

# **“The Sword of Sikhism”: A study of Sikh militancy**

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## **PART II**

This article is being reprinted, in two parts, with permission, from the author’s book “Terror in the Mind of God”, (Oxford University Press, Los Angeles, etc.) We gratefully acknowledge our debt to Prof. Juergensmeyer for permitting us to share his analytical thoughts with readers of The Sikh Review. Our purpose is, firstly, to put into a perspective the parameters of the Sikh struggle for autonomy in the wake of (a) the annexation of the Punjab by the British in 1849 and the consequential decline suffered by Sikhism, (b) the breach of faith by Indian leaders during and after the disastrous partition of the Punjab in 1947, and (c) the unguided and ill-advised militancy that preceded and followed the assault on Amritsar in 1984 and the brutal state repression that decimated a whole generation of Sikh youth, even as a scared leadership scrambled to a cocooned safety. The reproduction of this chapter from the celebrated author’s book does not signify either our approval or disapproval of his views and inferences. But in so far as his book has similar and more detailed analysis of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and other ferments of political violence sweeping the globe, we have reason to believe that many lessons can be learned by the Sikh intelligentsia as well as the leadership from the grim narrative that uncovers the futility of violence to promote religious beliefs, but also the failure of governments to deal with their political fallout in a just & human manner. - Ed. SR

### **Sikh and Hindu justifications for violence**

In considering the terrible toll of fifteen years of terror, one wonders what could possibly have justified all the bloodshed and destruction. The costs of the violence were palpable, especially in rural Punjab, where the social and psychological scars were slow to heal.

In 1981 I spent a day in Sultanwind village near Amritsar with Prof. Harish Puri and graduate students from the political science department of Guru Nanak Dev University. Sultanwind had been the headquarters of one faction of the Khalistan Commando Force during the stormy days of the movement, and the tragedy of the militant movement was still very much a part of the village’s life. We talked with one of the student’s relatives, a leading member of the village, Harjap Singh. The village leader seemed to have every reason to be satisfied: he had just been elected to the council of the Amritsar Municipal Corporation; he was a member of the leading subcaste in that area - the Chauhans; and he was the head of a large family farming complex, which he directed in person and through his cell phone. His family had a long history of leadership in the Sikh community, and pictures on the wall indicated an association with the Punjab’s great post-independence leader, Pratap Singh Kairon, and with the more recent Akali leader, Simranjit Singh Mann.

Despite Harjap Singh’s success, an aura of sadness surrounded his household, symbolized by the living room wall that had been devoted to a shrine for his younger brother, Kanwarjit Singh, whom the family regarded as a martyr for the Sikh community. Born in 1966, Kanwarjit grew up with two passions: Sikhism and sports, especially field hockey. In 1982, when he was only sixteen years old, he went to hear Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and was seduced by the romance and excitement

of the militant Sikh movement. In 1985, even though several families had extended offers of marriage to the handsome young athlete, Kanwarjit joined the Khalistan Commando Force. Two years later, at age twenty-one, he became commander-in-chief of the whole organization.

Those were busy times, the family recalls, as their humble village became the center of a very active and important organization. They were proud of Kanwarjit's leadership role. The other young men in the village were either under his command or intimidated into silence. There were rumors of "actions" undertaken by Kanwarjit's forces that led to the deaths of government and police officials and political leaders in surrounding areas, but members of Sultanwind village, even the police, were protected from the violence as long as Kanwarjit was alive.

As with most militant Sikh leaders, however, his leadership and his life did not last long. In 1989 Kanwarjit and two of his colleagues were cornered by police in a house near the city of Jalandhar. The police apparently did not realize the importance of their catch and began to take the group by car to the police station for questioning. One of Kanwarjit's comrades jumped out of the vehicle and ran away, but Kanwarjit had a metal plate in his leg as the result of an earlier injury from a police attack and was unable to run. Instead, he swallowed one of the cyanide capsules he always carried with him for such a situation. Like many militant leaders, he preferred to kill himself rather than to be tortured to death, or forced to reveal information about the movement. Kanwarjit Singh was twenty-three at the time. A few months later most of the other young men in the village were dead as well. An entire generation of boys had been taken from the community.

Yet they were remembered. In addition to the shrine in the family home, Kanwarjit's elderly mother had created another, more intimate shrine in her bedroom, where Kanwarjit was born. Harjap and his sons knew all the stories about the great days of the movement. Harjap and the village elders erected a memorial in the center of the village to "all of the lost sons" who died in police encounters during the years of terror. They wanted to name a new school in memory of the "lost sons", but there was a dispute with the government over the appropriateness of locating a government facility in a building dedicated to those who were, after all, 'enemies of the state'. A library adjacent to the school served as the memorial building instead.

