PUNJAB

THE KNIGHTS OF FALSEHOOD

K.P.S. GILL

PUNJAB

THE KNIGHTS OF FALSEHOOD

K P S GILL

HAR-ANAND
PUBLICATIONS PVT LTD

Har-Anand Publications Pvt Ltd
364-A, Chirag Delhi, New Delhi-110017

PRINTED IN INDIA

Published by Ashok Gosain & Ashish Gosain for Har-Anand Publications Pvt Ltd.
Typeset at S.S. Computers and printed at Nice Printing Press, New Delhi.

PREFACE

For ten long years, Punjab was tormented by a virulent campaign of terror; but by 1993, the terrorists had been comprehensively defeated, and peace returned to the state. This was certainly an exceptional victory, won at great costs and with great sacrifices. It was a victory I had the honour of sharing with the thousands of brave men in the Punjab police who spearheaded the battle against terrorism; with the jawans and officers of the other arms of the security forces who participated in that battle; and with hundreds of brave men and women in the Punjab countryside who eventually confronted the terrorists and helped bring their depredations to an end. The experience of the protracted and complex low intensity war that brought about this victory has in it many lessons of great strategic and political significance.

It was in the course of recollecting and recording these experiences that my attention came to be progressively focused on a single recurrent theme that eventually became the subject of this book. The virulent campaign for 'Khalistan' was fought in the name of religion - specifically, my religion, Sikhism. The Sikhs have been involved in warfare almost throughout their history, but no campaign has ever brought odium and disgrace upon them and upon their Faith as this despicable movement did. And yet the Faith, and a majority of the community, in whose name the most unforgivable atrocities were committed - against every explicit tenet of that very Faith - had nothing whatsoever to do with this lunatic and savage adventure. Indeed, it was this very community that most vigorously resisted, and eventually helped defeat, the scourge of terror in Punjab.

The gross abuse of the teachings of the Gurus, and the petty, malicious conspiracy for power that inspired this heretical campaign, demand exposure. This book, to my mind, was far

more urgent than any analysis of tactics and strategies to counter terrorism; for it addresses a far more grave and insidious danger than any such examination would.

The various themes in this book were discussed with friends, family, and a number of eminent people; while I would like to express my gratitude to each of them here, I will not give an extended list of all who have contributed to the elaboration of my arguments. Special thanks are, however, due to my daughter, Chitvan, whose help made this book possible.

K P S Gill

CONTENTS

I

DOCTRINES OF DECEIT

Nanak, such are the blasphemers,
Who set themselves up,
As the leaders and rulers of the world;
They consume daily the forbidden fruit of falsehood,
And yet they preach to others,
What is right and what is wrong;
Themselves deluded, they delude others also,
Who follow in their path.[1]

The people of Punjab are still struggling to come to terms with the terrifying memories of a tragic decade-and-a-half of turbulence and terror; but already, strange and unsettling reverberations of that malevolent past can be heard again..

If we cast our minds back to 1981 and 1982, when terrorism in Punjab was already being perceived as a serious threat to the authority of the State, we discover that 13 persons were killed by the terrorists in each of these years. 1983, which was described by contemporary commentators as "The Year of the Armageddon"[2] saw the number of deaths inflicted by terrorist violence rise to 75.

Almost four years after the terrorist scourge had decisively been eliminated, there was a sudden rash of terrorist incidents: between March 14 and July 10, 1997, fifty-five persons lost their lives to the militant bomb and bullet in Punjab.

When does terrorist violence cross the threshold at which it is recognised and confronted in its true guise - as terrorism? Recently, the World Health Organisation issued a statement to the effect that even one case of polio constitutes an 'epidemic'. It would be immeasurably beneficial if we were to apply the

same definition to incidents of terrorism. A single terrorist act, if it does not meet with the appropriate State response, will reflexively multiply itself till the point where it attains the objectives of its perpetrators; or the point at which these perpetrators are comprehensively defeated in their purpose.

Unfortunately, certain inveterate delusions that preclude the possibility of a fitting response to militant violence have established themselves in the minds of the political leadership of Punjab. A group of 'interested' politicians and activists, whose role during the period of the ascendancy of terror was more than ambiguous, are now vigorously projecting, and seeking to popularise, a myth that terrorism was defeated in Punjab, not by police action, not by the force of arms, but because it simply 'lost popular support'. This fable has been repeated so often, at every available opportunity and forum, that its advocates, if no one else, now appear to place all their faith in its explanatory efficacy. But are we to understand, on this argument, that terrorism 'returned' to Punjab because it had, in the first few months of 1997, inexplicably regained 'popular support'?

There are several dangers inherent in this manifestly specious argument. The first of these is the insidious suggestion that terrorism did, at one time, enjoy overwhelming 'popular support' in Punjab. Despite the comprehensive disruption of the entire machinery of the State, and of the normal lives of the people that the terrorists successfully engineered for over ten years, there is no reason to believe that a majority, or even a substantial proportion, of the common people, were ever behind them. Certainly, there was a measure of support in the area along the borders of Pakistan. This was largely restricted to what is referred to as the Majha region, comprising mainly the tract lying between the river Beas and the Pakistan border, and essentially covering only two districts - Amritsar and Gurdaspur. Even within these confines, support was only partial and restricted to rural areas; though submission to the terror was - at least for some time - absolute. The peculiar susceptibility of the people of this region to the creed of the Kalashnikov raises important questions; history, culture, economics and a unique constellation of political forces will all have a part in any answer to these questions, but the search for such answers is not our present purpose. I am sure that scholars from these various disciplines will eventually

be able to provide a satisfactory explanation for this conundrum. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that this was the terrorist heartland; and even here, the large number of dissenting voices that had to be mercilessly silenced by the terrorists are evidence to the fact that their support was far—I would assert, immeasurably far - from unanimous.

The second perversity is the implicit proposition that terrorism does, in some sense, represent the 'democratic will'; that it expresses - possibly by illegitimate means - the legitimate aspirations of the people; and that, when the political agenda of the masses somehow [fortuitously? spontaneously?] changes, terrorism simply 'withers away', or the terrorists adopt the methods and objectives sanctioned by the masses. Nothing could be more patently absurd.

But the greatest hazard, in the present circumstances, is not the intellectual deceit, the evident falsehood, of this thesis; it lies in the complacence that such a belief, or such a pretence, encourages on the part of the State; the sense of misplaced confidence, of mistaken security, that it induces in a gullible public - the belief that, without their 'support', militancy cannot return, despite the still recent memory of the terror inflicted upon them without the least regard to their own fervent desires.

The fact is that terrorism and its executioners have their own agenda, entirely independent of the popular will, of democratic considerations or institutions, or of the aspirations and desires of the community they claim to represent. They are defeated, not by the operation of some mystical force called 'popular will', but by the force of arms. Their activities are not some convenient substitute for the ballot box; they are an absolute rejection of every value integral to democracy. The people themselves have no defence against them, other than the power they confer on those who govern on their part. Their 'will' is expressed, at best, through the extent to which they extend or withhold co-operation, especially in the form of information, to those who fight the scourge on their behalf. It is the security forces of the state and of the nation who bear the burden of the actual responsibility for the war against terror and anarchy.

II

No security force in the world can, of course, provide an absolute guarantee against a random terrorist strike; what is critical in this context, however, is the State's response to such a strike. It is on the basis of their perceptions and evaluation of these reactions that terrorists shape their own future strategies. An individual victory, even if it claims a critical target, signifies little, as long as it meets with a commensurate response. But if the response systems of the State fail, or are perceived by the terrorist to have failed, the 'movement' inevitably gains sustenance. And nothing encourages the terrorists to greater audacity than the spectacle of weakness in the political leadership, and of confusion in the security forces.

Unfortunately, both these circumstances appear, once again, to prevail in the Punjab as they did when the movement for the despicable fiction of 'Khalistan' took birth. The response of the Akali Government to the new, if limited, eruption of violence has been as predictable as it has been inappropriate. Far from projecting a certain toughness in dealing with the situation, or an adequate understanding of the problem, most of the public pronouncements of the state leadership in the wake of the spate of killings since March 1997 have been restricted to blaming 'Kashmiri terrorists', or the 'ISI', or some vague forces 'inimical to peace in Punjab' or to 'Hindu-Sikh amity'. Is the State's responsibility to protect its citizens against the depredations of terrorists somehow diminished if they come from some other state? Or from another country? Or if they are motivated by the desire to disrupt peace or communal harmony? Unless they are confronted with firm, effective and immediate countermeasures, the terrorists, whatever their inspiration or nationality, will only return to visit greater destruction on a hapless people.

Terrorism in Punjab had been brought under complete control in 1993; however, an announcement to this effect was only made much later, in 1994, after an entire six months had passed without a single terrorist incident. The State's preceding response was sufficient guarantee of another two years of unbroken peace, marred only by one major, and tragic, breach: the assassination of the Chief Minister, Beant Singh, on August 31, 1995. After this grave lapse, the state and, indeed, even the central

government was rife with speculation about the revival of terrorism in the wake of what was certainly a major 'breakthrough' for the militants. A firm response, a swift investigation, and the exposure and arrest of the main conspirators in the shortest possible time constituted both the police reaction and the Government's declaration of intent: terrorism would not be tolerated; nothing would be permitted to destroy the hard-won peace. The lack of enthusiasm among terrorists to repeat their 'success' is evidence that the message was received with ample clarity.

Force levels in Punjab did not undergo any significant change between 1994 and 1997. Officers who had taken part in combating terrorism and in providing an almost fool-proof security umbrella to the people continue to serve in the state and are still available for the task. The only thing lacking is the leadership's ability and wisdom to analyse the experience of the past decade and a half, to draw appropriate conclusions, and to apply them to the maintenance of law and order. As long as the leadership continues to delude itself on the nature of terrorism and of the war against terrorism, as long as their basic perceptions are incorrect, their prescriptions cannot be effective.

Having seen both war and peace in Punjab, I am firmly of the opinion that, with a certain minimal effort, peace can be made a permanent feature of the life of the average citizen in the state. But that requires intellectual honesty and moral courage; not the habitual cynicism that has been a feature of political discourse in the state over the past decades. For too long have too many people been running with the hares and hunting with the hounds; this is often described as the 'art of politics' among those who subscribe to the views attributed to Machiavelli in the West, and to Chanakya in India. Of course, no single political party, or segment of the Punjab leadership, or individual leader, can be singled out for blame in this regard - the failure of leadership in the state has been comprehensive.

In the late Forties and early Fifties there was nobody in Punjab who could have foreseen the advent of terror. Punjab had just emerged from a nightmare of communal violence; an estimated half a million had been killed and millions of others were displaced in what was probably the largest enforced transfer of populations in the history of man. It was the extent and severity

of violence directed against them that impelled the people to abandon their homes and all their possessions, and to trek in desperate circumstances, often defenceless against the depredations of murderous gangs, out of the land peopled by their forefathers for centuries, and into an alien land. The Partition is now so routinely reduced to statistics about death and migration that it is difficult to imagine the sheer enormity of what each individual and family - even people who did not suffer a loss of life among those they loved - had endured. After World War I, the League of Nations had, as part of a plan to settle outstanding territorial disputes in Europe, attempted to bring about a transfer of populations across borders; the plan failed comprehensively, evidence of the deep attachment that people have to the soil of their birth. The brutality and violence of the Partition of India left not only the people of Punjab, but the entire nation numb with shock. It was only the hopes raised by Independence, after centuries of subjugation, that allowed the people to cope with their losses and to concentrate their energies on rebuilding their own lives and the fractured nation.

There was, in the first decade after Independence, very little violence anywhere in the country, with the exception of the Naga Hill District [then part of Assam], and sporadic Leftist violence in pockets in the South and in the East. The Congress enjoyed an unbroken spell of power at the Centre and in most of the states, including Punjab. The Punjab Congress, however, was a house divided from the very outset, with chief ministers replacing one another with unseemly frequency - interspersed with spells of President's rule - amidst an unending and unashamed scramble for personal power. This ignoble spectacle continued until Partap Singh Kairon took over as Chief Minister of Punjab and set it resolutely on the path of economic development.

It was during Kairon's years in power, however, that the Punjabi Suba agitation for a separate linguistic state with a Punjabi Speaking majority, came to a head. The underpinnings of the movement were always communal, but it was the obduracy and a policy of procrastination on the part both of the state and central government that created conditions of open hostility between the communities. It is idle speculation now to wonder what the shape of Punjab's history would have been if the Punjabi Suba agitation had been handled with greater sensitivity, and

if the demand for a Punjabi language state had been acceded to before it acquired a virulently communal character. The past is a reality that cannot be wished away. It is sufficient to note that it was from these apparently innocuous seeds that the poisonous weed of terror eventually sprung.

Although Kairon's handling of the Punjabi Suba agitation, and the reactionary escalation of communal rhetoric by the Akali Dal had created a palpable Hindu-Sikh divide, the Fifties and the Sixties were still untouched by the bigotry, the fundamentalism and the religious frenzy that was to overwhelm Sikh and Punjab politics before the advent of the Eighties. Right through the Sixties, simply no one could imagine or accept the possibility of a people subjected to such horrific bloodletting during Partition, inflicting new and hideous wounds upon themselves in a frenzy of terrorist violence less than four decades after that appalling catastrophe.

I had left Punjab for police training at Mount Abu in 1957, and subsequently for my posting in Assam. The little contact I had with my home state over the next two decades was restricted to the brief and occasional vacations at home that an extremely demanding schedule in Assam permitted. It was only in the late Seventies and early Eighties that I was able to spend more time in Punjab, and I was alarmed by the mindset that had established itself among a substantial number of the people I met. Disingenuous theories were being invented, facts and history distorted to bolster these absurd theses, and a peculiar, though still suppressed, hysteria was increasingly evident even among some of those who believed themselves to be educated.

None of this happened suddenly. A politically perceptive leadership would have, should have, confronted these trends even as they emerged. Instead, the entire leadership in Punjab, without any notable exceptions, preferred to ride the very wave that was to devastate the state.

III

There are none so blind, it has been remarked, as those who will not see. Even after over a decade of unremitting violence, denial appears to persist as the pre-eminent strategy of political survival in Punjab. The self-inflicted myopia of the political

leadership that is presently charged with the responsibility of guiding the destinies of the state, has once again put all the gains of the victory against the forces of fundamentalism and disruption in jeopardy.

The war against terror in Punjab has been comprehensively won; but no society, no nation, is ever proof against the intentions and the amoral inventiveness of the criminally ambitious. Democracies are, in this, peculiarly vulnerable; political instability, wide cultural differences and economic disparities - such as those that characterise the entire Indian subcontinent - heighten such susceptibilities.

The conditions specific to Punjab, moreover, do not justify excessive optimism - certainly not the kind of Panglossian obduracy that is reflected in the "no popular support for terrorists" thesis. Freedom from fear has been won at great costs in the state; it is not self-sustaining, and will have to be defended constantly if it is to survive. There are several factors that make such a defence an urgent necessity.

In the first instance, there is still a small residual potential for terrorism within the state: a fringe of lunacy among politicians and among the religiously bigoted, and substantial economic incentives for the purely criminalised. Over 200 listed terrorists, including roughly 30 in the 'hard-core' category, escaped the security net in Punjab; while most of them are now comfortably lodged at a variety of safe-havens abroad, some of them are still believed to be in India; a small army of sympathisers, comprising in a large part the families of terrorists, and a substantial force of professional criminals are still available to any group that can come up with a coherent and low-risk strategy for the revival of terrorism. The financial aspects of terrorism cannot be ignored; while the survival prospects of hard-core terrorists had been reduced to a point where personal financial gain would appear irrelevant, it is a fact that a majority of those who joined the movement, certainly after the mid-Eighties, were motivated by the 'benefits', both pecuniary and of a more lurid nature, that accrued in a 'career' in militancy.[3] Great fortunes were made by many people both in the leadership and on the periphery of the movement for Khalistan, and by their families. It was only when the 'active life' of the average terrorist in Punjab had been reduced to under six months that all these inducements

began to fail. However any situation of acute political instability and of interference, weakness or lack of direction in the functioning of the security forces would immediately revive these motives. In such a situation, moreover, even without outside support, a substantial cache of arms and explosives is readily available to subversive elements in the state. A significant proportion of the arsenal pumped into the state during the period of militancy still lies buried around the countryside and can be swiftly recovered and redeployed if conditions once again become 'favourable' to terrorist activity.

Pakistan's perception of its 'strategic interests' in the region, moreover, make Punjab a target in perpetuity for its machinations. The danger of open conventional warfare between India and Pakistan is now negligible, but support to and provocation of what has come to be known as 'low intensity warfare' will remain part of Pakistan's strategic objectives for a long time to come. The Inter Services Intelligence [ISI], Pakistan's primary agency for covert operations, even today runs a number of terrorist training camps for Sikh militants, including those in Bahawalpur, Sialkot and Lahore; the surviving scraps of most of the major terrorist groups of Punjab, including the Babbar Khalsa, the Bhindranwale Tiger Force for Khalistan [BTFK], the International Sikh Youth Federation [ISYF], factions of the Khalistan Commando Force [KCF], and the Dal Khalsa, have found sanctuary in these camps. The flow of recruits to these camps from India has now completely dried up. But there is evidence that the ISI is presently focusing a recruitment drive on 'Khalistan' sympathisers in Canada, the United States, England and Germany, for training at these camps. The ISI is also in possession of a vast arsenal, including some three million Kalashnikov rifles, some Stinger missiles, and large supplies of RDX explosives, which were obtained from the USA, and were diverted from their intended recipients in Afghanistan to the discretionary stocks of the Agency. Their deployment is, today, determined independently by the ISI, and is believed to be even beyond the review of the elected Government of Pakistan. Any evidence of political instability or of increased public discontent in Punjab will, consequently, certainly see a re-injection, both of these dormant militants and of a substantial proportion of these arms, across the border.

The 'ideology' of Khalistan, moreover, is certain to be kept on an artificial life-support system by an extremely active group of non-resident Indians [NRIs], primarily based in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. The flow of propaganda and financial support from this alienated coterie, out of touch with the ground realities of Punjab, their vision clouded by their own preconceptions and, worse, their own personal ambitions, remains at a high level even now, despite peace in the state. Subversive activities spearheaded by these groups include a barrage of pamphlets and letters - displaying little regard for facts, but high on emotion and an invented 'history' of persecution - to the governments of western nations and to international bodies, specially the United Nations. Petitioning the legislatures, and securing, through a variety of methods - not excluding sizeable 'contributions' to election funds - the support of members of these legislatures, and of a variety of influential committees, sub-committees and caucuses, particularly in America, are some of the strategies adopted to keep the 'Khalistan issue' alive. Their activities, however, go well beyond propaganda. A number of 'militant co-ordinators' currently operate from various European countries, America, Canada, Pakistan, Nepal, Thailand, Bangkok, Singapore and Dubai. Their activities include the organisation of *shaheedi samagams* - 'societies of martyrs' - from Gurudwaras; fund raising drives; and the propagation of the 'ideology of Khalistan' through the electronic and print media. The terrorist leadership presently based in Pakistan is totally dependant on these co-ordinators for communications, feedback, as well as substantial material support. These co-ordinators have also, over the past years, been regularly 'sponsoring' several groups to India to evaluate the ground conditions for the revival of militancy, to establish contacts with *shaheedi parivars* - families of dead terrorists - pro-militant human rights groups, and a range of old sympathisers in order to keep the infrastructure for future militant operations alive. Militant co-ordinators have also been motivating and funding youngsters in Punjab to cross over into Pakistan for short-duration training and for 'briefings' by militants there; this strategy, however, has been meeting with minimal success in the recent past. These 'nodal activists' explore contacts with sympathetic 'intellectuals', as well as with other militant groups in the country. Apart from

Kashmir, their activities in the North East, as well as along the Bangladesh border, are increasingly in evidence; there is also reason to believe that covert encouragement is also extended to a variety of discontented groupings, including caste and other communal cabals, with an overall intent to exploit every available opportunity for disruption within India.

Militant ideologues have, recently, favoured a shift in their strategy, advocating the creation of over-ground fronts and political organisations to spearhead their immediate campaigns. While 'Khalistan' remains their exclusive ideological platform, they now consider it expedient to exploit the democratic structure and institutions of the Indian State to pursue their goal in the immediate future. Their projected strategy is based on building up substantial public opinion through a variety of 'Human Rights' fora and sustained litigation, to be backed up, later, by a strong over-ground movement of agitations, demonstrations, *gheraos* and protest rallies. When, and if, these strategies bear sufficient fruit to make the situation favourable to a revival of militancy, violence will once again erupt.

Dr. Sohan Singh, a prominent 'ideologue' of the Khalistan movement, and the chief of his own faction of the 'Panthic Committee', was arrested in November 1993. He was one of the leaders of the movement whom I interrogated personally. Despite his bigotry, his muddle-headedness, his absolute distortion of history and political fact, the swelling hatred of his heart, he nevertheless succeeded in articulating what I believe is still the essential strategy of those who currently supervise the itinerant garbage of the movement for Khalistan.

> The ISI men told me in Pakistan that to promote terrorism in Punjab was their national policy irrespective of change of political leadership. They also said that supply of weapons to terrorists in India was not a problem as they could deliver them in Delhi. They are very serious to reactivate terrorist activities in Punjab to the extent they put even Heads of terrorist outfits camping in Pakistan to rigorous training like other trainees. These included Wadhawa Singh and Mehal Singh of the Babbar Khalsa, Dr Pritam Singh Sekhon of the KLF, Panjwar of the KCF(P) and Narain Singh of the KLA. Current Pak directed strategy is to avoid confrontation with the security forces as they are keen to avoid further killing of the terrorists.... Punjab terrorism is down but not out.[4]

IV

These dangers must not be underestimated. Neither, on the other hand, must they be magnified beyond their actual proportions.

The Indian State is more than sufficiently equipped to counter and contain the designs of all these inimical forces - as long as the communal virus does not erupt into an epidemic. The greatest danger, in this regard, is the threat from within. The entire structure and leadership that gave rise to Sikh fundamentalism, and eventually to terrorism, in the decades since independence is still in place. Worse still, the logic that fuelled the events of the Seventies and the Eighties has not even been confronted. This logic is integrally linked with fundamental aspects of modern democracies [particularly in culturally and religiously diverse societies such as India] and specifically with the problems of the creation and cultivation of communal 'vote banks' which distort political, economic and developmental goals, even as they warp the essential nature of religion. In every aspect, it is the lowest common denominator that prevails. As religions become a tool for political mobilisation, there is a skewed emphasis on conformity and religious identity; on the isolation of, and loyalty to, the community; to the exclusion of the spiritual and moral content of religion. All religious practices are transformed into ritual; ceremonies and celebrations marking religious events are metamorphosed into organised shows of strength. This distortion, moreover, works systematically against any effort of reform; those who seek to restore the original intent and purity, the immaculate and primary mystical impulse of the religious enterprise, are not only rejected, but are treated with hostility as 'enemies of the Faith'. A form of what is known as the 'hecklers veto', the ability of a vociferous, often violent, minority, to silence all dissent, stifles the primal search for spiritual salvation.

This process fulfils complex needs among those who seek identity, respect and fulfilment through their association with communal groups. Unfortunately, it simultaneously creates gross distortions of reality, crude simplifications that permit an unconditional glorification of their own group, even as they create a caricature of a definite 'other' as the enemy, the oppressor, the epitome of evil. It is in this process that we discover the

emergence of the 'ghetto mentality', the constant ritual lamentation, the invention and exclusive focus on alleged grievances, the creation, in other words, of the myth of a 'victim community'. The psychological failures of key individuals in such a community are then projected, increasingly, on the hostile 'other' - in the case of this category of Sikhs, the 'other' is the 'deceitful Hindus' and their 'Brahmanical conspiracy'. This is the process that led the Sikh political and religious leadership, and at least those Sikhs who accepted their warped message as their gospel, into the fruitless wilderness of communal antipathies, into futile rivalries between 'majority' and 'minority'; into attitudes and relationships that create deadlocks, that nourish, rather than remedy, existing frustrations, suffering and injustice.

The architects of this distorted worldview, however, are once more in control of the destinies of Punjab. One may hope that the lessons of the past have not entirely been lost on them. Unfortunately, the reactions of the current Akali regime to the sudden spate of terrorist violence in 1997 give little grounds for optimism and are reminiscent of what happened in the first half of 1986, when the Akali Dal government headed by Surjit Singh Barnala kept on denying and underplaying the threat of terrorism. The 1985 assembly elections in Punjab had been pushed through with undue haste by Rajiv Gandhi's government at the Centre. The general thesis, according to the 'think tanks' who advised the Prime Minister at that time, was that, just as the Marxists had brought an end to the Naxalite movement in West Bengal, the Akalis would bring an end to terror in Punjab. I was, then, as I am now, utterly convinced of the basic error of this thesis, and had repeatedly advised the Government to delay the elections till they had a better grip over the terrorist movement. There were fundamental ideological contradictions between the positions held by the ruling CPI[M] in West Bengal and the CPI[ML] or Naxalites; it was this basic conflict that make it possible for the Marxist Government to fight and subdue Naxalism. As far as the Akalis are concerned, however, they are on the same ideological continuum as the terrorists; any differences they have with them, are, at best, distances between the points at which they stand on that continuum, or disputes over methods.

If, consequently, we are to neutralise the impact of disruptive forces in Punjab over a long term, it is essential to expose and understand the dynamics of the genesis of fundamentalist terrorism in the state, and its integral link with entrenched political forces. Peace is the best time to prepare our defences against these forces; events in the past have repeatedly demonstrated that, once the crisis is upon us, hysteria inevitably triumphs - with disastrous consequences. And peace currently survives in Punjab. Unfortunately, opportunism appears to be the only political strategy that manifests itself in times of peace in our country. This has been the pattern of failures in the past. It is the gravest danger even today.

V

The arguments expounded, the examples selected, the perspectives and analysis of this book may appear inordinately biased against the Akali leadership. It is a well known and well documented fact that the flames of terrorism were fanned by the Congress (I), that the Akalis, if anything, initially opposed the 'Bhindranwale card' that the central and the state Congress leadership was playing. It is not the intention of this work to defend or exonerate any specific political groupings or leaders for their role in the Punjab tragedy. Not a single party that was involved in this protracted catastrophe conducted itself with honour.

It was, however, the Sikh religious leadership - and prominently among them, the Akalis - that picked up the fundamentalist card; moreover, it was this very leadership that had, over the preceding at least four decades, been preparing the soil in which the seed of bigotry and communal violence would thrive. And eventually, it was this very religious leadership that either participated in, encouraged, or failed to oppose or dissociate itself from, the campaign of terror for Khalistan.

It is this leadership, finally, and not any cynical external grouping, that claims to represent and to protect the Faith; when innumerable acts of cruelty, the slaughter of innocents, the barbarity of terrorism, were inflicted upon the people of Punjab in the name of Sikhism, the silence of these 'guardians of the

faith' was deafening; they failed, again, to protect the Faith from the outrageous distortion of the message of the Sikh Gurus, and from the dishonour the activities of the terrorists brought upon it.

Their silence alone, in the face of this onslaught, would be sufficient to condemn them. Their complicity is unforgivable.

REFERENCES

1. *Guru Granth Sahib*, Majh, M1, p. 140.
2. Joshi, Chand, *Bhindranwale: Myth and Reality*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1984, pp. 126-150.
3. See Chapter V.
4. This interrogation was recorded on Video, and the Press had been invited to view these tapes in the first week of November 1993.

II

THE MASK OF FAITH

Birds of prey are found in holy places
Yet they eat living things;
Though they are clothed in white,
Their hearts are evil.[1]

We are still in the wake of a vast and unforgivable tragedy. For fifteen years Punjab, and much of India, was tormented by a terror inflicted upon its people in the name of the faith of the Gurus. Echoes of that torment have not yet ceased.

The present marks the end of one of the greatest moral crises to confront the Sikh *Panth* [community] in its entire history. In the past, it had come close to physical annihilation; but never to the moral compromise that terrorism inflicted. How did this crisis come about? Who were its architects? What was the role of the larger Sikh community? And, critically, has the challenge and the danger it represented disappeared?

These questions continue to agitate the minds of every Indian, as the nation seeks to protect itself against a recurrence of the long-drawn tragedy in Punjab, and to develop defences against its replication in other states. But for the Sikhs, these questions are overwhelming. Acts of random terror still mar the peace in Punjab; a significant terrorist leadership still survives in safe-havens in Pakistan; an inimical neighbour and its covert agencies will exploit every opportunity to inflict anarchy and ruin on any part of India, and Punjab, by virtue of its location, remains a prime target. For the Sikhs, however, the most oppressive fact is that the terrorism that wreaked havoc in the lives of the people of Punjab was inflicted in the name of the Sikh faith and, within it, of the brotherhood of the *Khalsa*. A stain on its honour, like a

festering wound, torments the *Panth*; and it is only through deep and brutally honest introspection, through an understanding of the true teachings of the Gurus, through a re-examination of this period of its history and its collective experience, that the community can declare, unequivocally, that the many voices that claimed to speak for Sikhism, and for the *Khalsa* - and to kill in their name - did not, in fact, speak or act for them; that these voices abused the great faith, the universal message of the Gurus, and their final testament, the Guru Granth Sahib.

At the level of a generalisation, such a declaration would be simple; for the Guru Granth Sahib is explicit: the Sikh is "He who inspirith no fear, nor is afraid"[2] Those who sought to "kill one in order to terrorise thousands"—whatever their motives - betrayed this faith; they could claim for themselves neither the title of Sikh, nor of *Khalsa*.

This answer, however, is insufficient. Even today, in the Golden Temple - the holiest shrine of the Sikhs—elected representatives of the *Panth* present *saropas* to honour the families of those who inflicted this terror; and who they still describe as the martyrs of the *Panth*. In Gurudwaras in rural Punjab, there are still a handful of stragglers who preach a creed of unadulterated hatred and vengeance, though few attend to them. From across the borders, the remnants of the terrorist leadership speak of a shift in strategy - the adoption of what they describe as 'peaceful' tactics to promote their objectives - even while they reiterate that these objectives remain unchanged.

The attitudes of a large number of Sikhs, and particularly of the Sikh religious and political leadership has, at best, remained ambivalent in the face of these activities. Among the common people, there is little support for such antics; but indifference alone cannot suffice. Even today, a mythology of oppression, of torment and of martyrdom is being invented in Punjab around those who spoke only with the Kalashnikov and the bomb. And while the Government scampers to restore properties to the families of terrorists in order to 'heal the wounds', no one speaks of the wounds of the tens of thousands who were victims of terror in the state. It is in the midst of such ambivalence that the malevolent creed of the terrorist took birth. It is such ambivalence that makes the Sikh people vulnerable to its seduction again.

