concentration of power at the centre, especially in the hands of the prime minister, led regionalist and non-mainstream bodies like the Akalis to see this as a deliberate attempt to

42 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 97.

43 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 98.

44 Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate", 22.

45 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 57.

46 The Convention of Nirankari Sikhs sect was held in Amritsar in April, 1978 and ended in bloodshed.

47 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 99.

48 Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security*, 108.

threaten their capacity to exercise legitimate autonomy. Indeed, local and regional interests demanded greater autonomy in keeping with the federal spirit of the constitution. But the centre feared that the loss of its grip would allow centrifugal elements to secure the assistance of hostile forces, which were deemed to be awaiting just such an opportunity to tear the Union apart. As for the regional leaders, they viewed Delhi's resistance to their demands as a betrayal of India's democratic foundations, and as a manifestation of North-Indian Brahmanical domination.⁴⁹

In the Punjab Indira Gandhi's decision to appoint the secular leader Darbara Singh as chief minister, instead of nominated Home Minister Zail Singh, aimed at limiting the latter's command and influence. This led to a tussle between the two Sikh leaders for the support of Bhindranwale. Although opposed by the chief minister, he was absolved of the charges of having murdered notable Sikhs on the orders of Zail Singh, who had sought to use him to bring about the downfall of his rival, the chief minister.⁵⁰ Subsequently the Akali Dal, to give impression that it too was religious, entered a coalition with Bhindranwale.⁵¹

Once again Indira Gandhi employed old method of negotiations in an effort to prolong discussions and thus kill the Akali demands. Various set of talks between the Indira-led Congress and the Akali leaders took place in October 1981 and April 1982. This time Indira Gandhi failed to satisfy the Sikhs through talking, and her attitude moved from mild to tough. This change was due to her political considerations: with the elections of May 1982 looming in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, she did not want to lose Hindu votes by accepting the Akalis demands.⁵² She could not conceal this from the Sikh leaders, who themselves were

49 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 96.

50 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 63-71.

51 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 130.

52 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 79; Indira refused compromises, lest she be viewed nationally as appeasing minorities. Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate", 23.

in trouble because in any case, Bhindranwale would have rejected even the best terms the government could offer under the circumstances.⁵³

The breakdown of talks was seen by Kuldip Nayar, the noted Indian journalist, as the watershed. Thereafter the distance between government and the Akalis began increasing and, as in a Greek tragedy, both sides relentlessly marched towards the final disaster.⁵⁴ Even so, Indira Gandhi once more tried the tactic of deceptive acceptance. Perturbed by the Akali panel's withdrawal from the tripartite negotiations, on February 27, 1983 she unilaterally announced an offer of minor concessions with regard to the religious demands of the Akali Dal.⁵⁵

Having failed to curb the movement through negotiations and deceptive concessions, Indira Gandhi's attitude began to harden and favour the movement's outright suppression. This is the very solution that so often fans a spark of separatism into a wild fire. At this time Chauhan, who had raised the demand for Khalistan in September 1971, met Indira Gandhi in his search for political power. Finding that neither Akalis, then out of power, nor the Congress, then in power, was interested in his overtures, in March 1980 he again hoisted the national flag of Khalistan.⁵⁶

The central government's stiff action against the Sikhs at the Asian Games, which were held in Delhi in 1982, further humiliated them. Regardless of position or rank, they all were stopped and checked by the police, and many were banned from even approaching the venue of the Games.⁵⁷ A feeling of bruised pride and anger pervaded the community, and some now joined the Bhindranwale camp. Moreover,

53 Ram Narayan Kumar, *The Sikh Unrest and the Indian State: Politics, Personalities and Historical Retrospective* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1997), 111.

54 Kuldip Nayar and Khushwant Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab, Operation Blue Star & After* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1984), 50.

55 Kumar, *The Sikh Unrest*, 115.

56 Nayar and Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab*, 51

57 Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 84-92.

their treatment at the hands of the security forces led many ordinary youths with close ties to religion, and who were impressed by religious appeals, to join the militants. As J.M. Pettigrew notes, "all guerrillas mention that it was the behaviour of the security forces towards them and their families that finally drew them into the struggle".⁵⁸

Political repression, as well as the outright suppression of militancy, also played a significant role in enhancing the secessionist trend. In October 1983 the Punjab Legislative Assembly was dissolved and the state placed under the complete control of the central government.⁵⁹ In order to control the increasing number of violent incidents in the state,⁶⁰ the central leadership (and especially Indira Gandhi) kept even President Zail Singh in ignorance,⁶¹ and now turned to the armed forces. In June 1984, the sacred Golden Temple in Amritsar was assaulted by the military. This was accompanied by the suspension of democratic procedures, such as the state government and the imposition of censorship of the press. Punjab now became a test case for the introduction of new ordinances and legislations. Of these the most notable were the National Security (Second Amendment) Ordinances, promulgated on July 14, 1984 under which Punjab was declared to be a terrorist affected area.⁶²

Despite its apparent strength, the secessionist movement was destined to fail. A successful and tactful use of brute military force was the foremost factor in this failure. Instead of opening a general military assault, the Indians tactfully kept their operations limited only to specific targets so as to eliminate a significant number of its political opponents in "Operation Blue Star" and "Operation Woodrose". Many survivors went underground for fear of

58 As cited in Deol, "Religion and Nationalism," 197

59 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 197.