Harjap did not want to talk with me about Kanwarjit's opposition to the government, but he waxed eloquent about his brother's virtues as a political leader. "Kanwarjit never used his power to get money," Harjap told me proudly, adding that he was only "fighting for principles." Other militant groups, such as Bhindranwale Tigers, Harjap said, attracted thugs who would use their weapons to get money, drugs, and women. Kanwarjit's group, the Khalistan Commando Force, would sometimes "eliminate" these bad elements in order to keep the whole movement respectable. They would also eliminate members of their own group, Harjap said, if they found them abusing their power.

But what was the power for? What was the purpose of the movement?

At first he seemed somewhat perplexed about how to answer the question. "To support the Sikh community," he finally responded.

Was it worth it? Were the deaths of his brother and all of the others in vain?

Harjap Singh answered indirectly. "In Sikh history," he said, "young men go away in battle and do not return. They are our martyrs."

This simple justification for young men's fighting in battle - killing or being killed in sacred struggle - runs deep in India's religious traditions. Long before Sikhism developed as a separate religious tradition in the sixteenth century, in India's ancient Vedic times, warriors called on the gods to participate in their struggles and to provide a divine leverage for victory. The potency of the gods was graphically depicted in mythic stories filled with violent encounters and bloody acts of vengeance.

As India's religious traditions developed, images of warfare persisted. The great epics - the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* - contained grand accounts of wars and battles, and the enduring sermon of Lord Krishna, the *Bhagavad Gita*, was recorded in the *Mahabharata* as being delivered on a battlefield. The Gita gave several reasons why killing in warfare is permissible, among them the argument that the soul can never really be killed: "he who slays, slays not; he who is slain, is not slain." Another reason is based on *dharma* (moral obligation); the duties of a member of the *kshatriya* (warrior) caste by definition involve killing, so violence is justified in the very maintenance of social order. Mohandas Gandhi, like many other modern Hindus who revere the Gita, regarded its warfare as allegorical, representing the conflict between good and evil. Gandhi, who ordinarily subscribed to non-violence, allowed for an exception to this general rule when a small strategic act of violence would defuse a greater violence.

Most exponents of Hindu nationalism have differed with Gandhi on the religious necessity for non-violence, however. The Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Patriotism Organization) began training paramilitary cadres for the defense of Hindu culture in the 1920s. A former member of the RSS was Gandhi's assassin, and followers of the RSS stormed an ancient mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, setting off riots between Muslims and Hindus throughout India in which thousands were killed. Many of the leaders of the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, have come from the RSS; and when the new BJP nationalist government came to power in 1998, one of its first acts was to detonate a nuclear explosion as a test of its military power. Clearly, Hinduism, like most religious traditions, has been able to embrace positions of violence as well as non-violence.

The history of Sikhism is also one of violent encounters, usually in the defense of the tradition against its foe. Sikhism's bloody history, however, is something of a paradox. Guru Nanak, the sixteenth-century spiritual master regarded as the Sikhs' founder, is portrayed in literature as a gentle soul, one of India's great medieval saints. Yet his successors came to be engaged in military confrontation with invading Mughal forces. Members of a tribal group, the Jats, began joining the Sikh community at the end of the sixteenth century. They were great warriors and imposed their martial values and symbols onto the whole of the Sikh community. Some observers of Sikhism have contended that the most militant and aggressive aspects of the tradition - including the uprising in the last decades of the twentieth century - are legacies of the Jat influence.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the tenth and final Teacher in the lineage of Sikh masters, Guru Gobind Singh, presided over an army of considerable size.

Martyrdom was the supreme honor bestowed on those who gave their lives to the cause. The symbols Guru Gobind Singh is said to have brought to his followers in 1699, and which are still observed by the faithful, include such emblems of militancy as a sword and a bracelet-like shield worn on the wrist. The most frequently displayed symbols of Sikhism today is a double-edged blade surrounded by a circle - or perhaps a cooking vessel - and a pair of curved swords. Warfare, therefore, is not only a part of Sikhism's history but a central feature of its iconography.

In the eighteenth century the army of Sikhs in fact consisted of several armies, each with its own sphere of influence. Early in the nineteenth century the lands and armies of the Sikhs were consolidated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, whose kingdom spanned most of the Punjab. It was the last independent region in India to fall to the British, conquered only after a hard-fought war later in the century. The British colonial period saw a decline of the Sikh community until a reform movement in 1873 began to revive the tradition and imposed standards of faith and practice. This movement, the Singh Sabha, was disturbed over the display of what it regarded as Hindu artifacts in the Golden Temple and other Sikh shrines and *gurdwaras* (house of worship, - literally, "the threshold to the Guru").