II

It is the Sikhs themselves who must guard against this seduction. Democracy and liberalism are not a sufficient defence and this is a fact that the ideologues of 'freedom' need, equally, to comprehend. There is a fatal flaw in the liberal mind. Having established, in structure and form [though seldom in substance], a system of governance that corresponds to its conception of democracy, it feels that nothing more needs to be done. The 'Truths' of the liberal ideology are, as the American Declaration on the Rights of Man expresses it, 'Self Evident'. They require no proof, no reiteration, and no defence - certainly no defence by force of arms. Once democracy [or even the ritual of quinquinneal elections] is established, according to liberal mythology, the mystical 'invisible hand' keeps everything in place; the 'superior wisdom of the masses' ensures order and justice.

This is just so much rubbish. As we should know after living with falsehoods for fifty years now. Truth does not triumph; unless it has champions to propound it, unless it has armies to defend it.

But while the ideologues of 'freedom' wrap themselves up in complacent superiority, irrational cults are actively, and passionately, advocated; virulent doctrines are insidiously planted in the pervasive confusion, both among the young who find the opportunities of the world inadequate to meet their expectations, and among the old who mourn the disintegration of familiar values and institutions. Democracy is an imperfect institution; it has numerous flaws, and perhaps only a single virtue - all its alternatives are manifestly worse. But the disparities, the injustices, even the monumental inefficiency and corruption that democratic systems tolerate and appear to breed are more than adequate, if selectively highlighted and skilfully manipulated, to create an immense reservoir of frustration; if the subjective sense of deprivation or of discrimination within a community - irrespective of realities - can be sufficiently heightened, it is not difficult to convince the susceptible that violence offers the only solution; and that the indiscriminate violence of terrorism is the most efficient of the available options.

Once a certain religious and communal fervour is introduced into this incendiary compound of half truths, the liberal ideology

has no defence. The Rights of Man, even if passionately advocated, stand only a poor chance against the awful might of what is claimed to be the revealed Word - though it be distorted beyond recognition - of God; especially among the believers; especially among masses of illiterates; especially among those whom modern - or democratic - society has dispossessed.

And not only among these. In the early Eighties, well before the tragic farce of Operation Blue Star and the unforgivable slaughter during the anti-Sikh riots could justify a sense of insecurity among moderate Sikhs, I remember the sense of shock I experienced on encountering the prevailing mind-set of educated and successful Sikhs in the drawing-rooms of Chandigarh. Recall that a surprising number of well-educated and well off Sikhs, including University Professors, senior retired Army, Police and Administrative Services' officers became active Bhindranwale supporters; and the number who privately espoused his cause while maintaining a public - and expedient - posture of indifference, was many times greater.

This, indeed, is the case with all extreme doctrines. Today, the implicit support for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism in the country is substantially higher, even among the educated middle classes, than one would be led to suspect on the basis of its public manifestations. The case of Punjab is consequently critical for our understanding of the circumstances that give rise to millennial militant ideologies. If peace is to last in that state, and if the nation is to create defences against a recurrence of what transpired there, we must first understand how terror prevailed.

III

For the Sikhs, however, such an understanding is not only necessary because of the threat of terrorism, both past and present; an insidious constellation of forces that constitutes a persistent threat to their faith still prevails in the Punjab. The essential universalism, the humanism and dynamism of Sikhism is, today, being progressively distorted and circumscribed by the emerging patterns of both secular and religious politics in the state. The crisis of terrorism has, no doubt, been contained; but the crisis within Sikhism is far from over.

And this crisis is the greatest in Sikh history; greater, even, than the time when the entire *Panth* was confronted with the prospect of physical annihilation. The Sikhs had been the targets of gradually escalating violence throughout the seventeenth century; this campaign culminated, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in a concerted effort by the Mughal rulers and by Afghan invaders to exterminate the faith in its entirety. Their temples were barred or demolished, and a price was placed on every Sikh head. Sikh men, women and children were butchered wherever they were found; thousands were hanged, drawn and quartered. They fled their homes and sought shelter in the hills and forests. The oppressive measures against them went to an extent that would be ludicrous if it were not tragic: the use of the word *Gur* [jaggery] was banned lest it remind people of the Sikh Gurus; books were not to be called *granth*, since this suggested the Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs, and had to be referred to as *pothis*. The sacred pool at Amritsar was filled up with the debris of the temple that had stood at its centre since the time of the Fifth Guru. Sikh shrines everywhere were being reduced to rubble.

Yet, such was the refulgence of the faith, so great its inspiration, that even at this hour of its greatest physical danger, and despite the fact that the line of the living Gurus had come to an end with Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, Sikhism continued not only to attract new converts, but to spur them to acts of the greatest courage and sacrifice for their new found creed. The moral force of its teachings was the only inducement it could offer in this hour of darkness.

Sikhism, today, has arrived at its greatest numerical strength ever; and despite the artificial posture of martyrdom some of its prominent political and religious leaders seek to project, it is in no danger of annihilation by 'genocide' or by 'ethnic cleansing' - phrases that have been borrowed unthinkingly from the international arena and applied by the wilder imaginations among the Sikh 'intelligentsia' to the Punjab situation. But the message of the Gurus, today, is no longer carried abroad by those who call themselves the Gurus' *'sikhs'* [disciples]. And this is despite the immense institutional structure that has grown around Sikhism and its temples over the past century. If Sikhism still wins converts, it is because of the work of anonymous, dedicated lay preachers - not of those who claim to 'represent'

its greatest force. The latter, over the past decades, have sought only to incarcerate it within the narrow geographical bounds of fictional nation-states, and the confines of parochial mindsets obsessed with the external manifestations of the 'Sikh identity'. These 'representatives' today project themselves as the "one exclusive manifestation of the corporate will of the Sikh community", and insist that any individual who does not subscribe to their ideology has no right to speak for the *Panth*.[3] Those who oppose these 'guardians of the faith' are automatically condemned as 'enemies' or 'traitors to the *Panth*'.

Nothing could militate against the spirit of Sikhism as this does. The history of the Sikhs is replete with the struggle, led at one time by the Gurus themselves, against all those who sought to establish themselves as the arbiters of the faith. Sikhism is a defence of the claims of conscience against all external interference; between the devotee and God, there are no intermediaries. In the seventeenth century Guru Gobind Singh had himself set about to destroy the power usurped by the *masands* or deputies of the Sikh faith; and his harsh condemnation of the unacceptable mediacy of the *masands* is familiar to every Sikh.[4]

Closer in time we have the case of the *mahants* or temple priests who were driven out of the Gurudwaras in 1925, after a five-year-long peaceful mass movement spearheaded by the Akalis, in which hundreds of Sikh lives were lost and tens of thousands of Sikhs jailed.[5] This campaign expelled a corrupt and venal clergy which had transformed the Gurudwaras into hereditary family fiefdoms and distorted Sikh religious practices and beliefs.

Today, however, the institutions of the Sikhs, both religious and political, have been hijacked by a small clique, a self-interested oligarchy, representing a particular ethnic cluster, a small endogamous segment of Punjab's social fabric; a narrow caste group that seeks to define Sikhism and Sikh identity in terms of its own constricted vision. This straitjacketed vision cannot accommodate the great faith of the Gurus.

The Sikh community does not, in reality, conform to the simple undifferentiated image that has been imposed on the public mind - an image essentially defined by the prescriptions and standards of the *Khalsa* and associated with the five mandatory symbols of that order, the five 'Ks': *kesh, kada, kirpan, kangha, kaccha*

[unshorn hair, the steel bracelet, the short-sword, a comb, and loose breeches that do not go below the knees]. This, however, is a misconception energetically promoted by the leadership of the dominant section of the community. Those who strictly follow the discipline of the *Khalsa* in every aspect of their lives, would, in any event, be a small minority; even among those who wear its external symbols, the majority would consist of "the liberal, the lax, and the ambivalent."[6] A number of sects exist within Sikhism, such as the *Nanakpanthis*, the *Udasis*, the *Seva Panthis* and the *Namdharis*; and a large proportion of the *Panth* is comprised of what are described as the *Sahajdhari* Sikhs: individuals who do not conform to the strict discipline of the *Khalsa*, and do not wear the five symbols of the militant order, but who are, nonetheless, inspired in their daily lives by the teachings of the Gurus. The title *'Sahajdhari'* is associated with Guru Nanak's use of *sahaj* to designate the condition of ultimate spiritual bliss which climaxes the *nam simran* technique [meditation on the names of God]. Those who emphasise Guru Nanak's practice of *nam simran* thus came to be known as 'those who affirm *sahaj*' or *Sahajdhari Sikhs* in contrast to the *Amritdhari* Sikhs who undergo Guru Gobind Singh's baptism of the sword and wear all the external symbols of the *Khalsa* order. *Amritdhari Sikhs* today tend to apply the appellation *Sahajdhari* to all Sikhs who cut their hair, and interpret the term *sahaj* to mean 'slow' or 'natural'; the *Sahajdharis*, in this sense, are thought of as 'slow adopters' of Sikhism, or 'a Sikh who is still on the path to full *Khalsa* membership.'[7] If the *Sahajdhari* Sikhs are being isolated from the *Panth* today, it is because of the activities of the very people who claim to represent Sikhism; for they are denied a place of honour in the community, denied representation in the religious institutions that define and govern it; indeed, even denied their identity as Sikhs.

It is important, in this context, to understand the position of the *Khalsa* order. Even during Guru Gobind Singh's time, it was not obligatory for every disciple [the literal meaning of the term *'sikh'*] to undergo the baptism of steel, and *Sahajdhari* Sikhs have coexisted with *Amritdharis* throughout the three centuries since the creation of the *Khalsa* order. The baptism of the sword, traditionally, was seen by those who underwent it as a final commitment; a coming of age, a dedication of every aspect of

the individual's life to the faith. Today, however, it has, in large part, been reduced to a mere ritual - one that the children of *Amritdhari* Sikhs may undergo as a matter of routine. The 'five Ks' - the external symbols of the *Khalsa* - have now been transformed into inherited elements of a communal identity that have little connection with conduct or conviction. Those who wear them are no longer the 'warrior saints' of Guru Gobind Singh's conception; they are worn merely as marks of communal pride, or as the contemporary Sikh leadership is fond of expressing it, of 'Sikh identity'. Devoid of the spirit of absolute sacrifice and commitment that characterised their acceptance in the past, they are now indistinguishable from the caste marks of the Brahmanical order, their tufts of hair and their *janeus* [sacred threads].

And this has happened within a system of beliefs that rejected all such ritual distinctions. At the tender age of nine, when the child Nanak was told by the family priest that he must wear a *janeu*, to distinguish him from the casteless and the '*Shudras*', he replied;

> Make mercy thy cotton, contentment thy thread,
> Continence its knot, truth its twist.
> That would make a *janeu* for the soul; if thou have it,
> O Brahman, then put it on me.
> It will not break, nor become soiled, or be burned or lost.
> Blest the man, O Nanak, who goeth with such a thread on his neck.[8]

It is the misfortune of our age that the teachings of this enlightened soul, in their contemporary institutional incarnation, have been transformed into a mirror image of the very religious formalism that his original mystical insights sought to destroy. The "religion of gesture and symbol"[9] is easier to practice than the meditational disciplines and moral codes the Gurus imposed on their community; communal identities are easier to secure than the essence of faith.

This, however, is not our only affliction. The temples of Sikhism, many of them with important associations with the history and martyrs of the faith, have acquired immense sanctity and authority among the devout; and these sentiments are transferred almost automatically to those who control these temples. Among these, the Golden Temple has a position of

paramountcy, and a significance far greater than any individual priest, priesthood or leader. Any movement - and here we are speaking of political movements, though they may be couched in the language of religion [there have been no religious movements in recent times] - that originates from, or is associated with the Golden Temple, is automatically assumed to enjoy the support and sanction of the Sikh people, and of Sikhism. Recent Sikh history has consequently been an almost continuous internecine, often fratricidal, battle to control this holy sanctuary; and through it, the minds of the Sikh people.

IV

All this, however, still cannot explain how a deeply religious people - or even a significant segment among them - could resort to the inhumanity of terrorism. The social and economic disparities between the urban and rural sectors in Punjab; the flood of rural educated unemployed who could find no constructive role in the system around them; the interminable sequence of political machinations and betrayals that created the conditions for mass disaffection; all these are factors that contributed to widespread public anger - and I am sure a battery of social scientists is even now analysing reams of data to define their relative significance in Punjab's troubled years. Many of these factors, however, are to be found in most other states of the Indian Union, and while they provide the ground for discontent, these are not the seeds of terror.

The heart of this darkness is located in a long and continuous manipulation of the Sikh psyche through the institutions and symbols of religion. But before we examine this tainted core, it is necessary to discover the relationship of the average Sikh to his scriptures and his faith.

The Sikh scriptures are a living voice for those who believe in them and the Granth Sahib embodies the mystical person of the Gurus. The Granth is deeply revered, but few Sikhs will have read it in its entirety. The degree of their familiarity with its contents, however, is unusually high. The daily prayers comprise important, and fairly extensive parts of the Granth Sahib; they may include the *Japji Sahib* of Guru Nanak; the *Rehras* that follow immediately after in the Holy Book; the *Jaap Sahib*

of Guru Gobind Singh; the *Ardas*, a prayer that recounts the great sacrifices and suffering endured by heroes of the Faith; extracts from the *Dasham Granth*, the Tenth Guru's testament. For the devout, at least five *Banis* or hymns must be read every morning; another five *Banis* with some supplementary prayers and verses, are prescribed for the evening. And before they retire at night, the pious will recite the *Kirtan Sohila*, ending it, once again, with the *Ardas*.

Recordings of the *Gurbani* can be found in virtually every Sikh home. Children hear these prayers, hymns and legends from the earliest age. More importantly, a visit to the Gurudwara is not only a ritual visitation; it is usually a gathering of the community, where the scriptures are read, recited and sung, and tales of Sikh valour and sacrifice are reiterated again and again till they become an integral part of the mindset of every member of the *Panth*.

The Punjab countryside is dotted with the *deras* [abodes] of lay preachers and itinerant Sikh sages, many of them well versed in the scriptures and deeply committed to the task they have undertaken - though some of them may well be charlatans out to make a little money. They attract a steady stream of villagers, and on religious festivals, large congregations may gather to hear their discourses. In the villages, they are a major and vibrant source for the dissemination of the message of the Gurus.

A large and integral part of the religious teachings that are so variously communicated consists of the martyrology of Sikhism. The Sikhs were persecuted by the Mughals, and by successive waves of Afghan invaders, throughout their history till shortly before the British period. Confronting onslaught after onslaught they came within inches of complete annihilation on many occasions. The torments inflicted on their forbears, the brutal tortures they were subjected to, the martyrdom of two of the Sikh Gurus, and of four of the Tenth Guru's sons, at the hands of Mughal Emperors and governors, and the almost incredible acts of self-sacrifice by numberless Sikh heroes create the sense of a palpable wound in the heart of every Sikh. Many of the stories they believe in absolutely may, no doubt, be apocryphal; in history, however, "what is believed to have happened can commonly be more important than what actually happened."[10]

This is the truth that has been manipulated without end by those who seek to exploit the heightened sentiments of the Sikhs for their own political objectives. The sense of wrong, of grievous injustices that is ingrained in the psyche of every Sikh as a result of the tyranny of the ruling classes and the barbarity of invaders in the past is transferred seamlessly to the present, through metaphor and symbol; through the invention of a litany of supposed wrongs, of presumed conspiracies, of ostensible oppression.

To understand how this was possible we must see how the political message has been communicated in the past decades. The Gurudwara, deeply revered by the average Sikh, has, in this, become an adjunct of politics. It does not, however, motivate, form or shape the pattern and content of politics, guiding it towards what is right and just. In this, the Sikh doctrine of spiritual and temporal authority of the *Panth* has been turned on its head. The Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind had enunciated this doctrine, symbolically carrying two swords, *piri* and *miri*, to assert his authority in both the spiritual and temporal spheres. But the temporal authority he assumed was intended to protect and further the interests of *Dharma*, to defend the Faith against the relentless onslaught to which it was being subjected. The principles and institutions of the Faith, the inexorable puissance of *Dharma*, were not to be subordinated to secular ambitions. Today, however, the messages communicated through the intricate network of Sikh religious institutions are defined exclusively by the petty designs, the conspiracies and shifting loyalties of a venal and unscrupulous leadership that has discovered the advantages of adopting a religious posture, a quasi-religious garb and image, and of expressing all its demands in a communal idiom.

In thousands of Gurudwaras that dot the Punjab, *sangats* listen with rapt attention to readings from the scriptures; after this, *dhadis*, martial singers, recall deeds of sacrifice and heroism, detailing the tortures that the martyrs of Sikhism were subjected to, the continuous and cruel trials of the Faith. There are innumerable verses, in the *Janam Saakhis* or lives of the Gurus, in the folklore, in epic poetry connected with Sikh history and warfare, that detail these horrors in the most evocative language possible. In an atmosphere surcharged with religious fervour and a deep sense of injury, preachers and political activists harangue the assembled faithful on the wrongs of the present

regime; on the 'oppressive Brahmins who rule from Delhi' and 'seek to destroy the Faith', through cunning and cruelty, even as the Mughals had done. No evidence is needed here; no concrete cases of persecution; no martyrs. All the emotions aroused by the preceding drama are simply transferred to the present; ambiguous, but strangely tangible wounds suppurate in the mind; and when the time, the opportunity, and the final prompting come, explode in putrefying violence.

V

This process went on for over forty years - without any effective resistance or effort by saner elements in the community to counter it [the educated Sikh would absorb the scriptural message with devotion, and reject the rest as the ranting of semi-literates which were never meant to be taken seriously] - before it culminated in the terrorism of the Eighties. I personally witnessed the changing rhetoric of the Gurudwaras, as the nation attained Independence. My parents would take us, my sisters and me, to the Gurudwara every Sunday, and on all major festivals. In the winter of 1947, we were in Simla and I recall the family's visits to the Gurudwara near the bus stand. The Gurudwara rhetoric, which had been consistently anti-Muslim before Partition, took on an unconcealed anti-Hindu tone almost immediately after, targeting Nehru and 'Brahman India' as a regular feature.

The Gurudwara tirades found their echo in the highest echelons of state politics as well. Master Tara Singh, acknowledged as one of the 'moderate' Akali leaders, and the man who dominated Akali politics - both in the secular state apparatus and the religious forum of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee [SGPC] - before the party split in 1962, expressed one of his recurrent themes at the All India Akali Conference of 1953:

> Englishman has gone *[sic]*, but our liberty has not come. For us the so called liberty is simply a change of masters, black for white. Under the garb of democracy and secularism our *Panth*, our liberty and our religion are being crushed.[11]

This is comparatively gentle language compared, for instance, to the invective resorted to by Kapur Singh, an ICS officer

dismissed from service on charges of embezzlement. He claimed in a pamphlet, for instance, that Prime Minister Nehru had issued a directive in 1947 to all deputy commissioners in the Punjab that "Sikhs in general ... must be treated as a criminal tribe. Harsh treatment must be meted to them to the extent of shooting them dead so that they wake up to political realities *[sic]*."[12] Condensing the story of the suffering that the Sikh Gurus were subjected to by the Mughals, Kapur Singh came to the startling conclusion that "The Mogul king Bahadur Shah had ordered, 'Followers of Nanak [should] be executed on sight'. I, being a declared Sikh, fell a victim to this Mogul *firman*."[13] The destruction of the Sikh kingdom established by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and of the continuing suffering of the Sikh people was a result of "The Brahmanically oriented forces within and without Punjab," who "co-operated in destroying the Sikhs who alone held out a promise of the early redemption of India."[14]

These shades of opinion find their way easily into what masquerades as 'Sikh academics'. Pritam Singh Gill, a former Principal of Lyallpur Khalsa College, Jalandhar, writes, "Indians got freedom, but not the Sikhs. Hindus left the enemy country and migrated to a country of their brothers. So did the Muslims. But the Sikhs left the enemy country and migrated to [another] enemy country." The essentials of the Hindu conspiracy against the Sikhs, he added, were, "Kill the language, kill the culture, kill the community."[15]

Or again, one finds reflections of the same paranoia in what passes itself off as 'Sikh journalism'. As far back as 1973, the *Spokesman* declaims, "Now a days the Hindus are thirsty of Sikh Blood *[sic]* and would love to bury the Sikhs fathoms deep beyond any hope of resurrection. To achieve these nefarious designs, they consider no means too mean or too foul." And, "Scratch any Hindu and behind his skin you will find an anti-Sikh maniac who is sneaking his lips *[sic]* to finish off the Sikhs."[16] In this, we are only a short step away from Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's declaration that, in Hindu India, the Sikhs had to "give a cup of blood to get a cup of water".[17]

In the Fifties, the Sixties and the Seventies such statements could conveniently be dismissed as the ravings of the lunatic fringe in the community, as indeed they were. That, however, was the error. The 'lunatic fringe' had already begun to prevail

upon at least part of the community. Those who expressed these shades of opinion were already winning elections and holding offices of significant power. Despite his apparent paranoia, Kapur Singh became a member, first of the state legislative assembly, and subsequently, of Parliament. Master Tara Singh dominated Akali, and consequently SGPC, politics for over a decade after Independence, and for more than two decades before, and his memory is still revered in Punjab.

The fact of the matter is that Sikh politics had inexorably been thrown into the mould of competitive communalism ever since the constitution of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee [SGPC], the elected body responsible for the management of Gurudwaras in Punjab, in 1925.[18] The SGPC today administers well over 700 Sikh shrines; it controls enormous funds, a well organised bureaucracy, a large staff of preachers, priests, musicians and *sewadars*, functions as an autonomous body, and has often been described as a 'State within a State.' Control of the SGPC implies control over the very shrines that command the absolute devotion of the Sikhs, in addition to the vast material resources within them. Such power offers the opportunity, moreover, of capturing the state government as well.

The Akali Dal has held the SGPC under its sway from the time of its constitution, though this fact may give a deceptive picture of the actual situation. Within the party, various factions have struggled constantly for domination; and the grouping representing the more extreme or 'fundamentalist' positions has tended, over time, to prevail. It was precisely this spiral that culminated in terrorism; and it is precisely for these reasons that the Gurudwaras were the centres of militancy, and among them, the Golden Temple its axis.

VI

It was in the wake of Operation Black Thunder that I personally encountered the degree to which, and the cynicism with which these shrines, and with them the sentiments of the Sikhs, were being manipulated for political ends. On 18th May 1988, the last batch of terrorists in the Golden Temple surrendered to the police, bringing the Operation to a successful, and relatively bloodless close. A search was conducted within the temple

premises the next day, primarily with the intention of disarming any explosive devices that may have been planted by the terrorists. Instead, we discovered fourteen rooms around the *parikrama*, previously occupied by some of the hard-core terrorists in the complex, which had been converted into torture chambers. From these we recovered apparatus to deliver electric shocks; a wide variety of sharp edged weapons, leather straps, and *chittars* - large rubber spatula used to beat up victims - some of them still covered with coagulated blood and shards of disintegrating flesh. Documents, including correspondence between the terrorists in the temple and their associates operating from Pakistan, threatening letters, and a variety of notes and papers that provided details of extortion and torture were recovered from these rooms. They provided sufficient evidence to reconstruct the torture and murder of at least 75 victims - 'police informers', 'government agents', alleged violators of the 'militant code', group enemies and 'enemies of the *Panth*'. Forty-one mutilated bodies were recovered from the debris of the Akal Takth near Manji Sahib; they had been treated with rock salt to arrest the decomposition process - and the consequent stench.

The stench of death, nevertheless, pervaded the Temple complex. Red Cross volunteers removed the bodies recovered from the debris. Blood stains on the *parikrama* and in many of the rooms were cleaned. But nothing we could do was sufficient to wipe out the sense of desecration, of defilement. Any Sikh, indeed any person with even a suspicion of religious sensitivity, would, under the circumstances, have done everything within his power to restore at least a semblance of the sanctity that the Golden Temple merited. The Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, Sarabjeet Singh, and I felt that worship within the Temple should be resumed at the earliest, and the first step in this direction was the restoration of the *Maryada* - the ritual washing of the *parikrama* with milk and water, and the revival of traditional religious ceremonies.

For the SGPC, however, this was just another opportunity to extract political concessions. Bhan Singh was its Secretary at that time; and Ujagar Singh Rangreta its Vice-president; Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the SGPC President since 1973, was in jail as a result of his activities in the period preceding Operation Black Thunder.

The Deputy Commissioner met Bhan Singh and Rangreta on the 20th itself at Bhan Singh's residence, and they initially agreed that the authorised priests would be brought together and that *Maryada* could be restored. At a second meeting at the circuit House the next morning, Bhan Singh reiterated his assurance to the DC. I had flown to Delhi, and on my return, met the DC at the Brahmboota Akhara, which served as our command post throughout Operation Black Thunder. Bhan Singh, shortly after his meeting with the DC, had called him up and told him that only Bhai Mohan Singh, who had courted arrest during the Operation and was being held at Patiala Jail, could, according to the tradition, officiate over the ceremonies. The SGPC representatives were called in for a third meeting at 6:00 p.m., and thereafter necessary arrangements were immediately made to secure the release of Bhai Mohan Singh, and he was brought to Amritsar at 10:30 the same evening. On his arrival at the circuit house, he said he would do nothing until he had spoken to Bhan Singh. The DC failed to contact the latter over the phone, and consequently proceeded to his residence along with Bhai Mohan Singh. It was 11:00 p.m. when they arrived, and Bhan Singh's residence was in darkness. He was, however, roused and emerged to open the door. On entering the house, the DC noticed that Bhan Singh had deliberately removed his phone from the hook. What followed was a complete *volte face*. The SGPC Secretary became stubbornly evasive, and eventually insisted that Tohra be released on the grounds that he alone could authorise restoration of the *Maryada*.

At this point, Sarabjeet Singh informed Bhan Singh that he would proceed with the ceremonies without SGPC support, with the *ragis* and the *granthis* who had accompanied me from Delhi, and he joined me at the Brahmboota Akhara with this proposal. I, however, was not in favour of this course of action. The DC had earlier spoken to several eminent Sikh scholars in Amritsar, and they had assured him that, according to the tenets of Sikhism, anyone could clean up the temple and restore worship, and in doing so, would be rendering a service to the *Panth*. By this time, however, I had realised that, in the disturbed circumstances prevailing, the SGPC would seek to extract maximum mileage out of any act that could be distorted to appear to be the 'high handedness' or a 'usurpation' of religious functions by the

government or government 'sponsored' priests. Bhai Mohan Singh was brought to the Akhara and requested to proceed with the ceremonies. He refused on the ludicrous excuse that his clothes were dirty, and he had not brought another set. He was assured that necessary arrangements would be made. He rejected the offer. At this juncture, I intervened and told him that members of the national and the international Press were still present in Amritsar, and since he refused to restore worship in the Temple, he could explain his reasons for doing so to Sikhs all over the world. His resistance suddenly crumbled.

The next morning, hundreds of Hindus and Sikhs from the families that have traditionally washed the *parikrama* and the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Harmandir Sahib for centuries, gathered long before dawn and set about their task with eagerness. Then, well before the first light of dawn brushed against the dome of the Temple, at the *Brahmvela*, the holiest hour, the Granth Sahib was brought out of the Kothi Sahib and carried across the *parikrama* with great ceremony. A procession followed the Guru Granth Sahib, and, after it had been installed in the Harmandir Sahib, Bhai Mohan Singh opened it to select the *vak* for that day. The *vak* is selected by opening the Guru Granth Sahib at random, and the last lines of the first hymn on the left page constitute the morning *vak*. Sarabjeet Singh and I had decided to remain outside the Temple Complex during the ceremonies, and we were watching from the roof of a building nearby. The words of the *vak* carried across to us, and their memory is still with me.

> Delusion and everlasting loss attend those who forget the name of God,
> Those who look only to themselves are lost in the dark dust-clouds of egoism,
> Those who look to the Gurus for guidance and meditate on the holy Word, says Nanak,
> They receive the nectar of immortality.[19]

The severe castigation of the self-willed and their eventual downfall seems to me in the nature of a prophesy of what would prevail in Punjab in the years to come.

The absolute cynicism, the deviousness with which the SGPC and its employees treated the question of the restoration of the *Maryada*, seeking to convert it into a political issue was

symptomatic of the manner in which a deliberate debasement of Sikh institutions has been brought about by the very organisation that was created to protect and maintain them.

To define the extent of this degeneration, it is essential to understand how the average Sikh looks upon the Golden Temple. In many Sikh homes you may find pictures, painted in the somewhat florid style of calendar art, of a decapitated Sikh, his head held in one hand, a sword in the other, as he fights his way through massed enemy soldiers towards a distant Harmandir Sahib. This is a representation of one of the most revered of Sikh martyrs, Baba Dip Singh *Shahid*, a *Jat* from Lahore who was a trusted devotee of Guru Gobind Singh, and who fought alongside Banda Bahadur. Later he became one of the principal leaders of the *Khalsa* resistance against the Afghans and the Mughals. In 1757, after Afghan invaders had captured and desecrated Harmandir Sahib, Dip Singh took a solemn vow to reclaim the Temple and restore its sanctity. He was an old man, in his eighties, by this time. He led a small armed contingent towards Amritsar. But he was confronted, near Tarn Taran, by an overwhelming Afghan force and in the ensuing action, his head was cut off. Clutching it in one hand he is said to have continued to fight his way forward for another fifteen kilometres before succumbing to his injuries within the bounds of Amritsar. The 'historical' veracity of this incident, or of its composite details, is irrelevant. This incident or legend, as it may be, has inspired millions of Sikhs for centuries, and is perhaps the single episode that reflects the essence of their sentiments towards the Temple. The Golden Temple can never be treated as mere coinage in political transactions; whosoever violates its sanctity is an enemy to Sikhism; whosoever restores it, unconditionally, honours the Faith.

Cynicism, however, has not been the exclusive preserve of the SGPC and the Akalis in the Punjab. Another incident, again connected with the Golden Temple, exemplifies the perfidy of at least a section of the Congress (I) leadership - and the SGPC and the Shiromani Akali Dal were, on this occasion, its intended victims. More than seven years had passed since Black Thunder, and the maelstrom of militancy had been quelled. Beant Singh, however, had fallen victim to its rearguard, and Harcharan Singh Brar presided over Punjab as its ineffectual and progressively compromised Chief Minister. While some time still remained for

the state elections, a Congress (I) rout was becoming more of a certainty with every passing day. Good government and a fulfilment of electoral commitments has never been thought of as a relevant strategy to win votes by Indian politicians. So another, predictably insidious, scheme was hatched.