60 Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 223.

61 Kumar and Sieberer, *Sikh Struggle*, 264.

62 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism," 102.

harassment and torture by the paramilitary forces. This struck a major blow to the Khalistan Movement. In addition, to subvert such a movement it is vital to create a wedge between the guerrillas and the civilian population. To this end, the guerrilla cadres were infiltrated by undercover policemen and criminals were inducted into the police force to malign the guerrillas.⁶³ Once the paramilitary forces had succeeded in eliminating the ideologically committed cadres, the weakness in the organizational structure of the guerrilla groups became evident. Their recruitment without due screening and ideological training also led to this weakness.⁶⁴

During the period 1983 to 1988, the Indian government used a range of methods including kidnappings, torture, extra judicial killings, and illegal detentions to break-up the separatist movement. These actions continued for a considerable time before the Indian Parliament amended the Constitution so as to empower the province to suspend them. Observers have noted a close relationship between the escalation of separatist militancy and the steady augmentation of state violence outside of the established procedure of law.⁶⁵ Throughout the summer and fall of 1984, the Indian security forces combed the villages in Punjab in order to apprehend any remaining militants who had escaped from the Golden Temple complex before the Indian army launched its attack. This search spread more fear throughout the Sikh community and according to Maya Chadda, many young Sikhs fled to the neighbouring countries to escape the police dragnet.⁶⁶

63 J.M. Pettigrew noted that at one stage a family would be visited by persons masquerading as militants... At another stage, the same family would be confronted by the same persons dressed as policemen, who then accused them of feeding and sheltering militants; as cited in Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 217-18.

64 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 219.

65 See Kumar and Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle*, 297-375.

66 Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security*, 136.

Another cause for the defeat of the Sikh Movement was its failure to establish a base of mass support. During its first phase, the guerrilla movement evoked a sympathetic response from the Sikh professional classes. Yet by the end, the tactics and activities of the guerrillas had lost their ideological credibility among a broad mass of the Sikh population.⁶⁷ Moreover, Sikhs in general could not reasonably complain of discrimination and deprivation. If any part of India had benefited from development, and any minority had gained the most economically, it was the Sikhs and their area. As a whole, the Sikh community never supported the Akalis. Substantial numbers of Sikhs voted for Congress and the two Communist parties.⁶⁸

Also significant is the fact that the military suppression was accompanied by the seemingly accommodating political negotiations and measures of compromise introduced by Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's son and successor. After her assassination, he announced his resolve to heal the wounds of the Punjab by restoring to the state a democratic regime. This was hailed as a bold and statesmanlike step.⁶⁹ Accordingly, he appointed a new governor, released the detained Akali leaders, and promised an inquiry into the rioting that had followed Indira's assassination. Delhi also promised to treat Sikh deserters from the armed forces within leniency. Those Khalsa detainees not charged with specific crimes were to be released, the special tribunals set up under the aegis of the military were to be disbanded, and Delhi was to increase investment in Punjab's industrialisation.⁷⁰ Rajiv's government also reached a settlement – the Punjab Accord – which was signed on July 24, 1985 with a Sikh religious dignitary, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal. With this the centre conceded many of Akali demands, including the right of people to seek employment in the army on the basis of merit rather than

67 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism," 220-22.

68 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 279.

69 Kumar and Sieberer, *The Sikh Struggle*, 269.

70 Ali, *Fearful State*, 107; Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security*, 136-37.

fixed quotas, the setting up of a commission to examine the issue of sharing of river waters and, more importantly, the handing over of Chandigarh, still the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana, exclusively to Punjab by January 26, 1986.⁷¹

Sikh separatists, however, rejected the Punjab Accord and Longowal himself was assassinated. Nonetheless, Maya Chadda maintains that Rajiv Gandhi kept his word and proceeded with the promised elections in the Punjab. He remained determined to give the Akalis a fair chance to come to power, and to work with them to isolate the extremists. On September 25, 1985 voting took place for the Punjab Assembly. For the first time the Akalis won an absolute majority and Surjit Singh Barnala became chief minister of the state of Punjab. Throughout the campaign Rajiv Gandhi had purposely kept the Punjab wing of the Congress Party in the background and, in effect, permitted the Akalis to win the elections with ease. His strategy clearly was in marked contrast to that of his mother: he had acknowledged the Akalis' claim to be the sole representatives of Sikh ethno-nationalism, and then worked to establish a new balance with them.⁷²

In the end, unfortunately, Rajiv Gandhi failed to gain the support of the Congress Party for his strategy. In particular, he met stiff opposition from disgruntled leaders of the Punjab Congress, as well as from Haryana's chief minister, who was also of his party. Their combined resistance delayed the promised transfer of Chandigarh to the Punjab and this highly symbolic failure rekindled mistrust among the Akalis.⁷³ This made Rajiv Gandhi once more treat his agreement just as his predecessors would have done.⁷⁴ Consequently, two years after the Punjab Accord, the editor of *The Tribune* felt constrained to observe that the spirit of accommodation, it had generated at the time, had all but evaporated, and that

71 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 132.