In 1920 groups of Sikhs began agitating for reforms in *gurdwara* management, calling for an ouster of those who had been in control of the shrines, including the Udasis (a sect that traced its origins to the son of Guru Nanak, revered Hindu gods and texts, and venerated Guru Nanak to the exclusion of the other nine founding Gurus of Sikhism). The British government capitulated to these demands in 1925 and established a board of control, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (Central Gurdwara Management Committee), consisting largely of elected representatives. The SGPC became an arena for Sikh politics. One group of partisans in the *gurdwara* reform movement, the Akali Dal (the band of the Immortal One), later became a political party, and after independence it successfully contested elections for legislative seats, sharing with the Congress Party the ability to form ruling governments in the state. Sikh politicians supported India's fight for freedom from the British, though some were suspicious of what they regarded as Hindu control of the independence movement. The success of Mohammad Ali Jinnah in creating a Muslim state in Pakistan raised in the minds of many Sikhs the conviction that there should be a Sikh state as well.

India's independence in 1947 brought a certain amount of disillusionment to many Sikhs who had supported the struggle against the British. They felt peripheral to the mainstream of national politics. They did not even have control of their area of India, since the Sikhs constituted less than half of the electorate in the state of Punjab. In the 1950s a political movement emerged demanding that the Indian government fulfill its promise to have Punjab's boundaries drawn on linguist lines, as in other Indian states. They wanted the Punjab to include only speakers of the Punjabi language, a demand that was tantamount to calling for a Sikh majority state. The charismatic leader of the time, Sant Fateh Singh, went on a well-publicized fast and threatened to immolate himself in the precincts of the Golden Temple. The Indian government, captained by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, conceded, and in 1966 the old Punjab was carved along linguistic lines, and a new, smaller Punjab was created, which happened to have a narrow Sikh majority.

These early campaigns for Sikh autonomy and political power anticipated the movement that erupted in the 1980s. But in many ways the new movement was more intense, more religious. The movement began during a clash in 1978 between a group of Sikhs and the Sant Nirankaris, a branch of the Nirankari movement that had splintered from the Sikh tradition. The Sant Nirankaris follow its own lineage of gurus. The leader of the Sikhs attacking the Nirankaris was Jarnail Singh, a young rural preacher who at an early age had joined the Damdami Taksal, a religious school and retreat center associated with the great Sikh martyr Baba Deep Singh. Jarnail Singh eventually became its head and assumed the name of the previous leader, who had come from a village named Bhindran and was therefore called "Bhindranwale" (a person from Bhindran). Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale began to monitor religious standards in the surrounding Sikh society and found the Sant Nirankaris' worship of a living guru to be presumptuous and offensive. In the escalating violence between the two groups, lives were lost on both sides. In 1980 the Nirankari guru was assassinated. Some suspected Bhindranwale of being implicated in the crime, but he was not charged or convicted.

Soon Bhindranwale became busy with a new organization, the Dal Khalsa (the group of the pure), which was supported by the prime minister's younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, and other Congress Party leaders, including the president of India, Zail Singh. The group intended to replace the Akali Dal as the leading party in the SGPC, but it never succeeded. The next year, the publisher of a chain of Hindu newspapers in Punjab who had been a critic of Bhindranwale was shot dead; again, Bhindranwale was implicated but never tried or convicted. In response to his arrest and the destruction of his personal papers, Bhindranwale turned against the government. Bands of young Sikhs began indiscriminately killing Hindus, and later in 1981 a group of Sikhs hijacked an Indian Airlines plane in Pakistan. The serious violence had begun.

The situation came to a head on June 5, 1984, when Mrs. Gandhi sent troops into the Golden Temple in what was code-named Operation Blue Star. In a messy military operation that took two days to complete, two thousand or more people were killed, including a number of innocent worshippers. Bhindranwale's forces put up a spirited defense, but eventually they were all killed, including Bhindranwale. What shocked the Sikh community was not only the leader's death but also the desecration of their most sacred shrine. Even moderate Sikhs throughout the world were horrified at the specter of the Indian army stomping through their holiest precincts with boots on, shooting holes in the buildings' elaborate marblework facades. The assassination of Mrs. Gandhi on October 31, 1984, was widely regarded as revenge for this act of profanity. On the following day more than two thousand Sikhs were massacred in Delhi and elsewhere by angry mobs - a reprisal orchestrated, some say, by the police themselves.