At this time the SGPC had organised the celebration of the anniversary of Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior Jail. This is an incident of some significance in Sikh history. Briefly, the Emperor Jehangir, alarmed by reports of the militarisation of the *Nanakpanthis* by their sixth Guru, ordered Guru Hargobind to be detained at Gwalior Fort. Here he was imprisoned for an extended period of time [according to one estimate, almost twelve years] with a number of Indian princes from different parts of the country. The royal prisoners were deeply influenced by the Guru. Eventually, Jehangir relented, but the Guru refused to leave the fort until his fellow prisoners were allowed to leave with him. Jehangir is said to have allowed the release of as many prisoners as could 'clutch the robes of the Guru'; and more than 50 princes gained their freedom in this way. From this day, the Guru was known as *Bandichhor*, the Deliverer.

It was this event that the SGPC sought to commemorate with a march from Gwalior Fort to the Golden Temple. Arrangements were made well in advance and requisite permissions secured. A procession carrying the Guru Granth Sahib was to arrive at the Temple on Diwali; and, according to tradition, after due ceremonies, the Head of the Akal Takht was to address the gathering at 7:30 in the evening.

Unfortunately, the jockeying for positions within the Sikh religious leadership continued unabated, despite the lessons of the past decade and a half. The rump of militant organisations still present at the Damdami Taksal at Chowk Mehta [Bhindranwale's headquarters before he moved to the Golden Temple] was encouraged by the then Chief Minister to stir up trouble in a bid to upset the SGPC apple cart. The prize, in this case, was control of the Akal Takht. Whoever delivered the ceremonial address on Diwali would have a superior claim to its control; and Jasbir Singh Rode was keen to be recognised as the *Jathedar* of Sikhism's symbolic axis of temporal power. Just a few days before Diwali, the Damdami Taksal under his leadership, announced a rival procession from Fatehgarh Sahib Gurudwara to the Golden Temple.

If the two processions came face to face, a bloody clash was inevitable. But Chief Minister Brar met the Governor and assured him that the processions would be completely peaceful. The local administration and police in Amritsar were directly instructed to allow both processions to converge at the same time on the Golden Temple. The conspiracy was as simple as it was ingenious. If the march somehow, against the odds, passed off peacefully, the Government could parade its success; and wait for another opportunity to score against political opponents. On the other hand, if a clash did occur, if a few lives were lost in the hallowed precincts of the Golden Temple, the SGPC and the Akalis could be roundly blamed, the spectre of militancy could be disinterred, and the Congress (I) could once again be projected as the only defender of a peace that was, in fact, at that time, assured. As an electoral strategy for a politically and morally bankrupt leadership, it was a winner all the way.

I had in all this, been diligently excluded from the entire decision making process. Those who were handling the case failed to realize that I would inevitably learn of the affair from my own sources. I did so, however, virtually at the last moment. Nonetheless, I was able to intervene. I was aware of the decades-old enmity between the Damdami Taksal and the SGPC, and immediately sought the opinion of the DIG Amritsar, the SP and the District Collector; they confirmed my opinion that a clash was inevitable. I then issued orders that the Damdami Taksal procession should be delayed, and should be allowed to enter the Golden Temple only after the SGPC had finished its scheduled programme. I did not prevent the Damdami Taksal procession, since I believe that no Sikh, indeed, no professed devotee, whatever his beliefs, motives or intentions, can or should be prevented from going into the Temple; it is only after an individual's actions threaten or desecrate its sanctity that action can be initiated.

Despite these precautions, and despite elaborate police *bandobast*, clashes did eventually occur that evening. The Rode group was permitted into the Temple late in the evening [at about 10:30 p.m.], well after the SGPC ceremonies had ended and the crowds had dispersed. Nonetheless, a clash immediately ensued. A *Bir* of the Guru Granth Sahib had been brought with the procession, and the Taksal group insisted that it should be

kept in the Kothi Sahib. This was prevented by the SGPC *sewadars*, since, traditionally, it is only the *Bir* that is placed in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Harmandir Sahib that may be kept in the Kothi Sahib. A little later, the Taksal Group gathered in front of the Kothi Sahib and tried to force its way in. Another clash occurred. Eventually, the Taksal Group decided to return to Chowk Mehta well after midnight.

One can well imagine what would have happened if the SGPC and the Taksal processions had been allowed to arrive at the Temple at the same time. What amazed me most about this whole conspiracy was that less than two months had passed since Beant Singh's assassination; that the political leadership should have risked destabilisation of the peace that had been won after such a long and arduous battle was shocking; it laid bare the consummate venality of those who manipulate the minds of the people of Punjab.

VII

Every political group in the Punjab has been trying to hold the authority of the Golden Temple captive - because whoever controls the Temple controls the minds and the hearts of the Sikhs. This strategy is backed up by the manipulation of a variety of other symbols of what is described as 'Sikh identity'. But the essential objective is to hold the Sikh 'vote bank' in thraldom. The Akalis, of course, do this openly through the SGPC. Other parties are confined to more devious stratagems, to a process of infiltration of the SGPC and to the creation and orchestration and manipulation of a variety of crises. This competitive communalism is what gave rise to terrorism in the late Seventies. Terrorism has, of course, been contained. But so long as the structure and system that assigns such overwhelming political significance to religious symbols persists, the danger of its revival will always be upon us.

The Akalis have often cloaked their duplicity behind the claim of the inseparability of religion and politics in the Sikh faith. Guru Hargobind's assertion of *piri* and *miri*, the construction of the Akal Takht opposite the Harmandir Sahib, are evidence to the incontrovertibility of this thesis to the Sikh mind. But what is being done is an utter and complete corruption of the original

intent of the Sixth Guru. His thesis cannot have implied that religion, its institutions and its power could be subordinated to the personal political ambitions of a petty clique utterly lacking in vision, either for the nation or for the community.

That the Akalis and the SGPC have no religious or spiritual intent in their manipulation of the symbols of Sikh identity is evidenced by the manner in which their rhetoric changes with changing political compulsions. In the Fifties and the Sixties, when the mildly rabid Master Tara Singh was president of both the Shiromani Akali Dal [SAD] and the SGPC, the SGPC's political demands were clamourously projected as the demands of the 'Sikh people'; the Punjabi Suba was to be a 'Sikh Homeland'; the failure to settle river water disputes was a denial of justice to the Sikhs. When the more moderate Sant Fateh Singh assumed leadership of these bodies, the very same demands were projected, by both the SGPC and the SAD, as the demands of the State of Punjab and of the entire population living there [Punjabis].

The SGPC recently published a *White Paper* on the Punjab situation,[20] presumably as a counter to the official *White Paper* that the Government of India published.[21] It contains many gems, but in the main it is little more than a rambling justification of terrorism in Punjab, and in many parts an unashamed glorification of the most prominent terrorists. I, however, will restrict myself to the grievances of the 'Sikh people' in the post-partition era that are listed in the SGPC document. In four chapters titled, 'Post-partition Scenario: Monumental Betrayal of the Sikhs'; 'Struggle for Punjabi Speaking State'; 'Loot of Punjab Waters: Punjabi Suba Sabotaged'; and 'Dharam Yudh Morcha: Causes' the SGPC records its litany of 'Sikh' suffering in 'Hindu India'. I searched in vain for a single instance of a grievance that could even remotely be described as 'religious', or uniquely 'Sikh'. The nagging problems of Centre-State relations that afflict every single state in this country are the problems enumerated here - except that they are cloaked in a vituperatively communalised language: outstanding inter-state territorial and riparian disputes; quarrels over the devolution of powers and resources, including the sharing of taxes; the slow and inept implementation of centrally sponsored developmental projects, including the construction of Dams; some early squabbles over

linguistic pre-eminence in the administration; and repeated protestations against the de-stabilisation of 'elected governments'. Had these been contained in a *White Paper* brought out by the Akali Dal, and not the SGPC, had such a report been couched in terms of constitutional evolution towards a more federal political structure, had it been devoid of the rhetoric of the 'oppressed Sikhs' vs. the 'tyrannical Hindus' [and had it not contained the shameless justification of the very militants who had terrorised the SGPC and the entire leadership of the Akali Dal for more than a decade] it could have merited the attention of political analysts, as well as of the intelligentsia in the Punjab. As a document brought out by the organisation whose obligation is to look after Sikh Shrines, and perhaps as a corollary, after the religious interests of the Sikhs, it is a complete betrayal of trust, an attempt to use the authority and respectability it derives from its association with these revered sanctuaries for the partisan purposes of securing power for a specific clique of professional politicians.

This is really the crux of the matter. Virtually all strife in the entire country today flows from an unabashed and unscrupulous struggle for the cakes and loaves of political office. The peace of Punjab, and the lives of thousands of its people - both Hindu and Sikh - was sacrificed over a decade and a half in the name of Sikhism. As in every violent mass movement, the greatest sacrifices, the greatest suffering, was borne by the relatively poor, the deprived and the oppressed, predominantly among the Sikhs in whose name terror was incited. The entire process of mobilisation through the exploitation of religious institutions and idioms, was intended only to serve as an instrument to secure power for a small clique that had no interests, either in Sikhism, or in the welfare of the people of Punjab. Despite all the killing, all the agony over the intervening years, this clique persists.

The nation must guard itself against a recurrence of a tragedy in Punjab. Above all, however, it is the Sikhs who must defend themselves, their faith and the nation, against the future designs of this conscienceless cabal. It is their faith that will give them the strength and the wisdom to do so; but it must be a faith in the teachings of the Gurus; not a blind faith in those who have usurped the right to speak in their stead.

REFERENCES

1. *Guru Granth Sahib*, Suhi, M1, p. 729
2. *Ibid.*, M9, Sl. 16, p. 1427
3. *Vidhan arthat Neeyam ate Upneeyam*, Amritsar: Shiromani Akali Dal, n.d.p. 2.
4. Guru Gobind Singh's action against the *masands* is discussed in greater detail in Chapter III
5. This campaign is described and discussed in greater detail in Chapter III.
6. McLeod, W H, *Who is a Sikh*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 41.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 45
8. Macauliffe, M A, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, S Chand & Co, 1963. Volume I, p. 16.
9. Naipaul, V S, India: *A Million Mutinies Now*, Rupa & Co., 1990; p. 450.
10. McLeod, W H, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays*. Oxford India Paperbacks, 1996; p. 36.
11. *Presidential Address*, All India Akali Conference, 28 March, 1953. Amritsar: Shiromani Akali Dal, 1953, p.2.
12. Cited in Naipaul, *op. cit.*, p. 433.
13. *Ibid*, p. 435.
14. *Ibid*, p. 444
15. Gill, Pritam Singh, *Heritage of Sikh Culture*, cited in *The Punjab Story*, Amarjit Kaur, et. al., "Myth & Reality" by M.V. Kamath, Roli Books International, 1984, p. 141.
16. *Spokesman*, December 3, 1973; cited in Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, Uncommon Books, 1995, p. 357.
17. Naipaul, *op.cit.*, p. 473
18. Cf. Chapter III for the events leading to the constitution of the SGPC and the pattern of politics imposed on this body since then.
19. *Guru Granth Sahib*, Sorath, M3, p. 646.
20. Dhillon, Gurdarshan Singh, *Truth About Punjab: SGPC White Paper*, Amritsar: SGPC, 1996.
21. *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, GOI, New Delhi, 1984

III

THE MINISTRY OF HATE

Whose end is destruction,
whose God is their belly,
and whose glory is in their shame.[1]

In the summer of 1975, during my tenure as DIG [Southern Range] in Assam, I was travelling along the Silchar-Manipur border. The journey took me along what were called 'Jeep Tracks' which meandered through vast expanses of dense forest. To approach the occasional tribal village that lay in the area, one had to abandon even this dirt track, to wade across little streams, and to trek over stretches of trackless land. I was on a tour to inspect the police posts that had been created to provide protective cover to these villages against the extortionist gangs that frequented them at that time. Deep in the forest, as I drove past a small clearing by the roadside, I was surprised to see a small *shamiana* with a group of people seated on the ground in front of what looked [incredibly in those surroundings] like the Guru Granth Sahib placed on a small *takht*. I was travelling on a tight schedule at that time, and it was not possible for me to stop to discover what precisely was going on; but the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity did arise on my return journey the same evening. The *shamiana* was still there, although the group had dispersed, and, as I slowed down, I saw not only the Guru Granth Sahib ceremoniously placed on its *takht*, but a middle-aged Sikh, his hair in a top-knot tied up in a white *dastar* [half turban], sitting alone and reading aloud from the holy Book. I stopped and walked across to the Shamiana, paid my obeisance to the Guru Granth Sahib, and received *kada prasad*. The man read out and explained some verses from the holy Book, and I

noticed that he was far from fluent in Punjabi. After he had completed the ceremonies, I spent some time talking to him and learned that he was from Orissa. He had come under the influence of a lay preacher in his village in Orissa, and his teacher had inspired him to carry the holy Granth and its message wherever he went. This he had been doing for almost twenty years. And so, in that most unlikely of places, he not only sought, but created, an audience for the wisdom of the Gurus.

I do not believe that the SGPC can, or in recent history has attempted to, convince its salaried *granthis* to venture into areas so remote, and, for their parochial mindset, so psychologically inaccessible. Their vision of Sikhism, though it arouses much passion in them, has been circumscribed by conflicting allegiances to region, language and caste. Despite the manifest universalism of the scriptures, despite the example of the Gurus themselves, they have chosen to equate Sikhism with Punjab; the Guru's message with the language [Punjabi] and form [Gurmukhi] of its expression. Had Christianity similarly remained tied to the linguistic forms and cultural idiosyncrasies of its origins, it would, today, have been a small cult centred around the province of Galilee. Jesus had preached to a people within a small geographical area; he lived and died among them. But Christian missionaries carried the message of their messiah everywhere. The Bible was translated into every language of the world and transformed into the idiom of cultures that were completely alien to that of its origin.

In contrast, while the Sikhs, by virtue of their unmatched spirit of enterprise, have spread all over the world today, and while, even on the farthest shores, their devotion to their faith cannot be questioned, they have, nonetheless, failed comprehensively in communicating the message of the holy Granth to the people of their adopted lands. And now, clannish and committed to a creed of cultural exclusiveness, they suddenly find their own children turning away from the Faith. This has driven them further into dogma, ritual and formalism, with an excessive emphasis on the external symbols of the Faith to the exclusion of its essentials. For instance a Canadian television team sought my reactions to an outbreak of violence between two Sikh groups in a Gurudwara in Vancouver in November 1996. The clash was over the question of whether the *langar*, the community feast,

could be served on a table to a congregation seated on chairs; the fight was bitter to the extent that *kirpans* were used by the adversaries.

The religious zealots who plunged the Punjab into darkness for a decade and a half in the name of Sikhism, and many of whom provided inspiration and funding for terror from these distant shores, like to describe Sikhism as a 'world religion'. If, however, Sikhism remains confined to the people drawn from a limited geographical area, from a narrow cultural background and ethnic stock, it is the Sikh religious leadership of the latter half of this century - precisely these zealots - who are to blame for the incarceration of the wisdom of the Gurus within the constricted frontiers of their own prejudices, their intolerance, their bigotry.

The Gurus themselves had articulated a faith for all mankind; and had carried it as far as was humanly possible under the circumstances of their age. During the first twenty-three years after his enlightenment, Guru Nanak travelled incessantly, carrying his message of the equality of man and the glory of God from village to village, through towns, cities and famous pilgrimages. He is said to have covered all of Western Punjab; crossed the Hindu Kush to journey far into Arabia and debated the faith with Mullahs and Imams in Mecca and Baghdad; he traversed many of the most sacred places of Hindu pilgrimage - Kurukshetra, Benaras, Gaya, Patna - as he argued vigorously and incessantly against the caste-obsessed ritualism of the prevailing Brahmanical order; against the austeritics and self-inflicted torments of *yogis* and ascetics; against idolatry, superstition and irrationality; and personally won over thousands of devotees through his message of liberation through devotion to the one God. He went through the deep forests of Central India, and further, along the river Kaveri to Rameshwaram, "from where he went to one *Vilayat* after another, whose language and customs and rules were different, but they all worshipped one and the same God".[2] His travels, amazingly, are believed to have extended over Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, Afghanistan and the Middle East. During his journeys to these widely dispersed areas he travelled through Ladakh and Srinagar; through Kabul and Kandahar; through Puri and Dacca and Assam.

Articulating the same comprehensive vision, the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh wrote of the One God:

> The dwellers of the East know not Thy limit, the goddess Hingula who dwelleth in the Himalayas meditateth on Thee; the Gurdezis of Ghor sing the praises of Thy name.
> The Jogis practise Jog to be united with Thee; how many suspend their breath to obtain Thee. The Arabs of Arabia worship Thy name.
> The Firangis of France worship Thee, the Kandharis and Qureshis know Thee, the residents of the West recognise Thee as the object of their love.
> The Marathas, the Magadhis heartily do Thee penance, the natives of Tilang fix Thee in their hearts, and recognise Thee as the abode of religion.[1]

It is the genius of these great souls, of all the Ten Gurus who, each in his own way, extended the Faith, that the 'high priests' of Sikhism today wish to bury away in the obscurity of one small part of the Indian sub-continent.

They have good reason to do so - but the reason is not the Faith. In the history of Sikhism, this 'reason' has threatened the *Panth* twice before.

In the second half of the Sixteenth Century, the *Panth* had grown immensely, both in numbers and in its geographical spread. The Third Guru, Guru Amar Das, created a system of 22 *manjis* [dioceses or preaching districts] and 52 subsidiary centres, *pirhas*, extending from Kabul to Bengal in order to preach Guru Nanak's mission. His successor, Guru Ramdas enlarged the system, authorising the head of each mission, the *masand*, to accept contributions from the *sangat* [community]. The response was overwhelming, and the *sangats* grew enormously. Large establishments and prayer halls, elaborate *dharamshalas*, were constructed, and the common pool of resources for the religious and charitable activities of the *sangats* grew continuously. A little over a century later, followers of the *Panth* were spread far and wide, throughout India, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

By the time of the Tenth Guru, however, the system had degenerated to a hereditary priesthood with all its attendant evils. The families of the *masands* controlled the resources of the *sangat* including the temples and the large properties attached to them, and the opportunities this control represented were a temptation

they failed to resist. They abandoned the austere discipline of the Faith and lived in decadent luxury, immersing themselves in the pleasures of the flesh, oppressing the people, and using their religious authority to extort all they could from the devout. The Gurus revealed to their devotees a mystical path to God based on faith, service and meditation; based, not on ritual, but on absolute devotion to *Akal Purakh* [the Immortal One]. The *masands*, however, set themselves above the *sangats*, and corrupted the purity of Sikhism. Their covetousness, cruelty and arrogance grew to such an extent that they hatched conspiracies against the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who sought to curb their depravity. Of them, the Guru remarked,

> If anyone serve the masands, they will say,
> 'Fetch and give us all thy offerings.
> Go at once and make a present to us of whatever property is there in thy house.
> Think on us night and day, and mention not others even by mistake'
> If they hear of any one giving, they run to him even at night, they are not at all pleased at not receiving.[4]

And again,

> They put oil into their eyes to make people believe that they are shedding tears.
> If they see any of their own worshippers wealthy, they serve up sacred food and feed him with it.
> If they see him without wealth, they give him nothing, though he beg for it;
> They will not even show him their faces;
> Those beasts plunder men, and never sing the praises of the Supreme Being.[5]

The Guru dismantled the *manji* system, dispossessed the *masands*, and established the *Khalsa*, the community of Sikhs who were directly linked with him. The 'purification of the world', according to the Guru's earliest biographer, was equated by him with the 'removal of the *masands*'.[6]

By the late Nineteenth Century, however, the 'leaders of the faith' had, once again, abandoned it. The custodians or *mahants*, of hundreds of Gurudwaras had transformed them into hereditary fiefdoms; the tenets of the Sikh faith were openly violated;

Brahmanical rituals had re-emerged; superstition, casteism and idolatry were rampant, to the extent that idol-worship was practised even within the precincts of the Golden Temple; *pandits* and astrologers practised their trade in Sikh places of worship; pilgrims from the 'lower castes' were not allowed into Gurudwaras except during fixed hours of the day. Professional priests had again transformed the immaculate inspiration of the faith into base commerce, hawking holy dispensations, peddling amulets, and offering to mediate between a gullible people and their gods - for a price.

One of the critical incidents that heightened Sikh anger against this professional priesthood occurred in the wake of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The Golden Temple, at that time, was under the administrative control of the British Government in India, and its priests were appointed by the local administration. General R.E.H. Dyer, the man who ordered his troops to open fire at an unarmed crowd - including a large number of Sikhs - in the brickwalled square at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar on the Baisakhi of 1919, was one of the most hated officers in India. He compounded his offences after the massacre by using every occasion to humiliate the Indian population. Under these circumstances, the priests at the Golden Temple horrified and offended the entire Sikh community by presenting General Dyer with a *Saropa* - a robe of honour - and by 'initiating' him into the *Khalsa*. The entire farce of the proceedings has been captured in the following account of the exchange between the priests and the General:

> 'Sahib,' they said, 'you must become a Sikh'. The General thanked them for the honour, but he objected that he could not, as a British officer, let his hair grow long. Arur Singh [the *Sarbrah* or manager of the Golden Temple] laughed. 'We will let you off the long hair,' he said. General Dyer offered another objection. 'But I cannot give up smoking.' The priest concluded, 'We will let you give it up gradually.' 'That I promise you,' said the General. 'At the rate of one cigarette a year.'[7]

The disgraceful conduct of the priests, the gross misuse of the holiest of Sikh shrines, and the visible contempt with which the General treated both, further provoked the popular indignation against the growing irresponsibility and irrelgiousity of the *mahants*.

The inspiration, the origin and the structure of all Sikh politics today can be traced back to the heroic movement that cleansed the Gurudwaras and the Sikh faith of this defilement. We must understand the nobility of these sources to comprehend the extent of the debasement they have undergone at the hands of the present Sikh leadership.

II

Several reform movements had emerged during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century, and a certain impetus for a purification of Sikh religious institutions and practices had been generated. But the first important date directly connected with what was to become the Akali Movement was October 13, 1920. Prodded by some students and teachers of the Khalsa College at Amritsar, a group of 'low caste' or *mazhabi* Sikhs went to the Durbar Sahib in the Golden Temple and made the traditional offering of *karah prasad*; this, however, was well before the hour at which 'low castes' were allowed to enter the Temple, and the presiding priests refused to accept their offering, or to say a prayer on their behalf. The devotees and their supporters protested, a fracas ensued, and a demand was made that the 'Guru's word' be sought. As was the tradition, the Guru Granth Sahib was opened at random, and the first verse on the page was read.

> He receives the lowly into grace
> And puts them in the path of righteous service.[8]

The startling appropriateness of these lines to the issue at stake shocked the assembly; the reformists prevailed and the offering of *karah prasad* was accepted from the *mazhabi* Sikhs. The congregation then proceeded to the Akal Takht opposite the Harmandir Sahib. The priests fled in disarray, and the reformists constituted a 'representative committee' of twenty five Sikhs for the 'management' of the Golden Temple. At that time, however, the overall administrative authority over the Golden Temple was vested, not in the community or in any group of *mahants*, but in the Imperial Government. Exercising this authority, the Deputy Commissioner, on the following day, nominated another

committee of nine members - all of whom were drawn from among the reformers - with the manager of the Golden Temple as the President.

This first success created the impulse for the Akali movement that sought the 'liberation' of all Gurudwaras from the control of *mahants*. On November 15, they formed a committee of 175 Sikhs, called the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee [SGPC], despite the Government's announcement two days earlier of a 36 member 'official' committee. In order to avoid conflict with the Government, these 36 members were also included in the original SGPC.

Soon after, public enthusiasm for the Akali movement resulted in several Gurudwara's being surrendered into their care. However, the more strongly entrenched priests, particularly in the larger and 'wealthier' Gurudwaras, resisted fiercely. At Tarn Taran, a group of Akali volunteers was attacked by priests, and two of them died as a result. A greater horror was to follow. At Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, Narain Das, the wealthiest of the *mahants* with a number of charges of immorality and corruption against him, hired a group of 400 goondas and criminals and armed them to the hilt to protect his 'right' over the Gurudwara and the immense *jagirs* [estates] attached to it. Even before the SGPC had given a call for agitation at Nankana Sahib, on unarmed *jatha* of 150 Sikhs who arrived at the shrine were trapped within the sanctuary, fired upon with guns, attacked with swords and spears, and some of them were tied to trees and burnt alive. They perished to the last man.

The slaughter shocked the Sikhs so deeply that they permanently added a new passage to their *Ardas* or daily prayer which contains a recital of the greatest deeds of sacrifice in their history. The passage invokes God's blessings for "...Those who sacrificed themselves for the dignity of the Gurudwaras."

The SGPC peacefully protested the massacre by appealing to all Sikhs to wear black turbans, and these became the symbol of the Akali movement, and, eventually, of defiance of British authority. Though the perpetrators of the Nankana Sahib massacre were divested of control over the shrine, and subsequently brought to justice [Mahant Narain Das was sentenced to life imprisonment, some of his associates were hanged], the Government appeared to range itself staunchly against the Akalis

after this point. Several Akali leaders were arrested and sentenced to long and utterly unjustifiable terms of imprisonment. A Custodian was appointed to oversee the affairs of the Golden Temple, and the keys of the *Tosha-Khana* [Treasury] of the Temple were confiscated. A wave of protests made the Government relent three months later. But soon after, the Government began to arrest Sikhs carrying a *kirpan* of more than nine inches in length, for wearing the black turban of the Akalis, and for failing to pay punitive fines imposed on several mutinous villages.

The agitation came to a head once again over the controversy relating to the *Guru ka Bagh*, a large estate attached to the Gurudwara at Ajnala some 20 kilometres from Amritsar. Its *mahant*, Sundar Das, had already agreed to hand over the Gurudwara and its properties, but encouraged by the Government's attitudes, he subsequently rescinded on part of his commitment and refused to hand over the land that comprised the *Guru ka Bagh*, essentially a plantation of *kikar* trees that supplied the Gurudwara's free kitchen with firewood. He objected to the Sikh's cutting wood from the *Bagh*, and the police, backing him to the hilt, arrested five Sikhs of their own accord on August 9, 1922. Undeterred, the Sikhs continued to cut firewood from the *Bagh*. They continued to be arrested, and at this point, the Akalis decided to organise a more systematic protest by sending *jathas* of 100 volunteers every day to the *Bagh* in a completely non-violent protest. The first *jatha*, constituted entirely of ex-Army veterans, was arrested. But after this, a policy of cruel and systematic beatings was resorted to; small groups of volunteers would walk up to the police contingent; they would be clubbed down brutally; others would carry them away even as another group of volunteers offered themselves up to the police. A contemporary description by an Englishman, C.F. Andrews, who was witness to these proceedings is perhaps the best account of the nobility of what the Akali volunteers suffered and achieved each day over the next month.

> It was a sight which I never wish to see again, a sight incredible to an Englishman. There were four Akali Sikhs with black turbans facing a band of about two dozen policemen, including two English officers. They had walked slowly up to the line of police just before I had arrived and they were standing silently in front of them at about a yard's distance. They were perfectly still and did not move further forward.

Their hands were placed together in prayer and it was clear that they were praying. Then, without the slightest provocation on their part, an Englishman lunged forward the head of his *lathi* [staff] which was bound with brass. He lunged it forward in such a way that his fist which held the staff struck the Akali Sikhs, who were praying, just at the collar bone with great force. It looked the most cowardly blow as I saw it struck and I had the greatest difficulty in keeping myself under control... The blow which I saw was sufficient to throw the Akali Sikh and send him to the ground. He rolled over and slowly got up and at once faced the same punishment again. Time after time, one of the four who had gone forward was laid prostrate by repeated blows, now from English officers and now from the police who were under their control.... The brutality and inhumanity of the whole scene was indescribably increased by the fact that the men who were praying to God had already taken a vow that they would remain silent and peaceful in word and deed. The Akali Sikhs who had taken this vow, both at the Golden Temple and before starting and also at the shrine of *Guru-ka-Bagh* were...largely from the army They had served in many campaigns in Flanders, in France, in Mesopotamia and in East Africa. Some of them at the risk of their own safety must have saved the lives of Englishmen who had been wounded. Now they were felled to the ground at the hands of the English officials serving in the same government which they themselves had served.

...I saw no act, or look of defiance. It was a true martyrdom, a true act of faith...

There has been something far greater in this event than a mere dispute about land and property. It has gone far beyond the technical questions of legal possession or distraint. A new heroism, learnt through suffering, has arisen in the land. A new lesson in moral warfare has been taught to the world.... It reminded me of the shadow of the Cross.

....It was very rarely that I witnessed any Akali Singh, who went forward to suffer, flinch from a blow when it was struck. Apart from the instinctive and slight shrinking back, there was nothing, so far as I can remember, that could be called a deliberate avoidance of the blows struck. The blows were received one by one without resistance and without a sign of fear."

So moved was the Congress leader Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya when he witnessed these great events that he declared: "I cannot resist asking every Hindu home to have at least one male child initiated into the fold of the *Khalsa*. What I see here before my eyes is nothing short of a miracle in our whole history."[10] Mahatma Gandhi described the Akali movement as the "First decisive battle for India's freedom."[11]

This was, indeed, the Akalis' finest hour.

The *Guru ka Bagh* impasse was resolved by the British with a face-saving compromise. The *Bagh* was 'leased' from the *mahant* by Sir Ganga Ram, an influential citizen of Lahore, and he wrote to the police that he required no police protection. Thereafter, the Sikhs were not impeded in their use of the *Bagh*.

The Akali movement, however, soldiered on for another three years against sustained British repression. By the end of it, 400 Sikhs had lost their lives, between 30,000 and 40,000 were sent to jail, and punitive fines of over Rs 15 lakh had been imposed.

In the end, however, the Sikh Gurudwaras Act was placed on the statute book on July 25, 1925. A central Gurudwara Board - later re-christened the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee [SGPC] -, elected by the Sikhs, was to be the custodian of all important places of worship.

III

In this great victory were the seeds of all future strife. A monolithic centralised bureaucracy, with extensive powers, large properties, and substantial funds under its control, came into being. Its development inevitably followed the imperatives of power; and the Akalis, as its primary architects, have been continuously associated, not only with every aspect of this unfortunate evolution, but with its extension into the conflict ridden sphere of secular politics in Punjab.