72 Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security*, 137.

73 Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security*, 137.

74 Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate", 24.

only the latter remained.⁷⁵ This initially produced only a feeble rise in militancy and the dead secessionist movement could not gain much momentum. Yet when it became clear that Delhi's concessions were again more apparent than real, the position of the elected Akali leaders was once more undermined, and the cycle of militancy and repression recurred, albeit with less ferocity.⁷⁶

The separatist movement itself was now suffering from divisions within its ranks. Some were engineered by the Indian leaders, and some by the Sikh leaders themselves. Some Akali leaders' condemnation of the Punjab Accord reached at peak with the murder of Longowal on August 20, 1985 and resentment towards the traditional Akali leaders in general accentuated divisions within the Akali Dal. This subsequently led to the formation of a rival Akali Dal, called the United Akali Dal and headed by the father of Bhindranwale.⁷⁷ Consequently, "never were the Punjabis split so clearly on communal lines as in the elections of September 1985".⁷⁸ By 1988 a serious rift had developed between the main guerrilla organisations over issues of policy and tactics.⁷⁹ The central government too promoted divisions through incarceration or harassment. Simranjit Singh Mann won a massive majority in November 1989, and also succeeded in uniting the major factions of the Akali Dal under his leadership on December 26, 1990. Then the central government responded by classifying it as a militant party, and many of its workers were imprisoned, harassed and even killed.⁸⁰

75 Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 235.

76 Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate", 24.

77 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism," 213-14.

78 Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 230-31.

79 The split was between two main guerrilla organizations, the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) and the Car Jhujharu Jathebande (CJJ). The CJJ constituted two other guerrilla groups, the Babbar Khalsa and Khalistan Force. For details of the guerrilla organizations see, Deol, "Religion and Nationalism," 219.

80 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 222-23.

The politics of cooptation, of forging alliances with favourable moderates, and of using brutal military force against extremist elements, went hand-in-hand with the above-mentioned techniques of creating divisions. Longowal's successor in Akali Dal, as well as winner of the election, Chief Minister Surjit Singh Barnala, was tied to the Congress Party, but he sought to satisfy many factions and included all shades of Khalsa opinion within his cabinet. It seemed quite possible that the movement might have long remained harmless. But activism revived, though not as strongly as in early eighties, due to over-use of methods not amenable to democratic governance,⁸¹ and because the central leadership reneged on its commitments.⁸²

In its turn, the central leadership itself then revived its own repressive measures. By manipulating the Constitution at the expense of the states, New Delhi dismissed the Barnala Ministry in May 1987 and re-imposed presidential rule in the Punjab.⁸³ On May 9, 1988 the military launched "Operation Black Thunder II" to flush out some militants who once again were entrenched inside the Golden Temple. This time a prolonged siege ensued and sniper fire was employed to dislodge the militants. While thirty-six militants were killed, the rest surrendered after holding out for a few weeks.⁸⁴

The elections of 1989 can be seen as marking the end of an important chapter of history. Rajiv Gandhi's party lost control of the government both in the centre and in the Punjab, and new leaders came to the fore. The Akali leader Simranjit Singh Mann, having won the

81 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 108.

82 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 132.

83 Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 234.

84 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 132.

elections of Lok Sabha in 1989, had been demanding the right of national self-determination for the Sikhs, but not secession. On December 26, 1990 various Sikh parties and religious organisations, including the Akali Dal factions, passed a resolution at Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib demanding self-determination for Sikhs. But in subsequent statements Mann drew a distinction between his notion of self-determination and complete secession.⁸⁵

Even Mann's secessionism was lost in the elections of 1992, after which the Congress Party formed the state government with the help of alliances with favourable leaders. Though violence continued within the Punjab to such an extent that the chief minister was killed in 1995,⁸⁶ the political separatist movement had been gradually becoming weaker.

Having contributed mightily to the conditions in Punjab, the central leadership meanwhile have tried all possible approaches – from dividing the opposition, creating an extremist alternative to the moderate opposition, and crushing the militants militarily, to negotiating with the moderates, and talking to the separatists.⁸⁷ The divisions in militants and factions in Akali Dal, made sometimes under the auspices of the government helped them to counter the movement.

Conclusion

The Sikhs lacked the support of external powers and their region, being adjacent to the Indian centre, was an easy prey to New Delhi. The Indian leadership mishandled the political situation in East Punjab, felt it expedient to use the tactics of force and division among

85 Ahmed, *State, Nation*, 132-33.

86 Deol, "Religion and Nationalism", 223.

87 Ali, *The Fearful State*, 109.

the Sikh factions in order to fulfil its desire of centralization of power, and to undermine the regional political forces. This resulted in a rise of separatism. When there were more chances for the Sikhs to share power, it became difficult for the leaders of separatist movement to become a danger to the integrity and unity of India. These factors led to the ultimate failure of the Khalistan Movement.