The contours of this perversion were visible in the earliest stages, especially to those who were associated with its noblest phase. Master Tara Singh, one of the prime movers of the original Akali movement wrote:

> Our victory in the *morcha* (agitation) to obtain the keys of the Toshakhana[12] had puffed up our ego sky-high. Our *Jathas* would travel any class by train without ticket. We started insulting British officers without cause. Such fire was being emitted in speeches as led later to irresponsibility and indiscipline among our ranks. Everybody became a law unto himself. If the Government would not have come down upon us with a heavy hand, to unite us once again in the face of danger, our victory had finished us off. Tall talk, egoism and each for himself led to mutual quarrels and distrust. It is my firm conviction that he who cannot contain himself after a victory will lose in the end, also he who is demoralised in defeat. Initially the Akali movement had raised

> the level of our character. Now, it was all over. I ask you: O Sikhs, do not listen to those who say 'politics is built on strife and falsehood'. Our (Sikh) politics can only be based on the highest values of our religion.[13]

Unfortunately, soon after Independence, Master Tara Singh himself succumbed to the seduction of the politics of 'strife and falsehood'.[14] He was not the only one.

It seems to be the destiny of every great movement in India to succumb to the pettiness and banality of the more vigorous and less scrupulous elements in its leadership. India has before it the catastrophic example of the Congress Party which, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's vision - a moral and political ideology that had no historical precedent - mobilised millions of Indians, educated young men, civil servants, humble urban workers and poor village folk, to unimaginable sacrifice. Today, what was a great and revolutionary institution has become the very epitome of corruption and vice.

The fate of the Akali Dal is no different. The sacrifices of thousands of faceless volunteers, simple folk drawn from the villages of Punjab, over a five year struggle became the 'capital' that their leadership set about to exploit. The Gurudwaras became seats of an unbridled *machtpolitik*. Commitment to the restoration of the faith dissolved in the face of the flood of opportunities that confronted those who could capture and hold the SGPC; what was to be a 'Parliament of the Sikhs' became an arena of intrigue, manipulation and the unashamed quest for personal power. The Gurudwaras became mere property - though property of great, indeed immeasurable, value - and naked struggles for their control ensued.

Religious rhetoric was the essential currency of this commerce. But as the counterfeit of political sloganeering postured as spiritual instruction, the message of the faith was corrupted; fanaticism, exclusiveness and formalism supplanted the purity that was the objective of the Akali movement. Caste, faction, region and sect have become the dominant themes in a religion that mandated the equality of man, in a faith that exposed the absurdity of the artificial barriers that formal religions erected, in a *Panth* whose Gurus spoke to all mankind without discrimination. Religious formalism and an obsessive focus on the outward

symbols of Sikh identity dominated all discourse, as the leadership sought to impose uniformity, conformity, 'religious discipline' - and to secure the submission of the *Panth*, not to the will of the Gurus, but to their own.

The new *masands* had commandeered the Faith.

Tracing out the impact of the SGPC on the religious life of the Sikhs, one commentator observes:

> Devotion to religion gave way to a display of religiosity. Religious life declined into meaningless ritual and *Akhand Paths* through hired *granthis;* worship of the Granth, as if it were an idol, replaced its study as an hymnal of religious philosophy; and *keertans* by professional *ragis* demanding high fees like film playback singers proliferated. *Ragis* and *granthis* acquired vested interests in perpetuating these practices. Despite claims of outlawing the caste system, discrimination against lower caste Sikhs is only a shade less than among Hindus. The message of goodwill toward all mankind enshrined in the Granth has been reduced to a litany to be chanted on ceremonial occasions....[15]

IV

This recent perversion is far more dangerous, far more insidious than anything that preceded it. The power of the *masands* and the *mahants* of the past, tyrannical though it may have been, was widely dispersed and personalised. This is what made it possible, eventually, to dismantle their authority when their personal venality and injustice, and the distortions to which they had subjected the faith, were evident to the community.

With the creation of the SGPC, however, a central authority has come into being in Sikhism for the first time since the Gurus exercised direct control over their devotees; unlike them, however, its basis is not an overpowering moral authority, but a 'democratic', or rather, more accurately, 'majoritarian' process, dangerously based on selective suffrage that, by its very constitution imposes an exclusionary definition on the *Panth*. The question 'Who is a Sikh?' is no more a question of faith, of devotion, of religious practices, or of spiritual conversion; it is subject to the legislative authority of this 'elected' agency, and its criteria are the external symbols of identity of the dominant section of the Faith.

As time passed, moreover, a sustained, and at least partially successful effort has been made to elevate this body, originally

charged only with the responsibility of overseeing the day to day administration of Gurudwaras, to the state of a 'supreme religious council'. What we have been witnessing over the past seventy two years, in other words, is the creation and consolidation of a 'Church' around the Sikh faith, complete with its own ecclesiastic empire, its own episcopal hierarchy, and its own canonical dogmas.

We are witnessing, to put it simply, a process, albeit incomplete, of the 'semitisation' of the Sikh faith.

The first signs of this process were visible in the restrictive and exclusionary definition that was imposed on Sikh identity. Well before the Sikh Gurudwara Act was passed in 1925, the SGPC constituted by the Akalis at the beginning of their campaign for the liberation of the Gurudwaras had already settled the question for itself. When the first elections for this SGPC were held in 1921, voting was restricted to *Khalsa* Sikhs and all elected members were required to bear the 'Five Ks' of this order. However, the British authorities evidently diluted this occlusive definition, and the Act of 1925 described a Sikh as 'a person who professes the Sikh religion', who affirmed that he 'believed in the Guru Granth Sahib' and in 'the Ten Gurus' and who also declared that he had 'no other religion'. The key phrase in this statutory declaration was the last clause, which created some problems, especially among the *Sahajdhari* Sikhs and the *Udasi* sect [from among whom the traditional *mahants* had earlier been drawn] many of whom regarded themselves as being both Sikh and Hindu. However, the admissibility of the Sikh sects other than the *Khalsa* order - such as the *Sahajdharis*, the *Udasis*, the *Nirmalas*, the *Sewa Panthis*, the *Namdharis*, the *Nanakpanthis* - was neither questioned nor restrained, at least initially. In actual practice, however, the Akali prejudice persisted and these groupings were progressively marginalised; only those who declared their commitment to the *Khalsa* order and strictly adopted its outward symbols have ever been able to secure effective participation in the affairs of the SGPC. The rest have to content themselves with the role of worshippers and even today cannot aspire to any influence in decisions relating to the *Panth*.

More ambitiously, the SGPC, soon after its creation by statute, set about to define an 'approved' body of practices and beliefs;

a 'definitive' Sikh dogma. A sub-committee was constituted in 1925 itself, and after successive drafts and delays, the 'authorised' canon was published in 1950 under the title *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. There have been several *Rahits*, or statements of principles, in Sikh history, and it is in this background that this document should be understood. The very first of these came into being sometime after the Tenth Guru, and is said to be based on the sermon that Guru Gobind Singh delivered at the *Pahul* or initiation ceremony that inaugurated the *Khalsa* on the Baisakhi of 1699, in which he defined the essential elements of the *Khalsa* way of life. Several *Rahit-namas*, or manuals of religious principles, date back to the eighteenth century, and contain wide variations, both in terms of length and of the principles enunciated. They all include a statement both of some of the general principles that are acceptable to all Sikhs, such as belief in the *Akal Purakh*, the One God, veneration of the persons of the Gurus and the Adi Granth; and the rules for personal behaviour for a *Khalsa* Sikh. In this latter part, there is a strong emphasis on "features which express the militant aspect of the *Khalsa* identity, features which so obviously reflect the social constituency of the *Panth* and the experience of warfare which it encountered during the eighteenth century."[16] A number of prescriptions and taboos, including bars on association with a variety of 'reprobate groups', many of which are now completely ignored, were an integral part of these *Rahit Namas*.

The SGPC's *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, as the new canonical version, was intended to supplant all these and to assume the status of the exclusive moral reference for the entire *Panth*. In this it was unique, as it purported to speak, for the first time, for all Sikhs rather than for the *Khalsa* alone. What it did, in fact, was simply exclude all those who failed to conform to the *Khalsa* order. "A Sikh," it stated, "is any person who believes in *Akal Purakh*; in the ten Gurus (Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh); in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, other writings of the ten Gurus, and their teachings; in the *Khalsa* initiation ceremony instituted by the tenth Guru; and who does not believe in any other system of religious doctrine."[17]

The radical deviation from the definition of the Act of 1925 is obvious and in keeping with the original inclinations of the Akalis. Over the years, however, this is the definition that is

being progressively applied, though the SGPC Act has not been amended to incorporate this change. The influence of the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, however, is evidenced by the fact that, the Delhi Gurudwara Act of 1971 included, in its definition of a 'Sikh', a clause mandating the keeping of 'unshorn' hair, and required an affirmation that the person was a '*keshdhari* Sikh'. The SGPC, of course, did not frame this Act, nor was the Akali Dal in any position to steer it through Parliament; but their ideological constructs had, evidently, prevailed completely.

The SGPC, moreover, gradually extended the authority of various Sikh religious institutions, particularly the Akal Takht, to cover issues that go well beyond questions of religious belief and practice. For instance, the direct intervention of these institutions in secular politics through the instruments of *hukumnamas* and the power to declare individuals *tankhaiya* or apostate. A variety of the Committee's public pronouncements, activities and resolutions, such as the resolution of 1980, which declared that the Sikhs were a separate 'nation', have tended to exacerbate the polarisation of communities, and to create political crises and confusion in the minds of Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike.

Unfortunately, the complete absence of any challenge or resistance to this jurisdictional rampage from within the community has allowed the SGPC, for over seven decades now, to consolidate its power over all matters relating to the Sikh *Panth* and their religious institutions and practices. At the same time, the Committee has acquired an overwhelming, though sadly, perverse and destructive, influence over the political destiny of the community and has grown into an authoritarian agency that tolerates no dissent; its heavy hand has been felt even by a number of devout scholars whose interpretations of the scriptures and of Sikhism have deviated from the approved dogma.

This transformation goes well beyond mere politicisation of religion. It strikes at the very roots of Sikhism, distorting fundamental beliefs and imposing forms that were anathema to the Gurus. The Sikh faith, even under Guru Gobind Singh, could not be identified with the Five Ks and with the *Khalsa*. It was a spiritual discipline and a mystical method for human emancipation and the realisation of God, and its message was directed to the entire human race, irrespective of religious

denomination, of social grouping, or of any formal or material distinctions that create divisions between man and man. The Guru Granth Sahib is the testament, not only of the Gurus, but some 30 others, including Muslim and Hindu sages; when the construction of the Golden Temple first began, it was a Muslim saint, Mian Meer, who laid its foundation stone; the symbolism of the four doors facing the four corners of the earth, essential to the design of the Sikh Gurudwara, is that all men, irrespective of origin, caste, or creed, could enter there; it is this exalted and infinitely tolerant faith that the SGPC attempts to confine in the straitjacket of its exclusionary definitions and its dogmatic codes.

V

Lest we lose sight of it, it is essential to re-emphasise the point that the Akali Dal is at the root of all this. To speak of the SGPC is, at all times, to speak of the Dal [though the converse may not be true] since the Committee has been in Akali control without interruption right since its creation in 1925. The common Sikh, blinded by the sheer radiance of what the Akali Singhs had achieved in the 1920s, could see no deceit in those who adopted their garb and who spoke in their name. In election after election, the Akali candidates were returned to power, even as the SGPC's authority expanded to include hundreds of Gurudwaras, thousands of employees and a range of issues well beyond anything the *masands* and *mahants* of the past could have presided over.

But the ambitions of the Akalis expanded much faster, and could no longer be satisfied by the Gurudwaras that they held captive. Another more valuable prize lay suddenly within their reach. The state legislature appeared to be a legitimate goal, and the springboard which they believed would propel them into it was already at their command.

Unfortunately, the democratic system proved a stubborn impediment in this enterprise. The moral authority and pervasive influence of the Congress Party in pre-Independence India, on the one hand, and the communal appeal of Jinnah's Muslim League, on the other, precluded the possibility of the Akalis making any significant dent in the political configuration of

undivided Punjab through the electoral process. In any event, they had little more than their ambition to offer the people; in secular politics the Akali position has been consistently devoid of programmatic content or a coherent ideological vision. Under the circumstances then prevailing, it was impossible for them even to attempt to establish their exclusive hold on the votes of the Sikhs who constituted a little over 12 percent of the population of Punjab; a strategy of alliance with the Congress was, consequently, adopted, and the Akalis threw their weight behind the national movement for Independence.

Even after Partition, however, the electoral odds remained strongly skewed against a 'Sikh' party. Not only were the Sikhs still a minority, constituting 33 percent of the population, but even among them the appeal of the Akalis was far from universal. Two strategic alternatives confronted the party at this stage. It could have chosen to widen its political appeal by divesting itself of its communal character, to extend its social and ethnic base and to transform itself into a political party for all Punjab; or it could simply diminish the electoral spectrum to cover the limited space it believed it could dominate. The former alternative would have required immense sagacity, political courage, and patience; the groundwork for the latter had already been prepared, the requisite tactics had been evolved and tested during the Gurudwaras Agitation of the 1920s, and as an option it was in perfect conformity with the narrow parochialism of those who were in the ascendant in the Akali party at this stage.

The symbiotic relationship with the SGPC was exploited to the hilt, as an agitation for a 'Sikh homeland', the Punjabi Suba [initially 'Sikh Suba', though the more 'moderate' nomenclature was generally accepted in the early stages of the movement itself], was launched from the Gurudwaras of Punjab. The focus of the progressively strident Akali-SGPC political rhetoric from this point on was on the alleged threats to the 'Sikh identity' and the 'victimisation' of the community by a supposed Hindu majoritarian conspiracy headed by the 'Hindu Party', the Congress. The selective manipulation of Sikh history and Sikh religious symbols, both through the agency of the Gurudwaras and on secular platforms, was not only an essential part of the agitation, but its primary tactic. A refusal by the Centre to concede the Punjabi Suba demand was described by Master Tara

Singh as "a decree of Sikh annihialtion."[18] A number of leaders successively undertook 'fasts unto death', among them Master Tara Singh and later the man who was, by turns, both his protégé and his rival, Sant Fateh Singh; they read out the *Ardas* [the prayer that recounts, in brief, the great deeds of courage and sacrifice performed by Sikh heroes through history], and swore that they would not give up their fast till their objective was achieved, all within the holy precincts of the Golden Temple. Without exception, having received sufficient publicity and having sufficiently agitated the minds of their followers, they broke their fasts and their oaths. At one point of time, several leaders, lead by the 'moderate' Sant Fateh Singh, camped inside the Akal Takht, an unprecedented act [and one that was only to be repeated decades later by Bhindranwale and his gun-toting followers] and declared that they would immolate themselves if their demand for a Sikh majority state was not conceded; *Agn Kunds*, ceremonial platforms for their funeral pyres, were constructed within the sacred precincts of the Golden Temple, on a building near the Akal Takht. No self-immolation was ever attempted; this was just another ruse to excite public passion. The *Agn Kunds* were eventually demolished by the police.

With such unconscionable manoeuvres, the Akali leaders did succeed in arousing Sikh sentiments to the point where the Centre was forced to concede their demands; in the process, however, they also gave justification to a spiral of competitive communalism among Hindu fundamentalist groups. Groups connected with the Arya Samaj and the Jana Sangh launched rival campaigns to 'save Hindi', and exhorted Hindus in the Punjab - virtually all of whom were Punjabi speaking - to register themselves as Hindi speaking in the Census of 1961. Inflammatory, and in the social context of Punjab, ludicrous, slogans rang out: "*Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan*" on the one hand, versus "*Dhoti, topi, Jamuna paar*" [Those who wear Dhotis and caps, the Hindus, should be sent across the Jamuna]. Communal tensions mounted, and incidents of rioting between Hindus and Sikhs were reported for the first time in the history of Punjab.[19]

This was only more fuel in the fire; the duplicity of the Hindu communalists, the false declaration by large numbers of Punjabis regarding their spoken language, confirmed the Akali thesis of Hindu treachery in the minds of the more gullible among the

Sikhs. And this was a thesis that would serve their ends again and again, decades after the Sikh majority state had been carved out in 1966, right into the present.

Once this basic premise of a 'Hindu' or 'Brahmin' 'conspiracy' had been installed, everything was automatically transformed. Every demand, whether it was for the completion of the Thein Dam, for higher support prices for wheat, for the transfer of Chandigarh, for the renaming of a train, or for the settlement of the innumerable nagging problems between the Centre and state government, became a 'Sikh grievance'. Every failure to concede such a demand was part of the Brahmin conspiracy to 'oppress' or 'humiliate' or 'wipe out' the Sikh community and Sikh identity. Conversely, in case something was conceded, it was a demonstration of 'Hindu cunning', an attempt to deceive and defraud the 'Sikh people'. And if any Sikh raised his voice against this chicanery, he was an 'enemy of the *Panth*'. Virtually every leader of note in Punjab has, at one time or another in the past decades, been declared a *Tankhaiya*, the equivalent of an excommunication, for 'betraying the *Panth*'. This, incidentally, is as true of the Akali leaders as it is of the leaders of other parties. Indeed, the frequency with which Akali leaders are charged with apostasy is possibly higher, because any faction of the Shiromani Akali Dal which temporarily controls the SGPC loses no time in using the privileges of office to 'excommunicate' some of their immediate rivals in the other factions, or in the rapidly multiplying splinter Dals.

VI

That this entire charade is prompted by pure cynicism, and not even in part by basic religious sentiments and commitments, is not only evident in the pattern of subterfuge and broken religious oaths we encounter, but in the entire range of actions this political leadership has adopted. A comprehensive survey of these is neither possible nor appropriate here [though a scholar who undertook such a study would do the Sikh community, and indeed, all of India, a great service in exposing these patterns of communal brinkmanship] but a few outstanding examples of deceit can be mentioned.

Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Akali Singhs in the Gurudwara Movement, and one of its most respected leaders

at the time of Independence, in a moment of truthfulness, confessed to his true motives for starting the Punjabi Suba agitation: "Unless I keep my turbulent followers occupied by one agitation or another, they either fall apart and quarrel among themselves or try to pull the leadership down." To hold the Sikhs in one's charge, he added, "one needs to live and act as dangerously as to keep the throne of Afghanistan."[20]

This 'living dangerously' is what the Akalis have been doing since Independence, to the lasting detriment of Punjab, the Sikh community, and the nation at large. The entire history of Akali politics since independence is nothing more than a continuous experiment in political adventurism. None of the grievances they persistently harp on are really anything more than a ploy to harness the energies, occupy the minds and secure the volatile loyalties of their 'turbulent followers'. Consequently, on every occasion that they have been in a position of power, they have failed consistently even to pursue, leave alone secure, any of the 'objectives' they claim to be so essential for the Sikh *Panth*. There have been five Akali Governments in Punjab since 1966 [the last of these is presently in power] though none of them has completed a full term. On at least two occasions, they have shared power with a coalition at the Centre while the same coalition ruled the state. Not a single 'Sikh grievance' was even addressed during these periods.

The Congress is said to epitomise the 'Brahmanical conspiracy' that the Akalis have blamed for the consistent 'humiliation' and 'persecution' of the Sikhs. But innumerable Akali leaders have found it convenient to change sides and join the Congress when their personal interests so dictate; most of them also eventually find their way back into the Akali Party; their rhetoric on both sides of the fence remains startlingly violent, alternatingly attacking 'communal' Akali politics and the 'Hindu Congress.' A prominent example of this two-faced opportunism is provided by a leading Akali, Hukum Singh, who wrote in 1952: "Pandit Nehru is, to say the least, the spearhead of militant Hindu chauvinism who glibly talks about nationalism, a tyrant who eulogises democracy and a Goblian [i.e., like Goebbels] liar - in short, a political cheat, deceiver and double dealer in the services of Indian reaction."[21] Hukum Singh was soon to join the Congress Party, and eventually became Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

That their motivation was nothing more than an unadulterated appetite for political power, moreover, is supported by the fact that, while they focus their entire energy and attention on targeting the Congress, their only significant electoral opponent in the state, and while they never tire of harping on the 'treachery of the Hindus', they have no qualms whatsoever in sharing power with the very parties that they have so frequently described as Hindu communalists - the Jan Sangh, the Jan Sangh-dominated Janata Party, and now the Bharatiya Janata Party. Evidently, the whole 'Hindu oppression' rhetoric is nothing more than a convenient political sleight of hand.

How a proud and martial people such as the Sikhs came to voluntarily cast themselves in the role of habitual victims and complainers is incomprehensible. The spirit of the common people, far from being broken even after a decade and a half of terrorism, is more than robust and irreverent. But the demoralised and unconscionable men who project themselves as the 'leaders of the community' seem to revel in their posture of pathetic paranoia, even though it degrades the entire *Panth* in the eyes of the world.

Decades of this unscrupulous manoeuvring, however, still failed to provide the Akalis with a stable majority in the Punjab. On the rare occasion that they did succeed in controlling a simple majority in the state legislature, uncontrollable internecine quarrels, factionalism and eventual defections have brought down their governments prematurely. While they choose to blame the Congress (I)'s machinations for 'engineering defections', the truth is that the very strategy that led to their success is what underlies their failure.

The trifurcation of Punjab into Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and a Sikh majority province - with more than 61 per cent Sikhs in its population - did not provide the Akalis with the captive electorate they had hoped for. Despite their pretensions of 'representing' the entire *Panth*, the Akalis have never succeeded in either safeguarding the interests, or winning the trust of all Sikhs - and they have very certainly alienated most non-Sikhs. This has had a clear and consistent reflection on their electoral performance. Even when they were riding the post-Emergency Janata wave in the Assembly Elections of 1977, they secured barely 31 percent of the vote - almost 3 per cent less than the

Congress (I) - to capture 58 seats in the 117 member house, their best performance till then. Through the late Sixties [after the Sikh majority state came into being in 1966] and the Seventies, their share of votes remained well below 30 per cent. In the 1980 Assembly Elections, at a time when they were embarking on their most reckless adventure with religious extremism, they secured a bare 26.9 per cent of the vote. Clearly, even at the best of times for them, more than half the Sikh population had unequivocally rejected their ideology, their methods and their programmes. That is why they were never able to do better than to cobble together unstable coalitions in Punjab; coalitions that inevitably came apart as a consequence of the inherent contradictions and pressures of mutually exclusive and intrinsically antagonistic communal groups sharing power.

VII

Their manifest frustration in this situation, and their complete inability to evolve a more broad-based programme, to grow out of their bigoted mind-set, to speak to all the people of Punjab, is what led them into their greatest act of betrayal. Suddenly impatient with democracy, their own vision utterly clouded by communalism, yet chafing under the unwillingness of the majority of Punjabis to co-operate with their duplicity, they gave the state - and indeed the Faith as well - over into the hands of the terrorists.

They were not alone in their betrayal. They were, of course, the first to play the communal card during the Punjabi Suba agitation, and their politics retained a principally communal complexion during the decades that followed. But all other parties took their cue from them and progressively tailored their public pronouncements and projects to conform to the tone and texture of competing religious communities - though this rhetoric was nowhere reflected in the relationships between Hindus and Sikhs at the popular level. The state has been impressively free of major incidents of communal rioting; and it is notable that, even when terrorism achieved its apogee, not a single incident of communal rioting was noted in all of Punjab.

Nonetheless, the politics of alternating communal incitement and appeasement was adopted by all parties, as they competed

not only for the popular vote, but equally for a role in, if not control of, the religious affairs of the Sikhs through the SGPC. The 'secular' parties, including the Congress (I) and the 'atheistic' Communist parties, have consistently sought a role in the SGPC, and their campaigns and candidates have in no way been qualitatively different from those of the Akali Dal. A similar approach characterises the sphere of 'secular' politics. The Congress (I) Government that was installed in Punjab in 1972, for instance, gave enormous priority and publicity to the extension and re-construction of the Guru Gobind Singh Marg, a 400 kilometre long highway linking two major Sikh shrines, Anandpur Sahib and Damdama Sahib, and the erection of pillars with the Guru's writing inscribed on them along the way. *Kirtani darbars*, religious congregations, major Sikh festivals and commemorative celebrations were regularly organised by the then Congress (I) leadership, and a number of institutions and colonies had their names changed to those of various Sikh saints and martyrs. Evidently, this could only give a fillip to revivalism and further excite the religiously charged atmosphere in the state. The dubious role of the Congress (I) in the emergence of militancy has been substantially documented in the media and in the existing literature on Punjab; it need not concern us here.

The role of the entire Punjab leadership in this context, irrespective of party affiliations, was a betrayal of public trust - and this must be made abundantly clear - but the treachery of the Akalis - and with them of the SGPC - was the greatest. They had the institutions of Sikhism in their control; the hearts and the minds of millions [certainly the more gullible] of Sikhs, who believed that the Akalis spoke for the Faith, were open and vulnerable to them; to have placed this immense trust, this sacred responsibility in jeopardy for a purely political gamble is what is unforgivable.

In some measure, however, it was also inevitable. The process of the transformation of the Gurudwaras into instruments of political propaganda, the distortion of the faith, the cynical exploitation of its symbols, the mingling of its history and tradition of sacrifice and suffering with a contemporary pseudo-history of deprivation and tyranny created an automatic spiral towards extremism; if the Akalis themselves had not led this descent into darkness, the initiative would simply have passed

into the hands of those who adopted the most extravagant postures of religiosity, of those who most vigorously fanned the prejudices and communal hatred that had already been aroused. This, indeed, is what did eventually happen; and even when it did, the Alkalis failed; far from resisting, far from awakening to the error of their ways, far from reanimating their forgotten commitments to the *Panth*, they allowed themselves to be swept away in the whirlwind of their own sowing.

It was the factional struggle within the Akali Dal that resulted in a sudden escalation of fundamentalist rhetoric in 1978. Not only did this culminate in a rupture of the ruling Akali Dal-Janata Party coalition [in September 1979], it led to the adoption of a more than habitually strident posture by one of the factions, and the demand for the recognition of the 'Sikh nation', variously interpreted from time to time according to the exigencies of the situation, became the core of all subsequent political discourse. This platform was carried into the electoral struggle for control of the SGPC as well, though the extremist faction met with defeat in the SGPC elections of 1980.

It was in 1978, again, that the clash between the Sant Nirankaris and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha-Damdami Taksal combine took place. The rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the leader of the Damdami Taksal commenced with this event, in which his group lost two men, and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, eleven. The transformation of Bhindranwale and his Damdami Taksal into a militant organisation, and the emergence of the Babbar Khalsa from Akhand Kirtani Jatha sympathisers, are directly connected with this incident.

Bhindranwale was bitterly critical both of the coalition Akali Government in the Punjab and of the SGPC, and his speeches are full of derogatory references to those who had 'defiled' the Gurudwaras with their ambitions. Nevertheless, an unholy symbiosis emerged between the agitational politics of the Akali Dal and the increasing virulence of communal secessionist groupings. No word of condemnation from the Dal was forthcoming in the face of a mounting wave of murder and extortion, of the continuously intensifying extremist propaganda; on the other hand, as the misuse of Sikh shrines grew, a swell of Akali agitations and demands coalesced perfectly with the surge of violence and anarchy that was to envelope all of Punjab.

The *nahar roko* agitation, the *Dharam Yudh Morcha*, the "do-or-die" call to the Sikh masses and the recruitment of *shaheedi jathas* [suicide squads], the *rasta roko*, the *rail roko* and the *kam roko* movements, the threat to disrupt the Asian Games at Delhi, each of these were orchestrated in a reflexive synchronicity with incremental terrorist violence.

And then, in 1982, when Bhindranwale moved into Guru Nanak Niwas within the Golden Temple Complex, when the holiest of the Sikh shrines was turned into a safe-haven for terrorists and criminals, when the SGPC was repeatedly asked by the Government to ensure that criminals were not allowed to misuse the hallowed sanctuary, the SGPC representatives and Akali leaders flatly and repeatedly denied the presence of militants or of fire arms in the complex. When Bhindranwale moved from Guru Nanak Niwas into the Akal Takht, a senior Akali leader justified this action on the grounds that it was 'necessary for his safety'.

No ground was sacred, no event immune from the corrupting opportunism of these 'leaders' of the Sikh community. In September 1982, 34 Akali workers arrested during the *Dharam Yudh Morcha* were killed when the bus transporting them collided with a train at an unmanned railway crossing in Tarn Taran. With full knowledge of the truth, the Akalis chose to project this as a deliberate act of murder by the State, and the last rites of those who had died became an opportunity for a violent demonstration in front of Parliament in which another four lives were lost.

By late 1982, however, the vortex of violence had reduced the Akali leadership to humble submission to the terrorist fiat, and complete irrelevance in the political processes within the state. This remained true even after the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, when an Akali government struggled impotently to contain an increasingly criminalised terrorist movement supported and funded openly from abroad. For over a decade, the deafening death-rattle of the Kalashnikov precluded all meaningful political dialogue. The Akalis were trapped in a cage of blood; and it was of their own making.

REFERENCES

1. *The New Testament*, Phillipians, 3:19
2. Mehervan's account, cited in Dr Gopal Singh, *A History of the Sikh People*: 1469 - 1988, World Book Centre, 1989, p. 114.
3. *Sawaiyas*, Trans., Macauliffe, in Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, Volume V, S Chand & Co., p. 284.
4. From Guru Gobind Singh's *Thirty Three Sawwaiyas*, cited in J S Grewal & S S Bal, *Guru Gobind Singh: A Biographical Study*, Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1967, pp. 113-114
5. *Ibid.*, p. 114
6. Saina Pat, *Sri Gur Sobha*, Amritsar: Nanak Singh Kripal Singh, 457 *Nanak Shahi*, 19-38. Cited in Grewal & Bal, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
7. Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement*, Delhi, Macmillan, 1978, p. 14.
8. *Guru Granth Sahib*, Sorath, M3, 638.
9. Andrews, C.F., *Manchester Guardian*, February 15 and February 24, 1924.
10. Cited in Dr. Gopal Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 657.
11. Singh, Harbans, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 149.
12. This refers to the earlier successful agitation to recover the keys of the Treasury of the Golden Temple which had been confiscated by the Government-appointed Custodian.
13. Dr Gopal Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 663
14. Cf. Chapter II
15. Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs - Volume II: 1839-1988*, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 415.
16. McLeod, W.H., *Who is a Sikh*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 31.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
18. *The Spokesman*, October 19, 1955.
19. Singh, Khushwant, *op.cit.*, p.298
20. Dr Gopal Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 722.
21. Tully, Mark & Jacob, Satish, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, Rupa & Co., 1986, p. 38.

IV

PSALMS OF TERROR

...paens of murder are sung
and we anoint ourselves, not with saffron, but with blood.[1]

All the evil they did was in the name of God. And they did all that was evil. The murder of innocents, torture, rape, extortion, the desecration of temples, the abuse of sanctuaries, and a limitless host of other crimes that do not bear mention next to these.

They did it, they said, to avenge the 'injustices' done to the Sikhs by the Hindus; to defend the Faith against the machinations of the 'evil Brahmins' who were out to destroy it; to protect the lives and liberties of 'persecuted Sikhs' against an inimical and communalised State.

They had simply borrowed their contemporary mythology from the Akalis. But the creed of hatred that had been propagated for decades was suddenly translated into action. Its source and centre remained in the Gurudwaras; but its idiom was now the bullet and the bomb.

Every instrument and strategy was adopted to perpetuate the myth, to authenticate it: selective killings; the alternating desecration of Hindu and Sikh religious places; sermons of a malevolent rage - anything that could drive a wedge between communities; anything that could incite a slaughter of the Hindus in the state, and a retaliatory pogrom against the Sikhs in the rest of India. That could have fulfilled their ambitions.

Like the Akalis, however, they found only a few who could be swayed by their psalms of terror. To most, their falsehood was apparent from the outset. But those who did not believe them remained silent. Those who believed them, killed for their

convictions. And many more joined in the slaughter, for profit, for greed, for power, for lust, for drugs, or for the opiate of the sheer freedom from moral restraint that terrorism represented.

Some of the believers still survive; they will, eventually, seek to revive and extend their fraternity of strife. As long as the myth persists, it will find its votaries. It is the myth, consequently, that we must contend with.

Who were the victims of these 'defenders of the Sikh Faith'? Of a total of 11,694 persons killed by terrorists in Punjab during the period 1981-1993, 7,139 - more than 61 per cent - were Sikhs.

The most dramatic killings, the ones that were projected to the greatest extent by the terrorists themselves, were always of the Hindus, or of other 'enemies of the Faith', such as the 'apostate Sant Nirankaris'. But the most consistent victims, and perhaps the most dreaded opponents of the terrorists, were Sikhs. The terrorists claimed to speak for the entire *Panth*. Thus, any Sikhs who questioned their authority to do so, who questioned their actions, who exposed the immorality of their methods was a far greater danger to them than the Hindus could ever be. They threatened the credibility of the great myth. And they, above all others, had to die for it.

II

The incident to which the genesis of the terrorist movement in Punjab is traced, occurred in April 1978. The SGPC *White Paper* gives the Akali version of the background against which violence occurred. "....the Nrinkaris of Delhi," it observes, "were clandestinely supported and promoted by the Government in pursuance of its policy to create a schism and ideological confusion among the Sikhs."[2] And further, "The provocative utterances and activities brought the Nrinkaris into open clash with the Sikhs. In 1951, at Amritsar, the then Nrinkari Chief Avtar Singh, held a *Satsang* attended by his about two hundred followers [*sic*]. Some Sikhs clashed with the Nrinkari chief as he had committed an act of sacrilege by proclaiming himself a Guru in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. These bickerings continued and ultimately the two important Sikh organisations known as the Damdami Taksal and the Akhand Kirtni Jatha also came forward to confront the attack of the Nrinkaris."[3] "The tension that had been building up for quite some time, resulted

in clashes at Batala, Sri Hargobindpur, Pathankot, Qadian, Ghuman and Gurdaspur between the Nrinkaris and the followers of Sant Kartar Singh.[4] Clashes were also reported from Tarn Taran, Ludhiana and Ropar."[5] The circumstances of the actual clash of 1978 are then described:

> The Nrinkaris decided to hold their convention in Amritsar on April 13, 1978, the birthday of the Khalsa, when a large number of Sikh devotees throng the holy city. It was alleged that the place, date and time of the convention were deliberately chosen by the Nrinkaris in connivance with the Congress, which had been out of power and was trying to embarrass the Akali-Janata alliance, in order to get political leverage. One day before the Convention, on April 12, the Nrinkaris took out a procession, during the course of which their Chief allegedly made some derogatory remarks against the Sikh religion. These provocative gestures led to a lot of resentment in the Sikh circles in the city. Next day some followers of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and those of the Akhand Kirtni Jatha, went totally unarmed to the venue of Nrinkari congregation to dissuade the Nrinkari Chief from denigrating Sikh religion and its Gurus. The Nrinkaris, who were well equipped with rifles and sten guns fired at the approaching Sikhs, resulting in the death of thirteen of them.[6]

The SGPC version is interesting, both in terms of what it attempts to conceal as of the mind-set it exposes. Given their own evaluation of the background, violence could easily have been predicted. The 'Government' they refer to when they speak of the encouragement given to the Nirankaris is the succession of Congress governments that had ruled at the Centre. However, this 'villain for all occasions' was, in April 1978, out of power both in Punjab and in Delhi. The state, at that time, was under the command of the Akali Dal-Janata Party coalition; and the Centre was ruled by the Janata Party, with the Akali Dal both supporting and participating in the Government. The 'place, date and time' of the Nirankari Convention, 'chosen by the Nrinkaris in connivance with the Congress', were sanctioned by the Akali Dal Government in Punjab, with full knowledge of the history of conflict that the SGPC document outlines. The role of both the Damdami Taksal and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha in this conflict was also known to the Akali Government. Yet no attempt was made to prevent, shift, or change the schedule of, the Nirankari Convention.

This is not all. Shortly before the 'totally unarmed' protesters set out for the venue of the Nirankari Convention, they had assembled in the Golden Temple, where the then Akali Dal Revenue Minister, Jeevan Singh Umranangal tried, unsuccessfully, to explain away the Government's decision to allow the Nirankari Convention to take place. Bhindranwale interrupted the proceedings, shouting "We will not allow this Nirankari convention to take place. We are going to march there and cut them to pieces!"[7] No precautionary measures were taken in response.

A procession of a few hundred agitated Sikhs, led by Bhindranwale and by Fauja Singh of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, then left the Golden Temple and set out for the Nirankari Convention. On the way, in what was perhaps the first act of gratuitous violence by the future terrorists of 'Khalistan', they hacked off the arm of a Hindu sweetmeats seller. On arriving at the convention, they rushed the stage on which the Chief of the Nirankaris was seated; Fauja Singh drew his sword and tried to behead the Nirankari leader; he was shot by a bodyguard. In the skirmish that followed, two of Bhindranwale's followers, another eleven of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, and three Nirankaris were killed [Bhindranwale himself is said to have fled the scene just as the violence broke out, and this was a sore point between him and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha. Fauja Singh's widow often described Bhindranwale as a 'coward' for running away on this occasion, and blamed him for her husband's death]. Throughout the march, the vandalism and violence *en route*, and the clash at the Nirankari Convention, the state's forces made no attempt to intervene. Instructions for such a response, or lack of it, could only have originated from the highest echelons of the then [Akali] Government. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that no action was even contemplated against any official for this obvious and grave breakdown of law and order.

Over the next six years, until his death in June 1984, Bhindranwale propagated and practised a creed of unadulterated hate. Under the guise of *Amrit Prachar*, the propagation of the tenets of the Sikh Faith, he mixed a fundamentalist canon with rabid incitement to violence. Khushwant Singh has captured the essence of his 'revelations' well.

> He was not bothered with the subtle points of theology; he had his list of do's and don'ts clearly set out in bold letters. He took those passages from the sacred texts which suited his purpose and ignored or glossed over others that did not. He well understood that hate was a stronger passion than love: his list of hates was even more clearly and boldly spelt out.[8]

The first, and predictable, targets of his campaign of hate, and eventually of his violence, were the Sikhs who failed to conform to his interpretation of the Faith, the *patit* Sikhs, who could, however, escape his ire by submitting to his version of Sikhism, undergoing baptism, and wearing all the five symbols of the *Khalsa*. His second and irredeemable targets, were the Nirankaris, who, as heretics, quite simply had to be liquidated. The third were the Hindus, contemptible but numerous, who could, nevertheless be eliminated; Guru Gobind Singh had proclaimed that a single Sikh was equal to *sava lakh* [a hundred and twenty five thousand]. Given the population of Sikhs and Hindus, however, a few calculations led Bhindranwale to the conclusion that a mere 35 Hindus fell to the portion of each Sikh. He exhorted his followers to procure a motorcycle, a gun, and to set about their task in earnest.[9] These were to be his "storm troopers who would trample their foes under their bare feet like so much vermin."[10]

It took Bhindranwale some time to evolve and establish this 'complex religious doctrine'. He used this time to dabble, inevitably, in the snakepit of Sikh politics, the SGPC. In the SGPC elections of 1979, Bhindranwale, propped up by the Congress (I), put up forty candidates. Despite the fiction of his 'immense popularity with the Sikh masses', he was trounced, with just four of his candidates scraping past the post. He meddled with electoral politics on one more occasion, when, in the General Elections of January 1980 he campaigned actively for three Congress (I) candidates. Since he moved around at all times, with a phalanx of heavily armed men, his 'support' would obviously prove useful to the electoral prospects of his favoured candidates.

Meanwhile, the 62 Nirankaris, including the head of the sect, Baba Gurbachan Singh, charged in connection with the killing of 13 Sikhs in the clash of 1978 had faced trial and were acquitted on the grounds that they had acted in self defence. This was evidently an unsatisfactory resolution of the issue, and in April

1980 Baba Gurbachan Singh was shot dead in Delhi. The FIR named twenty persons for the murder, including several known associates of Bhindranwale, who was also charged with conspiracy to murder. After these events, his experiments with democracy came to an abrupt end.

It was at this juncture that Bhindranwale made his first experiment with the sanctuary of the Golden Temple. Fearing arrest, he moved into one of the *sarais* [rest houses], the Guru Nanak Niwas. But he was now a significant pawn in the Congress (I)-Akali political tangle, and the then Home Minister of India, Giani Zail Singh, saw fit to announce in Parliament that Bhindranwale was 'not involved' in the Gurbachan Singh murder. Without investigations or trial, Bhindranwale was once again free; so were his killer squads. A year later, the prominent journalist Arun Shourie wrote, "though the CBI has solved the murder case of the Nirankari guru, Baba Gurbachan Singh, and his aide last year, it is almost certain that the killers will never be arrested because they are alleged to be in the protection of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, in the Amritsar district of Punjab. Besides, the State police is not prepared to involve itself in the case by arresting the culprits."[11] The Government, both at the Centre and in Punjab, had now passed back into the hands of the Congress (I).

Evidently encouraged by the apparent political immunity it enjoyed, the killer squad struck again, this time against another proclaimed 'enemy of the *Panth*', Lala Jagat Narain, the proprietor of the Hind Samachar Group, publisher of the popular daily, *Punjab Kesri*, and a bitter critic of Bhindranwale. What followed was a flurry of deceptive moves apparently to arrest him, countered by a succession of manoeuvres to help him escape the consequences of his actions. During this sequence he barely escaped arrest, possibly with the collusion of at least a section of the administration, at Chando Kalan in Haryana. He was forced to abandon his private bus when he fled, and this was subsequently burnt in a clash between the police and his followers. Copies of his precious 'sermons' and a *Bir* of the Guru Granth Sahib were destroyed in this fire. He lost faith in his political protectors and barricaded himself inside the heavily fortified Gurudwara Gurdarshan Parkash at Chowk Mehta.

The Gurudwara was surrounded by the police, who, however, made no effort to arrest him. Instead, senior officials went in

to 'negotiate a surrender', and Bhindranwale declared he would 'offer himself for arrest' at 1:00 p.m. on September 20, 1981, after addressing a 'religious congregation'. All his terms were meekly accepted. At the appointed hour he emerged to harangue a large crowd of his followers, armed with spears, swords and a number of firearms; among those present were prominent Akali leaders such as Harchand Singh Longowal, Gurcharan Singh Tohra and *Jathedar* Santokh Singh of the Delhi Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee. Bhindranwale ranted against the Government, against the injustices done to him and to Sikhs at large. Having aroused the rabble to a pitch, he 'surrendered' to the police. Even as he was taken away, the mob opened fire on the police, a pitched battle ensued, and 11 persons were killed.

The very same day three motorcycle-borne 'storm troopers' opened fire in a market in Jalandhar, killing four Hindus and injuring twelve. The next day, one Hindu was killed and thirteen people injured in Tarn Taran. Five days later a goods train was derailed at Amritsar. On September 29, an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked to Lahore. A series of explosions followed in Amritsar, Faridkot and Gurdaspur districts.

For 25 days, while violence exploded all over Punjab, Bhindranwale was lodged, not in Jail as he should have been, but in the ample comfort of the circuit house. The Akali Dal, meanwhile, appeared to have decided to throw in its lot with him. Addressing a *Diwan* [assembly] at Manji Sahib, Longowal announced that the "entire Sikh community supported Bhindranwale." Similar support came from Gurdial Singh Ajnoha, the *Jathedar* of the Akal Takht, and from Tohra, the President of the SGPC.[12]

Whether or not Bhindranwale had the support of the "entire Sikh community," he nonetheless found a defender, once again, in India's then Home Minister, Giani Zail Singh, who announced to Parliament that there was no evidence that Bhindranwale was involved in Lala Jagat Narain's murder. Once again, the investigations were scuttled; political expediency prevailed over the exigencies of the law. October 15 saw Bhindranwale a free man.

Among his first public statements was an enthusiastic approval of the murders of the Nirankari Chief and of Lala Jagat Narain. "Whosoever performed these feats," he declared, "deserves to

be honoured by the Akal Takht. If these killers came to me, I would have them weighed in gold."[13]

No wonder the killings did not end. Bhindranwale had experienced absolute power; he had humbled the government; he was invincible. Soon after, an ominous warning was delivered to all who attempted to check him. A bomb exploded in the office of the DIG, Patiala, who had been sent to arrest him at Chando Kalan - no one was hurt, but the message was unmistakable; not even the highest officials of the Police were beyond his reach. From this point onwards, violence became an integral part of everyday life in Punjab.

Bhindranwale stormed across the Punjab with truckloads of men, armed to the teeth, no longer with swords and spears and primitive 12-bore guns, but with sophisticated automatic weapons; no one challenged him. In December 1981, *Jathedar* Santokh Singh of the DGPC, one of his supporters, was killed by a political rival. Bhindranwale attended his *Bhog* ceremonies; also present were Rajiv Gandhi and two prominent Ministers of Indira Gandhi's Cabinet, Zail Singh and Buta Singh; they were fully aware of the killings in Punjab; of Bhindranwale's role; and of his presence at the *Bhog*. Yet they chose to attend.

A few months later, Bhindranwale challenged the might of the Centre, as his armed gangs swept through the nation's capital with impunity.

The myth was constantly reiterated wherever he went; the baptismal ceremonies that had obsessed him in the past were forgotten; a baptism of blood now bound all who adopted his creed of carnage with greater strength. But this alone was not enough; the number of his followers grew, but slowly; until mass violence was instigated between the communities, the myth would not prevail.

Suddenly the heads of cows began appearing in temples; some retaliation was, apparently, provoked: cigarettes and tobacco was thrown into Gurudwaras. A few idols in Hindu temples were broken; some copies of the Granth Sahib in Gurudwaras burnt. But this 'game' failed abysmally; not a single riot or communal clash resulted in Punjab.

Eventually, the government chose to act, albeit hesitantly. On July 19, 1982, Amrik Singh, the President of the All India Sikh Students Federation [AISSF], was arrested. Amrik Singh was one

of Bhindranwale's closest associates, the son of his erstwhile mentor and teacher, Sant Kartar Singh of the Damdami Taksal. Under Amrik Singh's leadership, the AISSF had become the striking arm of Bhindranwale's storm troopers, responsible for many of the continuous succession of murders, dacoities, bank robberies and cases of desecration in the state. It was in connection with one of these crimes, the attempted murder of a Nirankari leader, that he was arrested along with two other members of the Damdami Taksal, Thara Singh and Ram Singh. Bhindranwale's own arrest was now imminent, and he realised this.

He left the Damdami Taksal at Chowk Mehta and moved the very same day into the Guru Nanak Niwas, east of the Harmandir Sahib, within the Golden Temple complex itself.

III

What followed was a continuous sequence of sacrilege, of profanities, of desecration, through word and deed, of the holiest sanctuary of Sikhism.

In the past, the Akalis had captured and manipulated the authority of the Golden Temple, no doubt by exploiting religious sentiments, but through an electoral process. The terrorists fled into the Temple out of fear of arrest, and then, as the security forces held back, awed by the sanctity of that hallowed ground, their power and audacity grew, and they secured it by naked force.

It mattered little how it fell into their hands. The mystical authority, the sacred, indefinable power, the inviolate sanctity of the Temple attached itself, in the minds of thousands of the devout, to those who held the seat and the symbol of the spiritual and temporal authority of the Sikh faith in their custody.

But Bhindranwale and his cohort of criminals were not the only ones who sought to command the power of the Temple. Well before him, another - relentlessly inimical - terrorist group had already established its base within its consecrated bounds. The Akhand Kirtani Jatha which had lost 11 of its members in the clash with the Nirankaris in 1978, had been led by Fauja Singh. His widow, Bibi Amarjit Kaur, and another member of the Jatha, Bibi Harsharan Kaur, had immediately entered the

sanctuary of the Golden Temple; from there they led the Babbar Khalsa, a terrorist group responsible, over the next decade and a half for a multitude of heinous crimes, including, according to the boast of its chief assassin Sukhdev Singh, the murder of 35 Nirankaris. Bibi Amarjit Kaur had not forgiven Bhindranwale his cowardice in abandoning the protesters at the Nirankari Convention, and blamed him for her husband's death. When Bhindranwale entered the Temple, a taut and troubled *entente* between their armed followers was established.

The SGPC was, of course, in formal control of the Temple. And as killers swaggered around the *parikrama*, guns slung casually on their shoulders and belts of ammunition across the chest, they made an attempt, pathetically inadequate, to protect at least a share in what was, till then, their monopoly; a third group of armed forces, thus came into being around the faction ridden SGPC offices near the Guru Nanak Niwas.

It was from here, then, that the kingdom of terror was run; and from here, the chaos of the Akali *Morchas* spread out. The SGPC, far from attempting to protect the sanctity of the Golden Temple, which was its primary duty, far from condemning the spate of bombings and murders that was being orchestrated from the Temple, preferred to betray the legacy of the men who had fought and died with such nobility to free the Gurudwaras from corruption and misuse. The SGPC and the Akali Dal decided to synchronise their own agitation with the campaign of terror.

The Akalis had been carrying out a *nahar roko* agitation in Patiala to prevent work on the SYL canal. And among the first of Bhindranwale's acts once he had secured the protection of the Golden Temple was the announcement of his own *Morcha*, or movement, demanding the release of Amrik Singh and his associates; each day, he proclaimed, voluntary *jathas* would march out of the Temple and court arrest till the state's jails overflowed. But while Bhindranwale could command men to the most bestial acts of violence, he could not assure the success of his *Morcha*; only a handful of volunteers offered themselves for arrest. Evidently his following among the Sikh masses was nowhere near what he - and for that matter the Press - believed it to be. The Akalis threw in their lot with him, beginning what they described as a *Dharam Yudh*. To their usual list of grievances they now added Bhindranwale's most urgent demand: the release

of Amrik Singh and his associates.

The 'Dictator' of the *Dharam Yudh Morcha*, Harchand Singh Longowal now declared, "He [Bhindranwale] is our *danda* [stave] with which to beat the government."[14] Bhindranwale, however, had his own agenda. "Every Sikh boy," he said, "should keep 200 grenades with him."[15] And again, "I had earlier directed that each village should raise a team of three youth with one revolver each and a motorcycle. In how many villages has this been done?"[16] In one of his sermons to the assembled devout, he exhorted, "Those of you who want to become extremists should raise their hands. Those of you who believe that they are the Sikhs of the Guru should raise their hands, others should hang their heads like goats."[17] This, then, is what the Sikh faith had been reduced to by those who claimed all authority to speak for it.

Far more than words, however, was the propaganda of the deed. Two Indian Airlines planes were hijacked; there was an attempt on the life of the Chief Minister, Darbara Singh; hand grenades were thrown at a *Ramnaumi* procession in Amritsar; police posts, government offices and residences, and, inevitably, the Nirankaris, continued to be targeted for murderous attacks; hardly a day passed without violence.

While the killer squads swept the Punjab countryside Bhindranwale gradually evolved a new image. The exploitation of religious symbols and sentiments was carried far beyond anything that had ever been dared in the past. He already spoke from the platform of the Golden Temple; he was *Santji*, a saintly spirit, approached with awe and submission by all who came before him; he spoke constantly of the *Khalsa*, of the five symbols of the brotherhood; he flattered the primitive self-image of the rural Sikh, preaching a crude ethic of vengeance and violent aggrandisement of the 'Faith'; the *Khalsa* was the lion, his enemies bleating sheep; he was no longer the protector of the weak; he was the hunter and the destroyer.

But these were only the preliminaries; the master stroke was to follow.

With breathtaking audacity he adopted the practice of carrying, at all times, a steel arrow in his hand, imitating the Tenth Guru; rumours were set afloat that the *baaz*, the holy falcon, another symbol associated with Guru Gobind Singh, was sighted hovering

protectively over him. It was whispered that the 'spirit' of the Tenth Guru had descended upon Bhindranwale; that he was an incarnation; even, among the more reckless, the blasphemous claim that he was the 'Eleventh Guru' of Sikhism.

This was the power of the Golden Temple, and of the symbols of the Faith. They conferred an aura of sainthood, almost of divinity, on this semi-literate evangelist of hate.

It is a measure of their cynicism that the SGPC and the Akalis failed to respond even to this heretical posture. It is not that they were ever taken in by it; they knew well enough what Bhindranwale actually was - and they plotted to weaken him whenever they felt they had a chance of success; but they also knew that he had somehow captured the imagination of at least a section of the rural masses; it remained convenient, consequently, to play along.

And they played along to the very edge of hell. Violence escalated and defiled the sanctuary itself. On March 16, two members of Bhindranwale's killer squads engaged with the police at Manawala, just outside Amritsar. One of the extremists was killed, and the other injured; but the latter managed to drive back to the Golden Temple with his companion's body. The SGPC handed over the body of the dead terrorist to District authorities more than 24 hours later. And then, in apparent retaliation to the 'murder' of his 'follower', Bhindranwale ordered a brutal 'execution' within the Temple precincts itself. In April 1983, A.S. Atwal, a Deputy Inspector General of Police, came to pray at the Temple; after receiving *prasad* at the Harmandir Sahib, he walked out towards the marble steps near the main entrance of the Complex where he was shot dead in broad daylight, with scores of witnesses standing by, including his own bodyguard and a police contingent posted a hundred yards away. Such was the terror of those days, so great the demoralisation of the police - crippled and constrained as they were by the political leadership - that his bodyguards simply fled; the police outpost was also abandoned, and the policemen ran and hid in the shops. The shopkeepers pulled down their shutters, and no one dared to approach the body. The killers danced the *bhangra* around the felled DIG, and then sauntered back into the Temple. Atwal's body, "riddled with bullets, lay in the main entrance to the Sikhs' most sacred shrine for more than two hours before the District

Commissioner could persuade the Temple authorities to hand it over."[18] It was actions like these that provided the greatest filip to violence, and to the acceptance of violence as a legitimate political weapon.

I was subsequently put in charge of the inquiry into the Atwal killing. I discovered that, at that point of time, there were over a hundred policemen in the vicinity and more than half of them were equipped with firearms. Among the officers whom I examined, each one was at pains to explain that he was not at the spot when the killers struck. I wondered how a police force noted for its gallantry, its fighting spirit and the adequacy of its responses in situations of violence was brought to such a point. One of the critical factors, I discovered, was a confusing order that the 'precincts' of the Golden Temple were to include not only the Temple compound, but also the buildings attached to it. The policemen and the administration, in a crisis situation, could never determine whether they were authorised to act, or whether they needed to seek clearance 'from above'. Under the circumstances, inaction was usually deemed to be the safer option.

The Atwal incident always remained at the back of my mind, especially when the security forces were confronted with a situation in or around the Golden Temple. I realized how essential it was that the policemen on duty should know exactly what was expected of them.

Four years later, I was confronted with another situation remniscent of this tragedy. A few days prior to Black Thunder, the terrorists, fully armed, had staged a march within the area, but outside the building, of the Golden Temple. After this I visited Amritsar and clearly told the officers that while the entry of the police into the Golden Temple would require the clearance of the political leadership because it was an issue of a politically sensitive nature, the movement of men armed with AK-47s outside the premises of the Temple should be tackled as an ordinary law and order problem, and immediate action taken to disarm and arrest the culprits. The correctness of this approach was proved a few days later, on the day when the terrorists shot at and grieveously injured Deputy Inspector General of Police, S.S.Virk. The terrorists had started building bunkers, and had blocked a street outside the Temple. Virk was supervising

the demolition of these structures when the terrorists shot him. The police reacted immediately, and the militants were forced to flee into the Temple. Had the terrorists been permitted to build defences in the streets around the Temple, the task of the forces during Black Thunder could have been infinitely more difficult.

Ugly as the Atwal murder was, however, it was only a beginning. On May 4, 1984, a badly mutilated body was found near the Golden Temple Complex. Less than twenty days later, another body was discovered from a gutter behind Guru Nanak Niwas - Bhindranwale's 'temporary residence'. Both the victims had been severely tortured. From this point on, this became a regular feature; bodies, mutilated, hacked to pieces, stuffed into gunny bags, kept appearing mysteriously in the gutters and sewers around the Temple.

The shrine, whose image can be found in every Sikh home, in every Sikh heart, had been transformed into a place of torture and of execution.

Never before had a Sikh spilt blood on this hallowed ground; never before had a Sikh raised a hand in anger, in vengeance, even in just retaliation, in this sacred place. It had been desecrated before, no doubt; but only by the declared enemies of Sikhism. In 1762, Ahmad Shah Abdali had reduced the Temple to rubble and filled up the *sarovar*, the sacred pool, with the blood and entrails of kine; even today, he is one of the most hated figures among all the enemies of the Faith. The *Panth* did not rest till it had rebuilt the Temple and restored its sanctity two years later; since then, though the history of the Sikh people has been marked with constant struggle and warfare, though they have suffered long periods of the most brutal persecution, no stain of blood had ever soiled this revered site.

In 1846, a single incident had threatened this untainted peace. A group of armed Nihangs had occupied the *burjis* [towers] of the Temple in a dispute over its custodianship. When the *Khalsa Durbar*, under Maharaja Dalip Singh sent an army detachment to clear them by force, they had immediately abandoned its sanctuary and surrendered, saying that they could not make the 'holiest of holies' a battleground.

IV

No such compunctions constrained the 'warriors' for 'Khalistan'. To them, the Golden Temple, like so many other Gurudwaras all over Punjab, was just a safe haven from where they could conduct their criminal activities with impunity, since the police would not pursue them there for fear of hurting the religious sentiments of the larger community. And if, after the Atwal murder, the government did contemplate the possibility of entering the Guru Nanak Niwas, a building that lay outside the actual bounds of the Golden Temple, across a public road, Akali Dal leaders thwarted them at the outset, issuing a fervent appeal to Sikhs all over the world to 'resist entry of the police' into the hostel complex.

This unholy covenant was not disturbed even by the selective and cold blooded slaughter of Hindus travelling in a Punjab Roadways bus that was hijacked by the militants on its way to Moga in November 1983. If anything, this incident produced a major 'victory' for the Akali-terrorist combine, since it provoked the dismissal of the Darbara Singh Government. Punjab was brought under President's rule; but the chaos, instead of ending, deepened.

But all was not well in the fraternity of convenience within the Golden Temple. Internal politics within the Akali Dal, and the erosion of its authority in the face of Bhindranwale's growing terror, created a widening rift between some of its leaders and between the extremist groupings. A protective alliance emerged between the dominant Akali factions and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha-Babbar Khalsa. Tensions within the Complex grew, confrontations mounted, scuffles broke out, and the mutilated bodies in the sewers outside the Golden Temple provided an index of the increasing hostility between these various 'soldiers' of the 'Faith'. It mattered little that they were all supposedly fighting for the same objectives, battling against 'injustice' and 'oppression'. This was, in actual fact, an unashamed battle to 'protect their turf'. Torture and murder, even within the confines of the Temple, were perfectly 'legitimate' implements of war. As the 'disappearance' of members of the competing forces increased, a very real danger of open combat for control came into being.

This, however, did not suit Bhindranwale's temperament. Hit squads, torture and executions were all very well, but he had never shown much nerve for a direct engagement. Unfortunately for him, the sanctuary of Guru Nanak Niwas, though it was sufficient to protect him from the police, could not shield him from the Babbar Khalsa's wrath. In a surprise move, the Babbar Khalsa had forcibly occupied some of the rooms previously held by his men in the Guru Nanak Niwas; instead of fighting for control, Bhindranwale abandoned the Niwas entirely, fleeing into the safety of the Akal Takht, right in the middle of the Temple Complex. Not even the Babbar Khalsa would dare to scar this, the sacred seat of the temporal power of God, with an attack against him. In any event, thousands of devotees who came to pray at the Golden Temple every day constituted a protective barrier between him and his enemies.

The move was not without its difficulties. The *Jathedar*, or High Priest, of the Akal Takht objected strongly. No Guru or Sikh religious leader had ever been allowed to live in the Akal Takht, he pointed out. Moreover, Bhindranwale's presence in the upper floors of the building was an act of sacrilege; the Guru Granth Sahib was placed in the main hall on the ground floor, and at night the *Bir* from the Harmandir Sahib itself, the most sacred copy of the Guru Granth Sahib, was placed in a room in the Akal Takht. No man could be permitted to stand above the Guru Granth Sahib; but Bhindranwale and his men would be living in quarters above these places. These niceties, however, mattered little to Bhindranwale, or to those in the SGPC who had made it possible for him to move into the Akal Takht. Nor, in fact, was Bhindranwale the first to occupy the building for his own ends. Sant Fateh Singh, the then President of the Akali Dal had done so during the grand charade of his threatened self-immolation and the construction of the *Agn Kunds* in 1965. Once again, Bhindranwale was adopting distortions created by the Akalis themselves; and as usual he carried them to the limits dictated by his own perversity.

The Akal Takht was thus transformed into his personal 'Court'. He held his *darbars* here, or on the roof of the *langar* across the *parikrama*. Surrounded by heavily armed henchmen, he would lie, half sprawled, on a mattress, and expound on his malevolent doctrine of vengeance against all those whom he held responsible

for the fictional 'slavery' of the Sikhs. And here he would receive petitions and intercede in disputes, dispensing a somewhat unequal 'justice'. Those who submitted to his will, swore allegiance, acknowledged his 'suzerainty' to the exclusion of all other powers, and, of course, paid him their 'tribute', received his 'protection'; their 'rights' would be upheld. The opposing party died. Hit lists were drawn up; those who sought the opportunity to 'serve' the 'Sant' were given a name and a gun. The hit squads flourished.

Despite the campaign of hatred that had been going on for close to five years by this time, however, few purely communal complaints were brought up at these *darbars*. Their main thrust was land disputes, quarrels over possession of properties, betrayals of trust, and the inevitable family vendettas that are so much a part of the *Jat* Sikh's life. Of course, the occasional Sikh complained against his Hindu neighbour; such actions, however, were prompted by a purely secular greed; they had little, if anything, to do with communal passions. The 'Brahmin' or the 'Bania' were no villains here; the same motives that provoked complaints against fellow Sikhs motivated petitions for vengeance against Hindus.

Murder, of course, was not the only business transacted; though it was the fountainhead of the power that created opportunities for diversification into organised extortion and protection rackets. In these operations, as in the murders he sanctioned, Bhindranwale was absolutely secular in his dealings; he accepted money from Hindu and Sikh alike; and his 'boys' served collection notices on businessmen, shopkeepers and industrialists from both the communities - those who failed to pay, as usual, faced the only penalty in Bhindranwale's book - death.

Unsurprisingly, the devout were becoming an increasingly insignificant minority among the men who gathered around Bhindranwale. Criminals on the run, professional guns for hire, smugglers, as well as police and army deserters enjoyed his protection - and did his bidding.

The government still showed no inclination to act; though it did try to prevail upon the SGPC to 'clean out' the Temple. They gave them lists of criminals known to be in the Complex, and details of the armoury that had been accumulated. The SGPC

repeatedly 'denied knowledge' of the presence of the men who swaggered fearlessly around the *parikrama*, and the arms that no one made any attempt to conceal. Worse still, despite their growing differences with, indeed, the visible hostility between the dominant Akali faction and Bhindranwale, they continued with their game of brinkmanship, announcing agitation after agitation, openly inciting the Sikhs, burning the Indian Constitution, exhorting farmers to stop the movement of foodgrain from Punjab to other states by force, calling upon the people to stop all payment of taxes and other dues to the government, and drawing the entire state to the precipice of anarchy.

This chicanery, however, was not approved of by the entire religious leadership. A few brave voices did speak up, both within the Golden Temple and from many of the Gurudwaras across the state. Among the most powerful of these voices was the venerable Giani Partap Singh, an old man of eighty by that time, one of the most revered spiritual leaders and a former *Jathedar* of the Akal Takht, who had openly attacked Bhindranwale for stocking arms and ammunition in the Akal Takht and described his occupation of the shrine as an act of sacrilege. He was shot dead at his home in Tahli Chowk. Other voices were raised; and swiftly silenced. They included Niranjan Singh, the Granthi of Gurudwara Toot Sahib; Granthi Surat Singh of Majauli; and Granthi Jarnail Singh of Valtoha. All those who spoke against Bhindranwale were his enemies; and all his enemies were enemies of the Faith. The Sikh religious leadership heard and understood the message; and they succumbed to their fear.

The violence rose to a crescendo in the months preceding Operation Bluestar; and the Golden Temple was defiled by horrors still unimagined. A great arsenal had been built up within the Akal Takht; for months, trucks engaged for *kar seva*, supposedly bringing in supplies for the daily *langar*, had been smuggling in guns and ammunition. The police never attempted to search these vehicles entering the Golden Temple, apparently on 'instructions from above'. But when one such truck was randomly stopped and checked, a large number of sten guns and ammunition were recovered. The terrorists, it was discovered after Bluestar, had even set up a 'grenade manufacturing' facility, and a workshop for the fabrication of sten-guns within the Temple Complex. Meanwhile, the killing rate had risen sharply

all over the state, and there were many days when the 'death count' rose above a dozen.

By this time, the war within the Golden Temple had escalated; the tortures and killings constantly fed the sewers around the Complex. A single incident exemplifies the pattern of violence and brutality that had been established in the shrine. Bhindranwale's main 'hit man', Surinder Singh Sodhi was shot dead just outside the Temple in April 1984. Sodhi had a number of important 'kills' to his credit, including H.S. Manchanda, the President of the Delhi Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Professor V.N. Tiwari, a Congress (I) MP, and Harbans Lal Khanna of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Sodhi was shot dead in broad daylight by a criminal enrolled in Bhindranwale's own band of thugs, Surinder Singh 'Chinda' and a woman associate, Baljit Kaur. Baljit Kaur immediately ran to the Akal Takht and tried to justify the killing claiming that Sodhi had 'misbehaved' with her. But soon enough a 'confession' had been rung out; she admitted that she and Chinda had been paid for the killing; Gurcharan Singh, Secretary of the Akali Dal and a prominent member of the Longowal faction, and Malik Singh Bhatia, one of Bhindranwale's own gang, were implicated. Bhatia was summoned immediately; he confessed to having provided Chinda with a vehicle to flee the site of the murder; he begged forgiveness and Bhindranwale instructed him to make an offering at the Harmandir Sahib. Bhatia, believing that he had been forgiven, prayed at the Temple and returned with *prasad*, which he offered Bhindranwale. After this he was permitted to leave; but as he went down the stairs, he was attacked with swords; badly injured, he began to run towards the safety of the Guru Nanak Niwas, but long before he could get there, a single shot in the back sent him hurtling, lifeless, to the marble tiled floor of the *parikrama*. Vengeance had begun. Soon after, a tea stall owner outside the Temple was shot dead. Baljit Kaur was tortured brutally, her breasts cut off, and then killed, within the Akal Takht itself. Her hideously mutilated body, bundled into a gunnybag, was found more than 24 hours later on the Grand Trunk Road. Near it was a second body: her associate and lover, Chinda. The day after Sodhi's killing, notices on the walls of the Temple boasted: 'Within twenty-four hours, we have eliminated the killers and two of their accomplices.' The only

one to escape immediate retribution was Gurcharan Singh, who was locked into a room in the Guru Nanak Niwas, and provided an armed guard of over fifty men by the Akali Dal President. He was to die on the 6th of June, when the terrorists opened fire and hurled grenades on a group of some 350 persons, including Longowal and Tohra, who surrendered to the Army near the Guru Nanak Niwas.

There are three other acts of documented barbarity that bear mention. The first of these was the attack during which Gurcharan Singh died; 70 people were killed, including 30 women and 5 children, with no other purpose than to prevent their surrender to the security forces. Two Junior Commissioned Officers of the Army who were captured by the terrorists were subjected to the most inhuman tortures, and then brutally murdered; the terrorists strapped explosives on to the body of one of these JCOs after having skinned him alive, and then blew him up as he was thrown from the upper floor of the Akal Takht. And on June 8, 1984, they hacked to death an unarmed army doctor who had entered a basement to treat some civilian casualties.

It was not only their acts of savagery that defiled the Temple. Long before the first Army shells were to hit it, Bhindranwale's men had already begun the process of disfiguring the Akal Takht. They smashed through its marble walls to create positions for their guns; from the basements in the Takht and from the rooms around the *parikrama*, they broke through onto the tiled courtyards to establish near impregnable machine gun 'nests'. Sandbags and hastily constructed brick walls protected every one of these 'positions'. The entire Akal Takht had been transformed into a large reinforced pillbox with weapons facing all directions. In fact, virtually every strategically significant building in the complex, excluding the Harmandir Sahib located at its very centre, had been similarly fortified - and defaced. The fortifications included 17 private houses in the residential area around the Temple as well. Ex-army veterans and deserters, under the leadership of the cashiered Major General Shahbeg Singh, provided weapons training to Bhindranwale's men in the Temple Complex itself.

Throughout this period the police and the security forces positioned all around the Temple Complex, though beyond a

sanitised area of more than 200 yards - lest the Temple was 'desecrated' by their presence -, did nothing. No effort was made to conceal these activities, indeed, it would have been impossible to do so; the government, the administration and the police were fully aware of what was being done, not only within the Temple, but also in the private residences commandeered by the terrorists beyond its walls. But a politically imposed paralysis had crippled the forces to such an extent that, far from enforcing the law of the land, they were not even capable of defending themselves against the depredations of the terrorists. A single incident epitomises their impotence. On February 14, 1984, a group of militants attacked a police post at some distance from the entrance of the Temple. Six policemen, fully armed, were 'captured' and dragged inside. The 'police response' came twenty four hours later in the form of a senior police officer who went to Bhindranwale in the Akal Takht and begged him to release his men and return their weapons. Bhindranwale agreed only to hand over the corpse of one of the policemen who had been killed. He later relented and released the remaining five men who were still alive. Their weapons, including three sten guns, and a wireless set, were not returned. No one asked for them. No action was ever taken in the case of the murdered policeman.

Eventually, however, the tide of blood rose too high. In June 1984 a reluctant and still confused government gathered up its courage, though evidently not its wits, and reacted.

V

Over the entire period of the terrorist movement in Punjab, the two most significant victories for the cause of 'Khalistan' were not won by the militants, but inflicted - through acts both of commission and omission - upon the nation by its own Government. The first of these was Operation Blue Star; the second, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.

Blue Star, coming at the end of an extended period of stupefying inaction, constituted the worst possible form of over-reaction that could have been contrived. Certainly, what had been happening all over Punjab over the preceding years was unforgivable; but it was not only condoned, there is evidence to suggest that, at least on occasion, it was even encouraged,

reaction that could have been contrived. Certainly, what had been happening all over Punjab over the preceding years was unforgivable; but it was not only condoned, there is evidence to suggest that, at least on occasion, it was even encouraged, by those who held the power of the State captive to their own petty ambitions. Even after all this, after all the distress the terrorists had inflicted, after all the damage the politicians had done and the almost complete demoralisation of the police, the scale and nature of the operation launched to contain terrorism and to 'clean out' the Golden Temple was by no means justified by the objective circumstances then prevailing. In the twenty two months preceding Operation Blue Star and after the *Akali Morcha* began, violence had claimed a total of 410 lives, of which 298 persons were killed in the last phase, between January 1, 1984 and June 3, 1984. Tragic though this loss of life was, the toll of violence in the later phases of terrorism was to be much greater, and the State's responses, nonetheless, were much more measured. In 1987, the year preceding Operation Black Thunder, for instance, 910 persons had been killed by terrorists alone. By 1988, the terrorists were killing, on the average, 160 persons per month, and they were once again in complete possession of the Golden Temple. The comparatively bloodless action in the Temple on this occasion Operation Black Thunder is itself an indictment of the lamentable State response in 1984.

The crucial responsibility for this botched action lies, once again, on its political planners and not, as has often been suggested, on the military command. After months of dithering, the Centre suddenly deployed the Army in Punjab and around the Golden Temple on June 3, 1984. The Operation itself commenced less than three days later under political pressure, indeed, in a state of political hysteria, long before the Army could dig in and make a realistic evaluation of the situation. It was this undue haste that resulted in both the unnecessary loss of life and excessive damage to various buildings within the shrine. The Army was sent in with needless haste, virtually blind, and, once again, with crippling restrictions on what they could and could not do within the Temple. There was a complete lack of information; no realistic intelligence existed on the actual strength of the terrorists, of the quantity and deployment of arms available to them, or even a sufficiently detailed layout of the

devastating impact on some of the most sacred buildings. What could well have been won by strategy and planning had to be seized by brute force.

Irrespective of what had preceded the Operation, it is with reason that the Sikhs were offended by what was done to their holiest shrine. Indeed, those who hastily planned and rashly precipitated this action owe an explanation not only to the Sikh community but to the entire Indian nation, to the Army, and to the families of almost a hundred officers and *jawans* who sacrificed their lives to free the Golden Temple from the malevolence of the crew of murderers who had installed themselves there, as also to the families of more than 550 innocent civilians who were killed in the cross fire.

Nothing, however, can explain or exculpate the complete collapse of the State during the three day-long politically sponsored slaughter of the Sikhs which followed in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination less than five months later. The manifest bad faith of all subsequent regimes in this context is reflected in the disgraceful record of investigations, prosecutions and convictions relating to the November 1984 massacre.

These two events, in combination, gave a new lease of life to a movement which could easily have been contained in 1984 itself. It was a lease of life which was to inflict a toll of thousands of deaths over the next nine years.

VI

The 'regrouping' of extremist forces started immediately after these events, and was not affected by the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, or by the installation of the Akali Dal Government headed by Surjit Singh Barnala in 1985 - if anything, it may well have been accelerated by these developments. The exceptionally high turnout in these elections, at 67 per cent, was witness to the sentiments of the people who were eager for the restoration of the democratic process and who, despite the evident delinquency of the national leadership, overwhelmingly rejected the cult of extremism.

Their elected representatives, unfortunately, had learnt little from the protracted tragedy of the preceding seven years. With 73 seats out of a total of 115 [elections to 2 seats were countermanded as a result of the death of candidates], the Akalis

had, for the first time, a clear majority in the House. But the enemy, once again, was within. Barnala's was "the first Akali ministry not reliant on any other political party: with some justification he described it as a *Panthic* government. Ironically, it was ambitious elements within the *Panth* who conspired to pull him down."[19] The Akali leaders began squabbling for power among themselves and created a vacuum which was promptly filled up by the extremists.

In 1986 alone, 512 persons were killed by the extremists, and terrorists activities accelerated even further in 1987. The Barnala government's response, throughout the less than two years that it remained in power, was worse than inadequate. On the one hand, instead of initiating strong steps to counter these developments, the Chief Minister continued to ignore the gravity of the situation and to deny that the terrorist threat was escalating; and on the other, he released, *en masse*, over 2,000 terrorists, accused of a variety of heinous crimes, who had been arrested from the Golden Temple and from some 42 other Gurudwaras during Operation Blue Star. Most of them immediately rejoined the extremist ranks, and the movement picked up momentum rapidly. By January 1986, they were already strong enough to eject the SGPC from the Golden Temple. They hoisted Khalistani flags there and immediately began to demolish the Akal Takht which had, by now, been reconstructed by the Government. The guns were back in the Temple. A five-member 'Panthic Committee' of militant leaders was created; on April 29, 1986, they passed a formal resolution proclaiming Khalistan and again hoisted the Khalistani flag in the Golden Temple. The killings, the torture, and now, increasingly, rape once more defiled the sacred shrine. A large number of kidnapped women were kept captive in the Temple, to be 'used' when and how the 'warriors of Khalistan' pleased; and then to be killed in cold blood; almost without exception, these were Sikh women.

The horror of the intolerable desecration of the shrine on this occasion was witnessed by the entire nation. Operation Black Thunder had been executed in the full glare of the media, with both Indian and foreign representatives, and continuous television coverage which made it impossible to hide even the minutest detail. It became impossible for the terrorists and their political

front men to explain away these hideous offences against the sanctity of the Temple, and the terrorists lost a great deal of their support as a result.

The strategic advantage of orchestrating terrorist activities from within the Golden Temple, furthermore, was discounted once and for all by Operation Black Thunder. After 1988, the sanctuary of this and other Sikh shrines no longer offered the militants immunity against the law; and the sanctity ascribed to their actions as a result of their association with these holy places was also lost.

Their rhetoric, and the pattern of their crimes, nevertheless, remained the same; what changed was the intensity and effectiveness of their operations. Immediately after Blue Star, a new generation of weapons, the Kalashnikov rifles [AK-47 and AK-57] were injected into the conflict by a helpful Pakistan. Large numbers of terrorists continuously crossed over into Pakistan for training in the use of an increasingly lethal range of weapons and explosives, and their ability to inflict damage multiplied manifold. After Black Thunder, a panicky militant leadership met with the authorities in Pakistan, and an unprecedented flow of weapons commenced all along the unfenced border.

The movement, however, had lost its ideological moorings at this stage, and a number of splinter groups emerged, defined, not by any specific doctrinal differences but essentially by a clash of egos between the various leaders. The initial grouping was around two 'Panthic Committees'; the Old came to be dominated by Gurbachan Singh Manochahal and Wassan Singh Zaffarwal, and the New, commanded by Gurjant Singh Budhsinghwala, Kanwarjit Singh, Charanjit Singh Channi, and later, Dr Sohan Singh. There were various subsequent reorganisations, with as many as five Panthic Committees emerging, and no clear line of authority could ever be established over the more than 160 gangs that went on a rampage all over the state.

Efforts, nevertheless, continued to be made to give the movement a religious tone; when Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh were hanged for Indira Gandhi's murder, 10 Hindus were hanged in a 'retaliatory action' in Batala, Tarn Taran and Ferozpur in January 1989. Various 'Panthic Codes' were promulgated imposing restrictions on the consumption of alcohol, on marriage

rites and practices, on the consumption of meat(!), on the patterns of dress to be worn by Sikh men and women, and on a range of 'immoral acts'. The public reaction was far from what had been expected by the militants, and by June 1989, Manochahal had directed his camp to discontinue the 'social reform movement' as it had resulted in 'alienation from the people and a dilution of the Khalistan movement'. The New Panthic Committee, dominated by the professedly puritanical Babbars, however, continued to lay great emphasis on imposing 'moral' discipline on the Sikhs.

Unfortunately for them, this was an increasingly difficult posture to sustain. Radical structural transformations had occurred as a result of Operation Black Thunder; the most significant of these was the loss of the Golden Temple and the Gurudwaras as shield and sanction. Rape, extortion and murder had been the business of the terrorists from the very beginning of the movement; but in its initial phases, and right up to the pre-Black Thunder period, the top leadership was apparently distanced from these activities, concentrated as they were in the Golden Temple. Their depravity and vice in that hallowed place remained unknown to the larger mass of Sikhs; and while lesser terrorists were often seen to 'stray from the path', the highest motives could still be ascribed to the militant leadership.

Divested of the sanctuary of the Golden Temple and the Gurudwaras, the leadership was forced to live life as fugitives in the Punjab countryside; on the one hand, their own deeds exposed them, and on the other, the deeds of their followers compromised them even further, since they were now believed to be condoned, even encouraged, by these leaders.

Unsurprisingly, they made several unsuccessful attempts to regain 'religious sanctions' for their activities. In a bid to recover lost ground, the Old Panthic Committee called for a *Sarbat Khalsa*, a congregation of the entire Sikh Community, at the Akal Takht on April 13, 1989. The call received almost no response, and the *Sarbat Khalsa* was 'postponed' indefinitely. Similarly, a splinter 'Federation' led by Bhai Manjit Singh called for the constitution of *Khalsa Panchayats* operating from Gurudwaras in every town and village all over the state. A *Chief Khalsa Panchayat* was to be established at the Akal Takht. Once again, the scheme died out due to a palpable lack of response.

The reasons were not far to find. The movement by this time had acquired a virulence that had affected the life of every Sikh. The death toll inflicted by the terrorists between 1988 and 1992 stood at 9693; of these, 6280, close to 65 per cent, were Sikhs. So many Sikh families had witnessed the gratuitous and often senselessly brutal murder of their loved ones that the myth of a war for the defence of Sikhism and of Sikh interests was wearing thin.

This was not all; the fear of death was pervasive, but terror reached into the homes of tens of thousands of other Sikhs in the guise of shame and dispossession. As fugitives, the terrorists and their leaders constantly sought shelter in the homes of common Sikhs across the countryside; and it was while they did this that their worst traits were exposed. Gradually, the myth of ideological driven 'holy warriors' was supplanted by an image of licentious criminals with a strong weakness for liquor, for women, and for easy money. The terrorists not only demanded food and shelter, but forced sex with the young women of the families they stayed with. Abduction and rape became commonplace. Compounding these was widespread extortion and, predictably, given the *Jat* Sikh's obsession with land, massive land grabbing.

At this point the media also began projecting certain peculiarities in the 'recoveries' that were being made from the hideouts of terrorists or after encounters. They included pornographic literature, a variety of intoxicants, the inevitable contraceptives, and, perhaps to complement these, 'medicines' believed to increase sexual prowess. 'Love letters', such as those of Gurdip Singh Deepa, one of the top terrorists of the Khalistan Commando Force [KCF], revealed the degree and depravity of their sexual adventurism. Moreover, recovered documents increasingly exposed the acquisition of massive movable and immovable properties by terrorists.

The hypocrisy and cynicism of those who were trying to impose 'Panthic codes' on the Sikh masses on the threat of death can be judged by the example of some of their most important leaders. The Babbar Khalsa projected itself as the most severe, intensely disciplined, indeed, puritanical Sikh organisation among the militant groupings. Its chief, Sukhdev Singh Babbar, however, was discovered living in a palatial bungalow in Patiala under

an assumed identity as a contractor, Jasmer Singh. Babbar had a wife and three children at his village in Dassuwal, Tarn Taran. But he shared his 'White House' in Patiala with Jawahar Kaur, herself a member of a group of devotional singers, the *Nabhe Wallian Bibian Da Jatha*, famed equally for their talent as for their piety; an illegitimate son had been born out of this liaison. The *White House* was estimated to have been constructed at a cost of over Rs 30 lakh in the end Eighties. Air conditioners, dish antennae, VCRs, colour televisions, sophisticated cameras, a micro oven and an expensive cooking range were some of the 'modern amenities' in the Patiala house. A substantial amount of jewellery and expensive clothes belonging to Jawahar Kaur, were also recovered. If further evidence of the 'holy warrior's' inclinations was needed, video copies of blue movies were also found in the house. Sukhdev Singh owned another bungalow, the *Pink House* at Rajpura, and a third one in the Model Town area.

In early 1991, Madha Singh, a 'Lt. General' of the Babbar Khalsa, and his associate Inderjit Singh Sakhira, raped two sisters in village Sirhali and subsequently abducted and forcibly married them. This was Madha Singh's third 'marriage'.

Jaspal Singh Bhuri, a 'Lt. General' of the KCF, abducted an 18 year old girl of Manochahal village in December 1990. She was kept in captivity for over four months, and was 'used' to satisfy the lust of various gang members. In April 1991 she was released. However, Bhuri followed her to her village and forced her to consume cyanide, because he felt she would damage his group's reputation.

Sukhdev Singh 'Sukha Sipahi', alias 'General Labh Singh', the then KCF Chief, had developed a relationship with a married woman. In July 1988, suspecting her 'fidelity', he and his associates gave her a severe beating and set her house on fire. Sukhdev Singh was later killed in a police encounter. His nephew, Paramjit Singh Panjwar, and an associate, Jagjit Singh Billa, believing the woman had acted as a police informer, killed her in October 1989.

Panjwar subsequently became the Chief of the KCF [Panjwar] group. He acquired a large bungalow in one of Delhi's upmarket colonies and took up residence there under an assumed identity as Partap Singh. He had also acquired a brick kiln in Ghaziabad, and had invested a large chunk of looted money in the transport

business. He 'owned' a half share in a rice shelling mill in Jhabal, and had forcibly occupied some 20 acres of land in the same area. One of his close associates, Harminder Singh Sultanwind, a member of Dr Sohan Singh's 'Panthic Committee', had 'kept' a married woman, the sister of another top terrorist Baghel Singh Dehriwal who had been killed, at a bungalow in Chandigarh. He owned a fleet of cars and had 'invested' Rs 10 lakh with a brick kiln owner of Majitha.

Satnam Singh Chinna, chief of the BTFK, had 'acquired' a 50 acre farm in the Puranpur district of Pilibhit in Uttar Pradesh, and had a large *kothi* constructed at Delhi. He had killed half a dozen of his close associates when they had demanded a share in the money looted by the group. He had two wives, and illicit relations with several other women, both married and unmarried.

A particularly brutal character was Sukhinder Singh 'Gora', the Deputy Chief of the KCF[W], who, in the first quarter of 1991 alone, raped and murdered two married women of Enkot village. In the second quarter of 1991, he abducted and raped the daughter of a retired Subedar living in Dialgarh village. In October the same year, he and his associates kidnapped two girls from Bujian Wali village and raped them. Some time later, they kidnapped a young girl of Manan village, and raped and killed her.

Another prominent terrorist, Balwinder Singh Shahpur, the Chief of the Dashmesh Regiment, virtually made rape his primary occupation and had ravished more than 50 girls in the Sathiala-Batala area.

These are only a handful of instances of the more prominent terrorists, based only on reported offences; most crimes by these men, however, will never have been mentioned by their victims - that is the essence of terror. Inevitably, their example was enthusiastically followed by what was at one time up to a three thousand strong terrorist force backed by an even larger number of unlisted criminals ravaging the entire Punjab countryside. As early as January 1989, their activities were causing deep alarm even within militants ranks, and the Old Panthic Committee issued a statement that those who were killing people in connection with land disputes and extortion, and who were committing 'other acts' that brought the movement into disrepute were in no way helping the Khalistan movement. They also

appealed to Sikh masses not to give shelter to 'such elements' as they were 'defaming the struggle started by the Damdami Taksal.' But given the record of its own top leadership, this call had a hollow ring. In any event, the real power was in the hands of those who had the guns; there was no organisational authority above the roving terrorist gangs in Punjab.

In 1991 a confidential survey of the socio-economic profile of terrorists, including 205 hard-core terrorists, indicated that a majority of those who joined voluntarily did so for the lure of easy money and the 'benefits' attached to being a terrorist; more than a third of the non-hardcore terrorists, however, were recruited coercively. A previous criminal background was seen to provide a distinct advantage in climbing the terrorist hierarchy. Families of hard-core terrorists, such as Gurbachan Singh Manochahal, Dharam Singh Kastiwal, Paramjit Singh Panjwar, Resham Singh Thande, Mahesh Inder Singh, Nishan Singh Makhu, Yadwinder Singh Yadu, Baghel Singh Dehriwal, among others, were identified as having amassed great fortunes. Even the lesser terrorists gained immensely in social significance and status once they had a Kalashnikov in their hands. Heads of their families were respectfully addressed as *Baba* in their villages. They were approached for assistance in settling private disputes. Fathers of some of the better known terrorists set up an independent 'business' of extortion, mediation in cases of kidnapping, and a variety of other acts of coercion. They also became beneficiaries of forcible acquisition of lands and other properties. Even if their sons died, they acquired the halo of martyrs; their families were called *shaheedi parivars*, and received substantial financial support.

These findings have now received further corroboration in a recent study by three sociologists of Guru Nanak Dev University. The main causes identified for the terrorists joining the Khalistan movement had nothing to do with religion or ideology: "At least 180 of the 300 terrorists we sampled joined 'out of fun.' The phrase that was often used was '*shokia taur se*'. They were happy if they had a motorcycle (Hero Honda; the 350 cc Enfield Bullet had been banned) and an AK-47 and if they got to eat almonds." Women, according to the study, were another big draw. Paramjit Singh Judge, one of the authors of this study, asserts, "I know one doctor in Majitha who terminated 10-15 pregnancies every Thursday. No one openly told you of the rapes. But in the villages, you often heard comments like, '*Itna vadaam khayenge*

one doctor in Majitha who terminated 10-15 pregnancies every Thursday. No one openly told you of the rapes. But in the villages, you often heard comments like, *'Itna badaam khayenge to kahin to nikalenge hi.'* [If they eat so many almonds, they have to find an outlet for their energies]. Often terrorists would enter a house just before dinner, have dinner, and then force all the family members except the young women up to the terrace... The majority of the terrorists died within a year. In that time they had access to 50 to 55 women."[20]

These were the 'armies of Khalistan', the 'defenders of the Faith', the men who claimed to speak for the Sikh *Panth* and to fight to establish an order based on the teachings of the Gurus.

VII

And who defeated them?

No 'great Brahmanical conspiracy', no cynical political combine out to crush the 'freedom and identity of the Sikhs', no armies of 'militant Hindus'; it was, overwhelmingly, the Sikhs themselves who fought the terrorists, and who eventually prevailed over them.

It was Sikhs themselves, no doubt; but it was not those Sikhs who claimed to represent the religious leadership of the community; it was not those Sikhs who had been playing political games with the lives of the people of Punjab for over a decade. Despite the experiences of Blue Star, of Black Thunder, and of the unrestrained depredations of the terrorists there-after, this 'Sikh leadership' never diluted its complicity with, or implicit support to, the strategy of religious manipulation that the terrorists had extended from word to deed.

In 1988, the Punjab Police was as an utterly demoralised force. Ever since the Daheru incident, in 1981, when a police party engaged in an encounter had simply abandoned their weapons and fled, their responses against terrorism had been utterly inadequate. People in Punjab's villages spoke of a situation where the police refused to move out of their barricaded police stations after dark; the force's will to fight terrorism, it appeared, had been completely broken.

The appearances were deceptive. What had been lacking was a clear mandate, and a freedom to carry on the battle without

crippling political interference. Throughout the era of the ascendancy of terror, virtually every hard-core terrorist had a political patron; police responses were distorted to such an extent that effective reaction was precluded even in cases where policemen and their families had been specifically targeted by the terrorists. But the will was far from lacking.

Within five years, this very force was to spearhead one of the most dramatic victories in the history of world terrorism. The men who were said to have been cowering in their police stations chased the terrorists deep into their own territory; and chased them to their deaths. Everywhere in the world, when terrorism goes beyond a point, the police has ordinarily been withdrawn from the battle, and armies engage with the militants. In Punjab, the Army was cast into a supportive role, forming outer cordons during raids and ambushes on militants; the police were the actual combatants.

And more than 65 per cent of the personnel in the Punjab Police were Sikhs.

After 1989, massive recruitment took place, as the force expanded strength from its existing 35,000 men to 60,000 men. It was Sikhs from all over the state, from deep within what had virtually been abandoned as the 'terrorist heartland', who came in overwhelming numbers to join the war against terrorism. They paid a terrible price for their resolve. To wear a police uniform in the era of militancy in the Punjab was to proclaim yourself a wilful target for preferential terrorist attack. And between 1988 and 1992 alone, 1566 police men were killed by terrorists. It was a risk they willingly took. More distressing, however, was the vicious targeting of their unprotected families.

August 1992 saw the most savage wave of these murders. Over just a few days in rapid succession, more than 60 persons from the families of Sikh policemen were killed. I drove from village to village to offer what little consolation I could to the survivors. In a village in Barnala, 18 persons had been herded into a small enclosure, and had been shot at point blank range. Even after their last rites had been completed, their congealed blood, with swarms of flies, marked the place where they had fallen. The survivors, mostly women and young girls, were too stunned by the tragedy to say anything; but on every face, in every tear-filled eye I saw an expression, at once of entreaty and of accu-

sation. From village to village, that expression was to follow me for many days.

But these murders only strengthened the resolve of the survivors to rid their people of the scourge of terror.

And the people responded. For years there had been no effective resistance to the militant dictat; the State it seemed, had abdicated all responsibility, and the people could only suffer in silence under the tyranny of the Kalashnikov. But once the State displayed a resolve to combat, the groundswell of popular support was simply immense. The popular revulsion was transformed into actual resistance, inspiring many a heroic deed. In June 1989, terrorists hijacked a bus and forced 10 Hindu passengers to disembark near Talwandi Ghuman; as the terrorists prepared to execute them, two Sikhs - Avtar Singh and Rajwant Singh - resisted; they were killed, only to become heroes and models in the eyes of the long suffering villagers. The terrorists could no longer find shelter as easily as they did; even those who had submitted to their rapine for years explored the possibilities of resistance. Sukhwinder Singh 'Sukha', a listed terrorist had been coercing a resident of of Basoya village to provide him 'hospitality'; he had then taken to raping his daughter-in-law when he pleased. In May 1991, his victim informed the police; Sukhwinder Singh and two of his accomplices were killed in an encounter.

The floodgates opened. But that was not all. The Punjabi villager was willing and eager to engage directly in the battle. When the police offered the opportunity through a scheme accepting volunteers as Special Police Officers who would be provided a weapon, ammunition and a small daily allowance, large numbers of Sikhs responded, and the battle lines were drawn within the villages.

Among the most noble sagas of this resistance was the dauntless courage of the families of comrade Balwinder Singh and his wife Jagdish Kaur, and of Major Singh. Fired by ideology, these active members of the CPI(M) transformed their homes on two ends of Bhikiwind village, one of the areas worst affected by terrorism, into solitary fortresses. Here they fought through and survived dozens of terrorist attacks, including two in which rocket launchers were used.

The Army, the central security forces, each played their role. But the war against terror in theatres all over India is, today, witness to the fact that this pestilence cannot be eradicated by a force imposed from without. The victory over terrorism in Punjab was a people's victory; the people were common policemen, courageous villagers, men and women inspired by an assortment of ideologies and motives.

One thing, however, is certain: those who fought the terror - whatever their beliefs or motives - were true to the teachings of the Gurus; those who perpetrated terror betrayed Sikhism.

REFERENCES

1. *Guru Granth Sahib*, Tilang, M.1, p. 722
2. Dhillon, Gurdarshan Singh, *Truth About Punjab: SGPC White Paper*, SGPC, Amritsar, 1996, p. 155.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-58.
4. The head of the Damdami Taksal before Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.
7. Tully, Mark, and Jacob, Satish, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, Rupa & Co., 1986.
8. Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs - Volume II: 1839-1988*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, pp. 330-31.
9. Taped speeches of Bhindranwale, compiled and distributed by the Damdami Taksal
10. Singh, Khushwant, *op.cit.*, p. 332.
11. *Indian Express*, July 10, 1981
12. Dhillon, Gurdarshan Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
13. *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, Government of India, 1984, p. 164.
14. Singh, Khushwant, *op.cit.*, p. 337.
15. *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation, op. ct.*, p. 164.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
18. Tully & Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
19. Singh, Khushwant, *op. cit.*, p. 404.
20. Judge, Paramjit Singh, Puri, Harish & Sekhon, Jagrup Singh, sociologists from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; cited in *Sunday*, 16-22 February, pp. 11-12.

V

BEYOND PILGRIMAGES, BEYOND CREEDS

Having attained the Infinite
A Sikh reveals not his infinite powers.[1]

The enormity of the betrayal of the Sikh faith by the terrorists, by those who gave them their tacit or explicit support, and by those who transformed the teachings of the Gurus into a creed of hatred and indiscriminate violence, can only be understood in the context of the history and traditions of Sikhism, of principles and ideals, and of the legends that have inspired and guided the *Panth* for centuries.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the history of the Sikhs, at least for nearly four of the five hundred years of the existence of their Faith, has been a history of warfare. But the origin and inspiration of the Faith was a doctrine of peace, and of the brotherhood of all mankind under the unbounded beneficence of the One God.

The first date associated with the emergence of the Sikh Faith is the year 1499, when, at the age of 30, Guru Nanak Dev announced his mission with his declaration rejecting religious formalism and affirming the universal brotherhood of man: "There is no Hindu, there is no Mussalman."

Even today, such an idea contains within it the potential to agitate the orthodox; in the age when it was expressed by Guru Nanak, it was nothing short of revolutionary, and could well invite the pain of death. A contemporary history, the *Tarikh-i-Daoodi* records the case of a Brahmin sage, Budhan, from the village of Kaner near what is now Lucknow, who was put to

death by the Emperor Ibrahim Lodhi on a *fatwa* given by two Kazis; his crime was that he had proclaimed, in the hearing of some Muslims that "the religion of both Hindus and Muslims, if practised with sincerity, was equally acceptable to God."[2] It is a tribute to the sheer spiritual force of Guru Nanak's personality, and the purity of his divine inspiration, that he could preach his doctrine of revolutionary humanism and of absolute and unmediated devotion to the One God, across the length and breadth of the Indian sub-continent and, according to tradition, well beyond, in the very heartland of Islam at Mecca, in the icy wastelands of Tibet and across the sea in Sri Lanka.

Within a hundred years, however, this unsettling faith was already being perceived as a threat to their power by the puritans both of Islam and Hinduism, and as a threat to stability and order by the imperial authority; inevitably a reaction, in this case overwhelmingly violent, began, in its turn producing a gradual but distinctive evolution in the content and character of Sikhism; an evolution that was to culminate in the militarisation of the Faith, and in the institution of the *Khalsa*.

The increasing intellectual ferment and the widening impact of the Gurus on the people, were noted, with conspicuous disapproval, by the Emperor Jehangir himself in his autobiographical *Tuzuk-i-Jehangiri* during the time of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, and the first great martyr of the Faith:

> At Goindwal, on the bank of the river Beas, lived a Hindu, Arjan by name, in the garb of a Pir or Sheikh. Thus, many innocent Hindus and even foolish and ignorant Musalmans he brought into his fold who beat the drum noisily of his self-appointed prophethood. He was called Guru. From all sides, worshippers came to offer their homage to him and put full trust in his word. For three or four generations, they had warmed up this shop. For a long time I had harboured the wish that I should set aside this shop of falsehood or I should bring him into the fold of Islam.[3]

Jehangir gave Guru Arjan Dev a choice between conversion to Islam and death. He spurned the offer of a life that could be bought only with the denial of his faith. He condemned Jehangir's bigotry and argued that his fight was not for the defence of Sikhism alone, but for the freedom of all faiths:

> Hinduism may not be my faith, and I may believe not in the supremacy of the Vedas or the Brahmins, nor in idol-worship or caste or pilgrimages and other rituals, but I would fight for the right of all Hindus to live with honour and practice their faith according to their own light.[4]

The Emperor condemned Guru Arjan Dev to "be put to death with torture". For five days he is believed to have been subjected to the most extreme physical torment; he was seated on red-hot iron plates and burning sand was poured over him; he was dipped in boiling water. In the end he was taken to the river Ravi; as he entered it to bathe his wounds, the impact of the cold water proved too much for his pain-racked body, and he died a martyr for the right of all men to the freedom of belief.

This uncompromising fidelity is an essential element of the Sikh Faith; a deviation or a denial, for profit, for expediency or even out of fear for one's own life is simply and unconditionally inadmissible. Ram Rai, the eldest son, and till then the designated heir of the Seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai, is said to have diluted the contents of a verse of the Guru Granth Sahib which he believed would offend the Emperor Aurangzeb who had asked him to explain the passage. The verse, intended to emphasise that differences in the last rites between Hindus and Muslims were of no importance, and that the fate of all flesh was the same in death, originally stated: "The dust of the Mussalman's body finds its way into the potter's clay; out of it he fashions pots and bricks and fires them, and when they burn, they cry out."[5] Fearing the Emperor's wrath, Ram Rai substituted the word *'beimaan'* [faithless or dishonest] for 'Mussalman'; for this transgression alone, he was disinherited by his father who declared: "The Guruship is like a tigress's milk which can only be contained in a golden cup. Only he who is ready to devote his life thereto is worthy of it. Let Ram Rai not look on my face again."[6] And so it was; never again was the Guru to see his eldest son, and it was the younger, Hari Krishan, who was to be the next Guru.

Ram Rai, at the time of his 'apostasy' was in his early teens; but this was no defence in a creed that prescribed no age for courage and devotion. The Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh's sons - Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh - were even younger when Wazir Khan, the Viceroy of Sirhind, sought to coerce them to

deny their faith. They were told that their father and two elder brothers had been killed and that "Your only hope of escape now is to bow before the Viceroy and accept Islam; and perhaps he will spare your lives." When confronted by Wazir Khan the elder of the two children, Zorawar Singh, is believed to have said: "My father, the holy Guru Gobind Singh is not dead. Who can kill him? He is protected by the immortal God. If any one say that he can tear down heaven, how is that possible? Were a storm to attempt to drive a mountain before it, could it ever do so? ...When we have dedicated our heads to our father who is such a Guru, why should we bow them before a false and deceitful sinner." Wazir Khan then offered rich estates and honours to the children. And once again, the inducement was rejected with contempt. "Hear, O Viceroy, I spurn thy religion and will not part with mine own. It hath become the custom of our family to forfeit life rather than faith. O fool, why seekest thou to tempt us with worldly ambition? We will never be led astray by the false advantages thou offerest. The indignities inflicted by the Turks on our grandfather shall be the fire to consume them, and our deaths the wind to fan the flame. In this way we shall destroy the Turks without forfeiting our holy faith."[7] Aged 7 and 9 respectively, Fateh Singh and Zorawar Singh were bricked up alive in Sirhind in the year 1705.

The Sikh's commitment to his Faith, however, can never be reduced to mere fanaticism or to a communal arrogance that denies others their right to choose their own path of salvation, their own way of life. Indeed, some of the noblest chapters of Sikh history have been written, not on the Sikhs' battles to defend their own faith or their own survival, but on their sacrifices for the protection of others. The circumstances of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur are known to every Sikh, though others may have forgotten this utterly selfless act. During the reign of Aurangzeb, large scale conversions to Islam were being imposed. This policy was implemented with exceptional enthusiasm by the Emperor's viceroy in Kashmir, Sher Afghan Khan, who simply slaughtered those who would not abandon the faith of their forefathers. A group of Kashmiri Pandits met the Guru at Anandpur on the bank of the river Sutlej and told him of the reign of terror unleashed upon them. As the Guru sat in contemplation, distressed by what he heard, his young son,

Gobind Rai, then aged nine, came by and asked him the reason for his preoccupation. The Guru replied, "My son, thou knowest nothing yet. Thou art still a child.... The world is grieved by the oppression of the Turks. No brave man is now to be found. He who is willing to sacrifice his life shall free the earth from [this] burden..." The child then demanded, "Who is more worthy than thou who art at once generous and brave?"[8] Hearing this, the Guru sent the Kashmiris to Delhi to make a representation to the Emperor: "Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru is now seated on the throne of the great Guru Nanak, who is protector of faith and religion. First make him a Musalman and then all the people, including ourselves, will of our own accord adopt the faith."[9] Aurangzeb was delighted, secure in his belief that enticement or force would eventually prevail, and once the Guru was converted, large numbers of Hindus and Sikhs would follow. The Guru then presented himself, with only five of his Sikhs, at Aurangzeb's court. The Emperor's blandishments, his attempts to bribe him, and eventually the most hideous tortures failed to make Guru Tegh Bahadur renounce his faith, and he was put to death on November 11, 1675.

A faith such as this does not stand against any other religion; indeed, it stands above divisions of creed, of sect, or of denomination, protecting all against the absolutism or the tyranny of any one. It was for such protection, that the Sikhs armed themselves; it was for such protection that the Tenth Guru - the son of the martyred Guru Tegh Bahadur - created the *Khalsa*.

On the *Baisakhi* of 1699, the Tenth Guru called a great conclave of his disciples at Anandpur Sahib. To an audience of thousands of his followers, Guru Gobind Singh said on that day, "Let any one of my true Sikhs come forward. My sword wants a head." Most of those present reacted with confusion and fear, but one volunteer offered himself. The Guru took him into a tent and returned with a sword dripping with blood. He emerged to repeat his demand. In this manner, five men offered themselves one after the other for the supreme sacrifice. The Guru then revealed that this was only a test. Five goats had been sacrificed. The selfless disciples who had offered themselves - the *panj piaraṣ* - lived. Three of the 'five beloved' were from the so-called Shudra caste, one a Jat, and one a Kshatriya. They received the Guru's blessings and went on to constitute the nucleus of his new martial

order - the casteless brotherhood of the *Khalsa*. An iron vessel was filled with water; *batasa*, a traditional sweet, was stirred in with a two edged sword; this was *Amrit*, the nectar of immortality; and as they drank of it, they were enjoined to help the poor and the persecuted, to fight the oppressor, to have faith in the One God, and to consider all human beings equal.

For over a century the Sikhs had been hunted down mercilessly by the Mughals; two of the Gurus had been martyred to the faith - the second of these, Guru Tegh Bahadur, being Guru Gobind Singh's father. But the gentle beliefs and traditions the *Panth* had inherited could not prepare its followers to confront the violent assaults of this tyranny. Steel was needed - in their hands and in their souls.

In one symbolic act, the Tenth Guru transformed his 'sparrows into hawks'.

Nearly 20,000 people were received into the *Khalsa* fold on that day. Each *Khalsa* warrior would bear the name Singh - 'lion' - and, having received the baptism of the sword, would believe himself no less than a king. These were the Tenth Guru's saint-soldiers, his knights of honour; their lives were consecrated to the Faith; their mission on earth was to defend *Dharma*.

The saint-soldier had, in fact, been the emerging ideal of Sikhism since the time of Guru Hargobind, the son of the first martyr of the Faith - Guru Arjan Dev. For the ceremonies of succession, Guru Hargobind abandoned his father's rosary and sat on the Guru's *gaddi* with two swords - which he called *piri* and *miri* -, symbolising both his spiritual and his temporal investiture. Before this, the Sikhs had been an entirely peaceful people, dedicated to the pursuit of religious truth as revealed by their Gurus. Guru Arjan Dev's own martyrdom was the supreme demonstration of non-violent resistance to the growing tyranny of the Mughals. The Sixth Guru, however, realised that the growing intolerance of the ruling dynasty would destroy all other faiths unless stronger measures were not adopted to combat their doctrinal oppression. He commanded all his devotees and his deputies to bring him gifts of horses and of arms, instead of their customary offerings. With these he raised a force of five hundred men - the nucleus of a great army that would grow out of it to dare and to die for the Guru's cause. He built a fortress called Lohgarh at Amritsar; and in consonance

with his doctrine of *piri* and *miri*, immediately opposite the Harmandir, the symbol of the spiritual aspirations of the Sikhs, he built a second structure, the Akal Takht, to represent the temporal power of God. In the area between these, great tournaments were held and ballads and odes to martial valour were recited, transforming a people inured to submission and suffering into a congregation steeped in the spirit of chivalry.

The extent and revolutionary nature of this change caused great consternation within the *Panth*, as contemporary accounts record, but the transformation Guru Hargobind brought about was an idea whose time had come. Bhai Gurdas, a faithful follower of the Guru wrote:

> The earlier Gurus sat peacefully in *dharamsalas*; this one roams the land.
> Emperors visited their homes with reverence; this one they cast into jail.
> No rest for his followers, ever active; their restless Master has fear of none.
> The earlier Gurus sat graciously blessing; this one goes hunting with dogs.
> They had servants who harboured no malice; this one encourages scoundrels.

But none of this detracts from the ardour and absolute dedication of the faithful:

> Yet none of these changes conceals the truth; the Sikhs are still drawn as bees to the lotus.
> The truth stands firm, eternal, changless; and pride still lies subdued.[10]

Through his own example, however, he never allowed this spirit to degenerate into a mere cult of martial dominance or of violence. In his personal life he observed the most spartan standards established by his predecessors and carried out the religious duties of his office with the same absolute dedication. The military ideal was, in this form, no more than a medium to fulfil and to protect the mission launched by Guru Nanak.

Precisely the same ideal was articulated by Guru Gobind Singh. In his *Sawwaiyas* he defines he ideal of the *Khalsa*:

> He who repeateth night and day the name of Him
> whose enduring light is unquenchable, who bestoweth not a thought on any but the one God;

Who hath full love and confidence in God,
who putteth not faith even by mistake in fasting,
or worshipping cemeteries, places of cremation, or *jogis'* places of sepulture;
Who only recognizeth the one God and not
pilgrimages, alms, the non-destruction of life, Hindu penances or austerities;
And in whose heart the light of the Perfect One shineth,
He is recognised as a pure member of the *Khalsa*.[11]

Such a man, his consciousness centred solely in God, does not easily resort to violence. Only, the Guru ordained, "When all other alternatives fail, it is lawful to resort to the sword."[12]

When the Gurus led their Sikhs into battle, not only were they certain of the justice of their cause, but, irrespective of the conduct of the enemy, their own actions were defined by a strict code of honour. At Hargobindpur, the combined force of the Mughal Subedar of Jullundar and of Rattan Chand and Karam Chand, whose fathers had suffered defeat and death in battle against the Guru, attacked Guru Hargobind. The Mughal commander sent Guru Hargobind a message, demanding that he abandon the town to avoid a clash; the Guru, though outnumbered by a force twice the size of his own, rejected the offer with contempt, saying that he was being forced into a fight when he desired to acquire neither dominions, nor wealth. He then addressed his own soldiers, defining the warriors' ethic. They were not to fire the first shot; nor were they to turn their back if a fight was forced on them. "Let no one kill a fleeing soldier nor the one who has surrendered. And no woman's honour should be molested, nor women or civilians captured in reprisals or booty... We are fighting for a righteous cause - our right to live with honour and in peace - and not for the sake of self-glory, or rule over others."[13]

It was not in words alone but through his own actions that Guru Hargobind prescribed his code of valour. When Karam Chand was captured, one of the Guru's followers wanted to put him to death. The Guru, however, ordered his release, saying, "It is not manly to strike at a defenceless person." Karam Chand chose to rejoin the battle once again, and was then confronted by the Guru himself. In the ensuing clash, Karam Chand's horse fell dead, and his sword was broken into two. The Guru,

however, refused to take advantage; he dismounted, threw down his own sword, and killed Karam Chand in a contest without arms.

The code was elaborated even further in a bitter engagement between Guru Gobind Singh and one of his harshest enemies, Wazir Khan, at Anandpur. One day one of the Sikhs was arraigned before the Gurus. During and after the battles this man, called Kanhaiya, had been seen giving water and aid not only to the wounded Sikhs but to the enemy as well. The Guru asked Kanhaiya if the charge was true. "Yes, my lord, it is true in a sense", he replied, "I have been giving water to everyone who needed it on the field of battle. But I saw no Mughals or Sikhs there. I saw only the Guru's face in everyone."[14] The Guru blessed him and told his Sikhs that Kanhaiya had understood his mission correctly.

Over the following centuries, the Sikhs rode into battle hundreds of times, careless of death. Even their most bitter enemies have testified, not only to their courage, but equally to their unyielding sense of honour, of right and wrong, of justice. The Afghan, Ahmad Shah Abdali, who invaded India time and again in the 18th century, laying waste large areas of the Punjab and inflicting untold atrocities on the 'hated infidels' was among the most relentless of these enemies. Yet even his chief chronicler, Qazi Nur Mohammad, whose writings are full of abuse against the Sikhs pays them grudging tribute.

> In no case would they slay a coward, nor would they put an obstacle in the way of a fugitive. They do not plunder the wealth and ornaments of a woman, be she a well-to-do lady or a maid-servant. There is no adultery among these dogs, nor are these mischievous people given to thieving... There is no thief at all among these dogs, nor is there any house-breaker born among these miscreants.... They do not make friends with adulterers and house-breakers....[15]

Abdali's armies were notorious for kidnapping and raping women during their campaigns. But the Sikh would not retaliate against even a dishonourable enemy by dishonourable means. When one of Abdali's general, Jahan Khan was defeated at Sialkot, he fled to Peshawar, abandoning many of his relatives and dependants to the mercy of the Sikhs. And they were not found lacking in this quality. "As the Sikhs of old would not lay their

hands on women," writes Ali-ud-Din in his *Ibratnamah*, "they sent them safely to Jammu."[16]

Abdali's forces committed great slaughters among the Sikhs, torturing and executing prisoners without compunction. In 1764, the Sikhs overran Sirhind and Lahore, taking thousands of Afghans prisoner. Not a single captive was killed in vengeance. "The Sikhs," writes Forster, "set a bound to the impulse of revenge, and though the Afghan massacre and persecution must have been deeply imprinted on their minds, they did not, it is said, destroy one prisoner in cold blood."[17]

Their conduct won them great awe and respect. G. Forster, a British traveller who journeyed through Punjab in that age, writes,

> I saw two Sicque horsemen, who had been sent from their country to receive the Siringnaghur tribute which is collected from the revenues of certain custom-houses. From the manner in which these men were treated, or rather treated themselves, I frequently wished for the power of migrating into the body of a Sicque for a few weeks - so well did these cavaliers fare. No sooner had they alighted, then beds were prepared for their repose, and their horses were supplied with green barley pulled out of the field. The Kafilah travellers were contented to lodge on the ground, and expressed their thanks for permission to purchase what they required...."[18]

The conditions under which the Sikhs attained such distinction, such honour, are unparalleled in the history of any other people. The pogroms, the slaughters, the unending persecution they were subjected to, particularly through the 18th Century, would have broken the spirit of most, creating the psyche of a 'victim community', constantly complaining of oppression, showing off their communal wounds to all who were willing to listen, bewailing their fortune, perhaps cursing and, eventually, abandoning their faith. Instead, with each new wound, they roared like the lions whose names they bore. Nothing, simply nothing could break their spirit. Whatever the Sikh may have suffered in those years - and his suffering was immense - he would not whine, or beg, or, indeed, transform his just anger into a vicious cult of vengeance.

The dying embers of the Mughal Empire, and the scourge of successive invasions from Afghanistan inflicted the greatest

horrors on the Sikhs from the dawn of the 18th Century virtually to the time of Ahmad Shah's last excursion in 1769. Almost throughout the period - though there were brief intervals of detente or of an uncertain peace - the *Panth* was marked out for extinction by those who controlled the volatile destinies of that age. At its peak this campaign, for instance under the command of Zakariya Khan, the Governor of Lahore representing, alternatingly, the Mughals and the Afghans, placed a price on the head of every Sikh. A graded scale of rewards was offered. A blanket for cutting off a Sikh's hair, fifty rupees for a Sikh scalp. To plunder Sikh homes was lawful. Giving shelter to Sikhs or withholding information of their movements was a capital offence. The Governor's armies scoured the country, returning with hundreds of Sikh captives. They were brought back to Lahore in chains and publicly beheaded at the *nakhas*, the horse market. Sikh men, women and children were butchered wherever they were found, and an absolute ban existed on their presence in Amritsar. Effective resistance against the overwhelming power of the government at that time was impossible, but the Sikhs invented innumerable, often quixotic, acts of defiance, heaping ridicule upon a power which, at that point of time in history, all other people accepted as absolute.

The names of Bota Singh and Garja Singh are now part of Punjabi legend, and will inevitably provoke a smile even as they inspire great respect. These two Sikhs set out to scorn Zakariya Khan's authority; they made it a practice to slip into Amritsar and to bathe in the holy *sarovar* at the Harmandir, and then to disappear into the forests around Tarn Taran. But this game of hide and seek did not satisfy them for long. So they planted themselves on the Grand Trunk Road, near the Serai Nuruddin, and started demanding a toll tax from all who passed, at one *anna* per cart and one *paisa* per donkey-load. Despite all Zakariya Khan's ordinances and laws against the Sikhs, no one dared to refuse; and no authorities intervened. Quite disgusted with this lack of spirit, Bota Singh wrote a contemptuous letter directly to the Governor, informing him of his decision to impose a private tax on a public road. Incensed, Zakariya Khan sent out a force of a hundred horsemen to arrest the two renegades; in an act as noble as it was apparently futile, Bota Singh and Garja Singh challenged them and died fighting. Their sacrifice became

part of the folklore, of the collective consciousness of the Sikhs, who found in it the inspiration to continue to fight a vast power which they gradually whittled away, in part with their arms, and in part with their laughter. The spirit of Bota Singh still echoes through the Punjab in the derisive doggerel:

Chithi likhai Singh Bota, hath hai sota;
Vich raah khalota; anna laya gadde nu, paisa laya khota;
Aakho bhabhi Khanan nu, yun aakhe Singh Bota.[19]

[Bota Singh wrote a letter;
He stood, staff in hand, in the middle of the road
charging an anna for a cart, a paisa for a donkey;
Call the Khans 'sister-in-law', so said Bota Singh].

Another notable martyrdom was that of Taru Singh who was arrested and brought to Lahore on charges of treason. He was asked to embrace Islam and, on his refusal, it was ordered that his hair be scraped off his scalp. His taunting reply was that the hair, the scalp and the skull have a natural connection, the head of man is linked with life, and he was prepared to yield his breath cheerfully. The Governor's orders were then carried out in detail. His hair was mercilessly scraped off with his scalp, and he was executed.[20]

Such acts of reckless courage became a commonplace, and a contemporary Muslim writer speaks of the innumerable, and fruitless, attempt by Sikhs to resume their pilgrimage to Amritsar:

> Sikh horsemen were seen riding at full gallop towards their favourite shrine of devotion. They were often slain in the attempt and sometimes taken prisoner; but they used on such occasions to seek instead of avoiding, the crown of martyrdom... No instance was known of a Sikh taken on his way to Amritsar consenting to abjure his faith.[21]

Not everything the Sikhs did fell into the category of these quixotic acts of provocation. They were eventually to undermine and gradually destroy the authority of the Mughals and the Afghans throughout the Punjab; and the primary tactic of this achievement was a pattern of guerrilla warfare that they perfected precisely in this period. As the Afghans under Nadir Shah and later his successor Ahmad Shah Abdali swept across the Karkoram to plunder the whole of North India down to the

Mughal capital time and time again, they found little resistance from the 'great powers' of the age. Instead, it was the numerically insignificant and politically powerless Sikhs who made life nigh impossible for them.

Denied a permanent home on pain of death, with their every village and dwelling destroyed by the Mughal armies, the Sikhs had taken to living a nomadic life in the forests on the foothills of the Himalayas. When Nadir Shah's loot-laden army, on its return from Delhi, entered the Punjab, the Sikhs swept out of their hiding places in the hills and continued to plunder his baggage train all the way to the river Indus. Immensely harassed, and deprived of a substantial quantity of his loot, Nadir Shah is said to have asked Zakariya Khan about the identity of the 'brigands' who had dared to attack his army. The Governor replied, "They are *fakirs* who visit their guru's tank twice a year, and after having bathed in it they disappear." "Where do they live," enquired the Shah. "Their homes are their saddles," replied Zakariya Khan. Hearing this, Nadir Shah is said to have prophesied, "Take care, the day is not far distant when these rebels will take possession of your country."[22]

Before that day came, however, the Afghans were to sweep across the Punjab another eight times under the leadership Ahmad Shah Abdali. The Sikhs continued with their campaigns of harassment against the invader. Contemporary accounts describe both the immense plundered wealth the Afghans sought to carry away, the enormous strength of their forces, and also the exploits of the Sikhs who tormented them to the very limits of the Punjab.

> Abdal's own goods were loaded on twenty-eight thousand elephants, camels, mules, bullocks and carts, while two hundred camel-loads of property were taken by Mohammed Shah's widows, who accompanied him and these too belonged to him. Eighty thousand horses and foot followed him, each man carrying away spoils. His cavalry returned on foot, loading their booty on their chargers. For securing transport, the Afghan king left no horse or camel in any one's house, not even a donkey.[23]

A Maratha account describes the Sikh onslaught against this bloated confusion of men and spoils that was marching triumphantly home.

> ...when the front division of Abdali's army under Prince Taimur was transporting the plundered wealth of Delhi to Lahore, Ala Singh, in concert with other Sikh robbers, had barred his path at Sanawar (between Ambala and Patiala) and robbed him of half his treasures, and again attacked and plundered him at Malerkotla. So great had been the success of these brigands that rumour had magnified it into the prince's captivity and even death at their hands.[24]

When Abdali followed, the Sikh bands slew his guards and pillaged his baggage time and time again. He arrived in an evil temper at Lahore, and failing to lay his hands on the elusive Sikhs, he spent his fury on the city of Amritsar. The Harmandir was blown up and the sacred pool filled with the entrails of slaughtered cows. This only made the Sikhs his most implacable enemies; they tormented him every time he returned, and were to eventually block his access at the Jhelum itself when he came for his ninth looting spree in 1769.

Their repeated success against the great armies of the Afghans was a consequence of the transformation that their faith, and the persecutions that it had been subjected to, had imposed upon them. Dispossessed of all that could bind or weaken them, their lives forfeit by their very faith, they learned to live and fight as only a people with the deepest convictions, and nothing to lose, can. An English adventurer, George Thomas gives a vivid sketch of their ways of life and warfare:

> After performing the requisite duties of their religion by ablution and prayer they comb their hair and beard with peculiar care, then, mounting their horses, ride forth towards the enemy, with whom they engage in a continued skirmish advancing and retreating, until man and horse become equally fatigued; then they draw off to some distance from the enemy, and, meeting with cultivated ground, they permit their horses to graze of their own accord, while they parch a little grain for themselves, and after satisfying nature by this frugal repast, if the enemy be near, they renew the skirmishing; should he have retreated, they provide forage for their cattle, and endeavour to procure a meal for themselves... Accustomed from their earliest infancy to a life of hardship and difficulty, the Sikhs despise the comforts of a tent; in lieu of this, each horseman is furnished with two blankets, one for himself, and the other for his horse. These blankets which are placed beneath the saddle, with a gram-bag and heel ropes, comprise in time of war, the baggage of a Sikh. Their cooking utensils are carried on *tuttoos* [ponies]. Considering this mode of life, and the extraordinary rapidity of their

> movements, it cannot be a matter of wonder if they perform marches, which to those who are only accustomed to European warfare, must appear almost incredible.[25]

Abdali was to desecrate and destroy the Harmandir thrice. On every occasion, even as his forces departed, the Sikhs would seize and rebuild it. Even when he sought to make peace, or arrive at some terms of agreement with the other people of the lands he had plundered, he never forgave the Sikhs; he left his own son, the Prince Taimur, to govern the Punjab and to exterminate the Sikhs; they were chased down and killed wherever they could be found. Two great slaughters, remembered by the Sikhs as the *chotta ghalughara* and the *wadda ghalughara* were inflicted on them by Abdali. Up to 40,000 Sikhs died in these two incidents alone, most of them non-combatants - the aged, women and children.

Despite all these atrocities, despite his unlimited cruelty and his immense power, in all the years that the Punjab was part of Ahmad Shah's 'Empire', he could never contain the Sikhs; indeed, his hold over the entire region was never more than tenuous. A contemporary commentator describes the situation:

> The Shah's influence is confined merely to those tracts which are covered by his army. The Zamindars appear in general so well affected towards the Sikhs that it is usual with the latter to repair by night to the villages, here they find every refreshment. By day they retire from them and again fall to harassing the Shah's troops. If the Shah remains between the two rivers Beas and Sutlej, the Sikhs will continue to remain in the neighbourhood, but if he passes over towards Sirhind the Sikhs will then become masters of the parts he leaves behind them.[26]

Every calamity only strengthened the irrepressible spirit of the Sikhs. When the survivors of the *wadda ghalughara* assembled in the evening for their community prayer, one Sikh is said to have risen to say, "No harm done, *Khalsaji*! The *Panth* has emerged purer from the trial: the alloy has been eliminated."[27] Within four months of the great carnage, the Sikhs had inflicted a severe defeat on the Governor of Sirhind. Four months later, they were celebrating Diwali in Harmandir which the Shah had demolished, and were fighting pitched battles with him again, forcing him to withdraw from Amritsar under the cover of darkness.

Out of all this adversity the Sikhs shaped a philosophy of life tinged with a grim humour that taught them to laugh at their misfortunes, at their enemies, and at themselves. Mir Mannu was the instrument of one of the most sustained and cruel campaigns to crush the Sikhs. The Sikhs composed a doggerel about him - and about themselves:

Mir Mannu is our sickle,
We the fodder for him to mow,
The more he reaps, the more we grow.[28]

And all Abdali's depredations were reduced to the couldn't-care-less adage:

Khada peeta Lahe da
Rahnda Ahmad Shahe da.
[What we eat and drink is ours
The rest is Ahmad Shah's]

The braggadocio of the *Nihangs*, even today, reflects the linguistic peculiarities that emerged out of the attitudes of irreverence and audacity forged in those trying times. A single Sikh describes himself as a *fauj* [army], or as *sava lakh* [a hundred and twenty five thousand]; when he goes to urinate, he says he is going 'to see a cheetah off'; when he defecates he announces that he is going to 'conquer the fort of Chittor', or to 'give rations to the Kazi'; coarse food like gram is 'almonds', onions are 'pieces of silver'; a one eyed man earns himself the name *Lakhnetra Singh*, the lion with a hundred eyes; and death is simply an order to march.

All this was soaked into the culture that was the Punjab, into its language, into the collective consciousness of the Sikhs. It was what gave them the power to create a kingdom for themselves; and the strength to bear its loss. It gave them the courage to fight every enemy; and the large heartedness to be just even with those who gave them no justice. Themselves the victims of the worst kind of tyranny, the Sikh *misls* [or independencies within the *Panth*] that established their power after they had stemmed the Afghan tide, and the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, gave all faiths complete freedom and made no distinction among their subjects on grounds of religion

or of caste. In times of distress they helped all without discrimination. In 1783, when a severe famine hit the Punjab, the Sikh chiefs enlarged their *langars* so that all the poor and the needy could be provided for. A report quoted in the Gazetteer of the Montgomery district says of the Sikh *Sardar* of the area: "The famines of 1783 occurred in Budh Singh's time. He is said to have sold all his property, and to have fed the people with grain from the proceeds."[29]

Such generosity, such empathy with the suffering of others, was possible because Sikhism, despite the unbalanced attention its turbulent history of conflict has received, was not, and was never meant to be, a creed of war or violence. The *Khalsa* certainly took up arms; but it did so, not because these were in any way connected to the core of his religious beliefs, but to protect that core.

It would be inappropriate to attempt to define what constitutes that core, or in any way to circumscribe the message of the Gurus within what would be no more than a partial and imprecise interpretation. There are certain features of the essential teachings of Sikhism, however, which concern us here, and which are beyond the realm of controversy or of exegetic dispute. We shall highlight only some of these.

The Sikh Gurus offered a conception of God as Truth, without form or aspects - *nirguna* - and beyond human comprehension. Yet He is given to man as a presence, revealed through creation and through His infinite grace. Whatever we do, our awareness of this presence must be constant; and this awareness must inform and be reflected in all our actions. Religion is not a turning away from the world, not a denial or a renunciation, but a life in God's presence - realised through absolute and constant devotion, and through the repetition of the many names of the One God. Most of the religions of the world deny in absolute terms the possibility of a valid vision other than their own; some admit to a formal concession or to a condescending 'tolerance'. But the Sikh Gurus recognised the potential of other living faiths, though they resolutely rejected their failings; this noble quality of wisdom and understanding, of the acceptance of the truth and of whatever was valuable in other religions is consecrated in the *Adi Granth*; side by side with the word of the Gurus, one finds the wisdom of Hindu and of Muslim saints. In this, the Guru Granth Sahib

is unique in all the scriptures of the world. And its message is for all men without distinction or prejudice, for all men are in the protection of the One God. There is no space in this conception for distinctions between man and man, for prejudices of caste, colour or creed; nor any space for superstition, for bigotry or for ritual.

> All men belong to You.
> You are the support,
> You stretch your protective hand.[30]

And the essence of religious conduct is defined in terms, again, of the equality of man, and of the realisation of God within the normal duties and activities of the world.

> Religion consisteth not in mere words;
> He who looketh on all men as equal is religious.
> Religion consisteth not in wandering to tombs or places of cremation, or sitting in attitudes of contemplation;
> Religion consisteth not in wandering in foreign countries or in bathing at places of pilgrimages.
> Abide pure amid the impurities of the world; thus shalt thou find the way of religion.[31]

There is, thus, in Sikhism, no denial of the diverse and often conflicting variety of life. Indeed, there is an explicit rejection of all asceticism, of the ritual piety, and of all the ponderous, sombre and oppressive features associated with most religions where the wrath and the vengeance, and not the grace, of God is the axis of human destiny. Rejecting the Brahmanical credo of asceticism and the severities of Islamic puritanism, Guru Nanak wrote,

> One sings religious songs, though he possesses no divine knowledge,
> A hungry Mullah turns his home into a mosque,
> An idler has his ears pierced - and so becomes a yogi!
> Another embraces the life of a mendicant to shake off his caste. [32]

So again, austerities are ridiculed by Guru Gobind Singh:

> Swine eat filth, elephants and donkeys bespatter themselves with dust.
> Jackals live at places of cremation;

> Owls live in tombs, deer wander alone in the forest, trees ever die in silence;
> The man who restraineth his seed should only have the credit of the hermaphrodite.[33]

Sikhism is a vigorous, earthy, dynamic faith; a faith that gives man concrete guidance by which he may live in the real world; its truths are tangible, its methods eminently practicable. An energetic and deeply religious people have translated its essence into the spirit of laughter that permeates the culture, the music, the dances, and the way of life of the Punjabi, the colours and flamboyance of the clothes they wear, their indefatigability, their unyielding courage.

The Sikhs may, at times, have been somewhat lax in their practice of the tenets of their faith. Even in war, despite their glorious traditions, there have been horrifying deviations from their codes of chivalry. Individual Sikhs and Sikh armies have certainly, on occasion, been guilty of cruelty, even of barbarity. No Sikh, however, would feel even the slightest tinge of pride in a victory, however great, that was tainted by the slaughter of innocents, by savagery, even by low cunning; and whatever the oppression they may have been subjected to themselves, no Sikh will offer a justification for these. The collective consciousness of the community, their sense of identity, can never be defined in terms of anything but the noble traditions reflected in their scriptures, and in the principles, the examples and legends they themselves value the most.

Those who have been guilty of betraying these traditions, of bringing shame upon the *Panth* by their actions, have sometimes acted in the name of the *Panth*, and in the purported defence of the *Panth*. Their claims, irrespective of the intensity of their subjective convictions, and irrespective of their own personal suffering or sacrifice, must simply be rejected; for they cannot be reconciled with the teachings of the Gurus.

The terrorists almost destroyed not only the spirit of Punjab, but the essence of Sikhism itself. This essence was threatened, not only by their acts of indiscriminate and unprovoked violence, by their cruel debauchery, but equally, more insidiously and constantly, by all those who still seek to impose a hideous conformity in the name of the Faith; by those who seek to

transform the message of the Gurus into the very mirror image of the religious absolutisms, the ideological tyranny and bigotry that it set out to free mankind from; by those who have compromised the vitality and dynamism of the *Panth* through a tragic adoption of the ghetto mentality, the 'minority community' syndrome, the eternally whining, complaining tones of a defeated people in a time and an age when the Sikhs have more achievements to their credit than they have had at any other time in history.

Sikhism is a large hearted religion; it is a religion, equally, for the large hearted. Those who seek to mangle it in order to fit it into their own constricted vision, their own withered, hate filled hearts, speak, not for Sikhism, but for an unnamed and malevolent creed to which Sikhism has ever been, and will ever be, an unrelenting enemy.

REFERENCES

1. Bhai Gurdas, Var 12, p. 15. Cited in, Trilochan Singh, *Guru Nanak: A Biography*, Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Delhi, 1969, p. 156.
2. *Tarikh-i-Daoodi*, Trans. Sir Henry Elliot, Volume 4, pp. 464-65, cited in Dr Gopal Singh, *History of the Sikh People*, World Book Centre, 1979, p. 45.
3. Cited in Dr Gopal Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
4. *Ibid*, p. 258.
5. *Guru Granth Sahib, Asa Di War*, M1, p. 466.
6. Macauliffe, Max Authur, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, Volume IV, p. 310.
7. *Ibid.*, Volume V, pp. 195-97.
8. *Ibid.*, Volume IV, pp. 371-72
9. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
10. *Varan Bhai Gurdas* 26: 24, cited in W.H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, pp. 23-24.
11. Macauliffe, *op. cit.*, Volume V, pp. 314-315
12. *Zafarnama*, cited in J S Grewal & S S Bal, *Guru Gobind Singh: A Biographical Study*, Department of History, Panjab University, 1967, p. 118.
13. *Ibid*, p. 226.
14. Singh, Harbans, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 40.
15. Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs, Volume 1*: 1469-1839, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 160.
16. Cited in Harbans Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

17. Forster, G., *A Journey from Bengal to England through North India, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Persia into Russia*, 1783-1784, Volume I, London, 1798, p. 279. Cited in Khushwant Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 157.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 326. Cited in Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p. 177.
19. Cited in Dr Gopal Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 376.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 376-77.
21. Malcolm, Sir John, *A Sketch of the Sikhs*, London, 1812, p. 88, quoting a contemporary Muslim writer.
22. Singh, Khushwant, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126.
23. *Tarikh-i-Alamgir Sani*, cited in Khushwant Singh, Ibid., p. 144.
24. Gupta, H.R., *History of the Sikhs*, cited in Khushwant Singh, *Ibid.*, p. 144.
25. Francklin, William, *Military Memoirs of George Thomas*, Hurkaru Press, Calcutta, 1803, p. 71-73.
26. Singh, Harbans, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
27. Singh, Khushwant, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
29. Singh, Harbans, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
30. *Guru Granth Sahib*, Asa 49, M5, p. 383
31. *Ibid.*, Suhi, M1, p. 730.
32. *Ibid.*, Sarang, M1, p. 1245
33. Loehlin, C.H., *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa Brotherhood*, Lucknow Publishing House, 1971, p. 24.

VI

LOOKING FOR A NEW STAR

Naam yun pasti mein balatar hamara ho gaya
Jis tarah paani kuen ki teh mein taara ho gaya[1]

The ceremonies that mark the turn of a century are a momentous rite of passage for all people; for the Sikhs, however, they have a unique significance. Guru Nanak announced his divine mission in the year 1499. In 1599, Guru Arjan Dev commenced the first compilation of the *Adi Granth*. A hundred years later, in 1699, the *Khalsa* was constituted by the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

In the year 1999, Sikhs all over the world will celebrate the completion of half a millennium of their Faith, and three centuries of the *Khalsa*. Throughout that year, prayers and devotional hymns will echo everywhere; great processions will march through the streets carrying the Guru Granth Sahib on richly decorated *palkis*, in a ceremonial reaffirmation of the tenets of Sikhism and of the piety of the Sikh people.

But if this is all that happens, it would be no more than an hollow ritual.

There is an abiding crisis in the *Panth*; and if it is not addressed, Sikhism will go the way of all faiths. Its institutions will grow, eventually to extinguish its inspiration.

Every great religion of the world has, as its fountainhead, a remarkable mystical insight, a revolutionary spiritual intuition which is then expressed in a mission to reinterpret and re-evaluate the events of history, and to recast the structure of society, the relationships of man and man, in the context of a new and enlightened perspective. It is this uncorrupted spiritual power alone that is the essence of all religions. It is this power that inspires

millions to acts of great sacrifice, setting them on the path of selfless service, and creating in them the hope and possibility of spiritual salvation. It is this power, again, that welds large masses of human beings into religious communities. Out of this fusion of energies, great wealth, great institutions, an immense infrastructure, and a new and great power, comes into being.

Unfortunately, the fact that power originally emanates from a religious or spiritual impulse, or from the institutions associated with religion, is not, and can never be, an adequate guarantee against its subordination for egotistical or evil purposes. There is, thus, in the history of every religion, a continuous struggle to harness the immense energies of faith for conflicting ends - both good and evil. In this process, every religion acquires a corrosive crust of the inessential, often of elements inimical to its basic character. From time to time, this cancerous residue of the exigencies of politics and history has to be scraped away in order to restore the essential radiance of the faith.

All over the world today, we can see the manifestations of enormous religious ferment. Materialism and modernity, as ideologies, have tapped immense energies, imbuing entire societies and cultures with a dynamism that is attained only rarely in history. They have, however, failed to fulfil critical needs in the life of man. Religious fundamentalism has been the predominant and confused reaction to this failure.

But fundamentalism itself, far from being a solution, is nothing more than an admission, often violent and destructive, of failure. It is inspired, not by a positive conception of the religious enterprise, but by frustration at the inability to cope with an unfamiliar and volatile world in which the sheltered certainty of stagnant societies - and the security of its traditional power brokers - is threatened. That is why the symbols and images associated with fundamentalism across the world are representations of violence and oppression: social and moral codes imposed through cruel and public punishment: flogging, maiming, execution; violence against the designated enemies of the faith as defined by xenophobic fanatics; and terrorism, with an underlying thesis that the conflict of ideologies can, perhaps must, only be resolved through an eventual clash of cultures, a great inter-continental war in which one, and only one, absolute truth - and its adherents alone - will survive.

Nothing in the world could be further divorced from the essence of any religion. The one thing every religious prophet has realised, without exception, is that there are no 'Final Solutions' to the suffering and the strife of the human condition. The slaughter of the populations of entire continents, and the imposition of a single religious form and ideology [itself an impossibility, if only because of the essential anarchy of the human mind] on all surviving mankind is hardly a route to spiritual emancipation; nor is it in consonance with the teachings of the prophets of any faith.

The spiritual life is a constant struggle for conquest, not of an external enemy, but of the bloated and vainglorious self. This is the greatest and most difficult adventure any human being can embark upon; and it requires a courage and a discipline that is extremely rare. It is easier to pursue political power by all available means, and to impose norms and standards on others through the terror of the whip and the gun.

The *Panthic* codes and their imposition through terror, the creed of hatred and violence that dominated Punjab for ten long years is just such an escape from the challenge of the true religious enterprise. What the terrorists did was not only wrong, it was unconditionally evil. The movement for 'Khalistan' - a State to be ruled according to the 'values of Sikhism' [though it was sought to be created out of the murder of everything the Faith stood for] was spearheaded by those whose interests were inexorably connected with the institutions and infrastructure, the wealth and power, that had grown out of an association with the religion and the community. They fed on the commerce of faith; it was its capital, its infrastructure and its power that they sought to command, not its essence.

This is a growing realisation everywhere among those who have the deepest interests of religion at heart. Even in a nation under the sway of a fundamentalist regime, this is a message that is finding a constantly increasing and receptive audience. In Iran a prominent dissident, Abdolkarim Soroush challenges the tyranny of the Islamic clergy on precisely these grounds. "Islam, or any religion," he states, "will become totalitarian if it is made into an ideology, because that is the nature of ideologies... The clergy earns its living from religion. If your interests are secured through religion, then you will defend your interests first and religion will become secondary."[2]

This is the key to understand why religious institutions and those who control them have seldom pursued or promoted truly radical spiritual ends. The conservative impulse, the outward form and power of religion, communal conformity, and a numerical expansion of those who submit to their authority in the name of faith are the features essential to the expansion of their influence; these, consequently, constitute the core of their concerns, and of any 'reforms' that emanate from the 'church' - the institutions of organised religion.

"It is curious," Macauliffe remarks, "that the greatest religious reforms have been effected by the laity. The clergy, apart from their vested interests, are too wedded to ancient systems, and dare not impugn their utility or authority."[3]

Guru Nanak, Gautam Buddha, Mahavira Jina, the Prophet Mohammed, Jesus Christ - of all the founders of the great religions that dominate the world today, none was attached to the established institutions of religion; none was a member of the orthodoxy or the religious leadership of the prevailing faith that they eventually sought to reform, challenge or supplant. Men such as these do not set out to create new religions or establish new churches. Their mission is fundamentally inimical to the dogma and ritual that inevitably stifle the mystical faculty in any formal religious order. They challenge orthodoxies and force people to think for themselves. They address their message to individuals, emphasising meditative practices, a profound effort to understand the human condition, an intense subjective striving to encounter the divine, and to express its will through their own lives.

The leaders of 'churches', of organised religious communities, prefer the unthinking and submissive herd. Their interests are best served by larger numbers, visible rituals and symbols that create distinctions between the followers of their order and those of other sects and creeds. This is true of the religious establishment even in a faith, such as Sikhism, which sought to destroy all distinctions of creed and of sect, creating an unvarying criterion to judge all men: their deeds and their devotion to God.

This indeed, is the reason why religious orthodoxies have often been the most unyielding opponents of popular education and of progress that would directly empower people. The educated do not make a good 'flock'; they are not good milch animals; and they do not lend themselves easily to being fleeced.

In this regard, the impact of democracy on religions, certainly in the euphemistically labelled 'developing countries', has been altogether negative. The need for herds, rather than a thinking congregation, has become even more acute among the 'leaders' of third world democracies than it had ever been before. It is amazing that even in the imperial ages, even under harshly repressive and orthodox regimes, the religious reformer and rebel makes his presence felt - often with disastrous results for himself - with far greater frequency than has been the case in democratic India. All religions have been transformed into 'holy cows' today, and religious discourse is severely circumscribed by the fear of 'offending the sentiments' of highly volatile masses, who have no interest or understanding of such discourse, but who will run riot and kill with absolute abandon on the command of manipulative and highly politicised leaders.

These developments and the attitudes that they engender lie completely outside the sphere of true religion - for all true religion encourages its adherents to greater learning and conscious discrimination, insisting that they discover the truth for themselves rather than have it rationed out by clerical intermediaries - and are in fact an oppressive and unscrupulous subordination of the religious enterprise to politics.

In the age when Guru Nanak enunciated the principles of the Sikh faith, Europe was also experiencing an era of religious ferment. The Church had created a vast and despotic secular empire out of its religious authority; Christ's message of peace, humility and brotherhood had been transformed into a doctrine of political strategy and conquest; and the priesthood sold 'dispensations' to the rich to free them of the burden of their sins. Gradually a powerful voice rose against this subversion of the true teachings of Jesus Christ, eventually to develop into the Protestant movement which created a schism in Christianity. In Germany, at the Diet of Spires in April 1529, a small group within the assembly of religious and secular leaders issued a formal 'Protestation' which stated, "in matters which concern God's honour and salvation and the eternal life of our souls, everyone must stand and give account before God himself."[4]

This is an essential principle of the religious enterprise in any faith. The priests and religious leaders, the institutions, the shrines, all these are only instruments to mobilise or to harness

the energies of individuals towards spiritual emancipation; and they are always secondary to the actual undertaking, which is the individual's quest for, and his accountability to, God.

It would be futile to wait for another Guru Nanak, or some messiah to appear today to show us the way, to purify the religions of the world. Such an expectation is a denial of individual responsibility, a misunderstanding of religion, and in Sikhism, heretical. The Tenth Guru explicitly vested all responsibility for the defence of the Faith in the *Panth*, the community itself; and this meant not just a defence against the threat of physical extermination by hostile armies, or the defence of the shrines of Sikhism against attack and desecration; it implies, possibly more importantly in the current context, a defence against the insidious distortion of the Faith from within.

No Sikh institution or organisation with pretensions to represent the *Panth* has shown itself to be equal to this task today. It is each Sikh in his or her individual capacity who will have to undertake this onerous responsibility; but the path, the direction and the method are quite clearly defined. In his final testament to his followers, shortly before his death, Guru Gobind Singh had said, "Let him who desireth to behold me, behold the Guru Granth. Obey the Granth Sahib. It is the visible body of the Guru. And let him who desireth to meet me diligently search its hymns."[5]

II

There are many obstacles, however, that must be removed before this search commences. The Sikh people have been subjected to what, for lack of a better expression, can be spoken of as an extended process of 'pygmification' - the progressive shrivelling up of attitudes, perspectives and horizons which has made them less than what they were, and infinitely less than what they could have been. The fall of the Sikhs has been all the more distressing because centuries of continuous struggle had transmuted them into a stronger people. That strength was visible in their adaptation to the circumstances created by Partition. It was visible in the Green Revolution, in the great economic success that is Punjab, in their vigour, their humour, the sheer intensity of the lives they lived. It was equally visible

as they travelled all over the world and made a success of their lives - on the material scale - in the harshest and most hostile environment.

And yet, wherever the Sikhs have gone in the last half century, they have carried the pettiness of the Gurudwara politics of the Punjab countryside with them; their tunnel vision has made their faith an adjunct to their cultural identity - and this identity has been dominated by caste, by narrow parochialism, and by a corrosive bitterness that they have nursed and cherished, like a prized possession, in the depths of their hearts. They peopled a world of their own invention, so full of conspiracies and betrayals that these became part of their own lives. A philosophy of failure and persecution was built around a melange of grievances - a few that were real, no doubt, though essentially secular, but most that were demonstrably imaginary.

So, we discover that a proud, a noble, and immensely courageous people - or at least a substantial number among them, including all their most prominent leaders - began to perceive and project themselves as habitual victims; to wear their 'wounded' hearts constantly on their sleeves.

In the eighteenth century, when the Sikhs were numerically a negligible minority in Punjab, they dominated its politics, creating a powerful, just and secular empire under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. But today, with a majority of more than 60 per cent in the state, they have taken on the injured, whining tone of an 'oppressed minority' that goes against the grain of everything that Sikhism has ever propounded.

I have travelled across India, and every town and every city that I visited, however small or however remote, had a Sikh population and at least one Gurudwara with its *nishan sahib* flying proud and high. No Sikh in India can honestly claim that his community is prevented from worshipping according to its beliefs, or from proselytising its faith. Nowhere in India, before 1984, had I heard of Sikhs being victims of a communal carnage. In employment, if anything, there was a bias in their favour; their reputation for hard work and enterprise was valued everywhere they went. Their representation in the services was, and remains, disproportionately high relative to their population. Their collective standard of living is uniformly better than any other community in the country. But above all these is the respect

and the honour the Sikh has always been given in India. The *Sardarji* jokes notwithstanding - and most of these were put out by the Sikhs themselves - in a public place or in a crisis most Indians will prefer to approach a Sikh for information, for assistance, or for services offered; in their eyes, the Sikh turban still represents strength, honesty and fairness.

And yet, in a nation where the very idea of communal majorities is being reduced to a mockery from day to day, the image of a 'persecuted minority' has been irresistible to a growing number of Sikhs. In a nation where the Brahmins are themselves rapidly acquiring the status of a victim community, the Sikhs still seek to discover a 'Brahmanical conspiracy' in every aspect of their lives.

It was against this mindset that the twin tragedies of 1984 - Operation Blue Star and the anti-Sikh riots - came as a virtual fulfilment and affirmation of a worldview that had been nurtured for close to four decades. Many Sikhs, even among those who did not share this worldview, seized upon these events as the defining circumstance of their lives.

Let it be clear that nothing can ever justify these two acts of utter barbarism. The nation and successive governments have sought the Sikh people's forgiveness for Blue Star, but the principal perpetrators of the '84 riots still walk free. The entire Indian people, and the State will have to clear this hideous stain; and this can only be done by punishing the guilty without fear or favour. But while it is incumbent on the Government and its agencies to ensure that justice is done, it is the Sikh community and the families of the victims of this carnage who will have to discover in themselves the largeness of heart and the endurance of faith to give their lives a direction beyond this tragedy.

The malevolent shadow of Blue Star, and of the '84 riots, cannot be permitted to darken the Sikh imagination in perpetuity, to cripple the Sikh people, to warp their perspectives for all time to come. Many horrors were inflicted on the people of Punjab during the decade of terror - and these were certainly among the greatest - but those who have travelled through Punjab, through its countryside and its villages, in the past few years will discover that the common people - of all faiths - have moved on. They have come to terms with their losses, rebuilt their lives,

and recovered, once more, the irrepressible spirit associated with their culture and their faith.

Unfortunately, the very people who were responsible for the genesis of the tragedy in Punjab still have a vested interest in keeping these wounds alive; in constantly reviving a partial and selective memory of suffering; in reinforcing the image of the Sikhs as a victim community to provide a self-perpetuating justification for retaliatory violence; in recreating the ghetto mentality that will allow these leaders to consolidate their power over the *Panth*, and the state.

If the Sikh people are to free themselves of the self-inflicted slavery of their minds, if they are to reverse the processes of their 'pygmification', if they are to restore themselves to their rightful stature as inspired leaders and complete human beings - Guru Nanak's conception of *mard-e-kamil* - they will have to reject, not only this doctrine of failure and infirmity, but equally the leadership and the institutions that propagate and perpetuate it.

The Sikhs are a vibrant and ambitious community, eager to carve out a place of honour for themselves among the people of the world; and Sikhism is a dynamic, forward-looking faith that can help them take the lead in strengthening India by bringing castes and communities together, by emphasising the essential unity between all people, and by transcending even the boundaries of contemporary nation states to bring all of humanity into the ambit of the 'service' enjoined by the Gurus. Their faith is not merely a doctrine for a small community confined to a limited geographical area in the Indian sub-continent, or to those who trace their roots to it. It is a universal doctrine which can benefit all mankind. Their leadership has conveniently forgotten or ignored it, but the Sikh people must now recall and fulfil Guru Arjan Dev's injunction to reject the prejudices that yoke their Faith to their own culture and community, and to translate the Guru Granth Sahib into all the languages of the world, so that "it might spread over the whole world as oil spreads over water."[6]

And lest their loyalties still remain bound to a narrow cultural identity, lest they feel that in doing this they would offend against the Faith, let each of them return to its source, the Guru Granth Sahib, and they will discover that the entire spirit of Gurudwara

politics militates against the teachings of the Gurus. People in progressive religious societies around the world are increasingly questioning the authority of priesthoods in order to embark on a truly spiritual quest; and the present Sikh leadership is doing everything in its power to create a priesthood in a faith that explicitly prohibits such an institution.

The world is rapidly moving into a millennium where the constant acceleration of the pace of change will simply leave behind those who fail to cope with it, those who merely wait for history to apply the necessary correctives to their inflexible mindset. The Gurus showed us a path, a path from which the Sikhs have regrettably strayed. A path of progression on which their success will be measured, not only in material terms or as a physical transformation, but in the qualitative change of perception that will make every Sikh everywhere in the world a symbol of strength, of freedom, of trust, of justice, of courage, of enterprise, of an open, constantly seeking mind, of independence, and of horizons that extend into the infinite.

REFERENCES

1. As the water resembles a star in the depths of a narrow well,
   Even so, in our darkest hour, was the refulgence of our glory.
   - Sheikh Mohammad Ibrahim *Zauq, Kulliyat.*
2. "Iranian thinker gets both bouquets and brickbats,' *The Times of India,* July 15, 1997, p. 14.
3. Macauliffe, Max Arthur, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors, Vol. 1,* S. Chand & Co., 1963, p. liv.
4. "Protestantism", *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia,* Compton's New Media, 1996.
5. Macauliffe, *op. cit.,* Vol. V, p. 244.
6. *Suraj Parkash, Ras III,* cited in Macauliffe, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. viii.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bhullar, Narindar Singh, *White Paper on Sikh Issues*, Pub: Narinder Singh Bhullar, 1983.

Cole, W Owen, *The Guru in Sikhism*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982.

Cunningham, J D, *History of the Sikhs: From the Origin of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej*, John Murray, 1849.

Dang, Satyapal, *Genesis of Terrorism: An Analytical Study of Punjab Terrorists*, Patriot Publishers, 1988.

Dhillon, Gurdarshan Singh, *Truth About Punjab: SGPC White Paper, Amritsar:* SGPC, 1996

Forster, G., *A Journey from Bengal to England through North India, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Persia into Russia, 1783-1784*, London, 1798.

Fox, Richard G, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*, Archives Publishers, 1987

Francklin, William, *Military Memoirs of George Thomas*, Hurkaru Press, Calcutta, 1803.

Grewal, J S, *The Sikhs of Punjab*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Grewal, J S, & Bal, S S, *Guru Gobind Singh: A Biographical Study*, Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1967

Jaijee, Inderjit Singh, *Politics of Genocide: Punjab 1984-1994*, Baba Publishers, 1995.

Joshi, Chand, *Bhindranwale: Myth and Reality*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1984.

Kaur, Amarjit, et. al., *The Punjab Story*, Roli Books International, 1984.

Loehlin, C.H., *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa Brotherhood*, Lucknow Publishing House, 1971.

Macauliffe, M A, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, S Chand & Co, 1963. Volumes I-IV.

Malcolm, Sir John, *A Sketch of the Sikhs*, London, 1812

McLeod, W H, *Who is a Sikh*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992.

———— , *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1976.

———— , *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

Naipaul, V S, India: *A Million Mutinies Now*, Rupa & Co., 1990.

Nayar, Kuldip & Singh, Khushwant, *Tragedy of Punjab: Operation Bluestar & After*, Vision Books, 1984.

O'Connell, J T, et.al., [Ed.], *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, Manohar Publications, 1988.

Press Council of India, *Crisis and Credibility*, Lancer International, 1991.

Singh, Dr Gopal, *A History of the Sikh People: 1469 - 1988*, World Book Centre, 1989.

Singh, Harbans, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, Asia Publishing House, 1964.

Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs, Volumes I & II*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

Singh, Mohinder, *The Akali Movement*, Delhi, Macmillan, 1978.

Singh, Sangat, *The Sikhs in History*, Uncommon Books, 1995.

Singh, Trilochan, *Guru Nanak: A Biography*, Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Delhi, 1969.

———— , *et. al., The Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960.

Tully, Mark & Jacob, Satish, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, Rupa & Co., 1986.

Vidhan arthat Neeyam ate Upneeyam, Amritsar: Shiromani Akali Dal..

Wallace, Paul & Chopra, Surendra [Ed.], *Political Dynamics and Crisis in Punjab*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1988.

White Paper on the Punjab Agitation, Government of India, New Delhi, 1984.