The sermons of Bhindranwale offer clues to his religious sensibilities and their political implications. In a rambling, folksy manner, he called on his followers to maintain their faith in a time of trial, and he echoed the common fear that Sikhs would lose their identity in a flood of resurgent Hinduism, or worse, in a sea of secularism. One of his more familiar themes was the survival of the Sikh community; for "community" he used the term *qaum*, which carries overtones of nationhood. As for the idea of Khalistan, a separate Sikh nation, Bhindranwale said he "neither

favoured it nor opposed it.” What Bhindranwale did support was the Sikh concept of *miri-piri*, the notion that spiritual and temporal power are linked. He projected the image of a great war between good and evil waged in the present day - “a struggle ... for our faith, for the Sikh nation, for the oppressed.” He implored his young followers to rise up and marshal the forces of righteousness. “The Guru will give you strength,” he assured them.

Violence was not the explicit theme of Bhindranwale’s message, but he did not shirk from what he felt the implications of *miri-piri* might be in an unjust world. He affirmed that the Sikh tradition, like most religious traditions, ordinarily applauds non-violence and proscribes the taking of human life. He acknowledged that “for a Sikh it is a great sin to keep weapons and kill anyone.” But Bhindranwale went on to justify the occasional violent act in extraordinary circumstances and said that “it is an even greater sin to have weapons and not to seek justice.” In an extreme moment, he praised his young lieutenants for hijacking an airplane and called for either full concessions to his demands from India’s political leaders, “or their heads.”

One of the surviving leaders of the movement concurred that violence was sanctioned in Sikhism, but ordinarily as a defensive act. The leader Sohan Singh, whose name is associated with one of the main coordinating bodies of the militant Sikh movement - the Sohan Singh Panthic Committee - was in his eighties when I interviewed him in the suburb of Mohali near Chandigarh. Sohan Singh spoke eloquently about the role of love in Sikhism, saying that the tradition emphasizes love and allows for conversion only through moral suasion. But Sohan Singh said, if others try to kill you, you are warranted in trying to kill them. He argued that the violence of the Sikhs in recent years was primarily a response to the violence of the state. Sohan Singh claimed that the killings undertaken by militants were always done for a purpose; they were “not killing for killing’s sake.” Moreover, Sohan Singh said that warnings were given and punishment was meted out only if the offenders persisted in the conduct that the militants regarded as offensive.

One might wonder why the militants felt they had the moral authority to make judgments about others and to carry out corporal punishment on their own. In a remarkable series of interviews with Sikh militants transcribed and analyzed by Cynthia Keppley Mahmood in her book *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, the militants seem unconcerned about the issue of their moral authority. According to Sikh tradition, a council of five leaders is sufficient to give the community guidance; there is no hierarchy of priests or codified authority within Sikhism. In 1986, shortly after Bhindranwale was killed, the militants created their own Panthic Committee (an authoritative committee led by five elders). One of the members of this committee, Bhai Dhanna Singh, told Mahmood that the task of the group was to speak for Sikhs. He said the term *Sikh* meant anyone “who listens to the Guru’s command.” The Guru’s command, Dhanna Singh said, was “to speak against injustice.” He added that “anyone who complies with an oppressive regime is never a Sikh.”

Thus the militants assumed a divinely ordained authority to right injustice and secure public order. Sohan Singh assumed that he and his colleagues had the moral jurisdiction to make life-and-death decisions about their constituency, especially when they thought that the government was morally bankrupt. What needed to be shown, he said, was that he and his colleagues were able to conduct their public role as upholders of political righteousness in a responsible manner. As

an indication of what Sohan Singh considered to be the militants' good manners, he cited the apology they had extended to the families of those who were inadvertently killed in the explosion that took the life of Punjab's chief minister, Beant Singh, whom Sohan Singh described as "a killer" who was killed in the "heat of battle". This apology showed the "moral courage" of the militants, Sohan Singh said.

Though Sohan Singh showed little reservation about the way that the militants used their force, Simranjit Singh Mann was more reflective. Although he had no moral qualms about Sikhs destroying those considered to be enemies of the faith, he felt that there were strategic choices to be made. Mann made a distinction between "random killing" and "targetted killing". The former, he said, simply scared the general population and made it vulnerable to the potential for even more terror from the state in reprisal. Targetted killing, on the other hand, could broaden the base of support for the movement by inviting sympathy and eliminating ruthless persons. The assassination of Chief Minister Beant Singh was an effective example of targeted killing, Simranjit Singh Mann said, since he was a symbol of the state's tyranny. Punjab's former police chief, K.P.S. Gill, was a similar symbol. If he were to be killed, it would also be a symbolic act. It would indicate the collective judgment of the Sikhs and the continuing power of the movement.

Another former leader of the militant movement, Major General Narinder Singh, agreed that Chief Minister Beant Singh "had to be killed," and that K.P.S. Gill would be targeted soon - "tomorrow," as he put it. Narinder Singh could justify such an act, for he accepted violence for purpose of defense and punishment. He thought that the militant movement provided stability in a time of anarchy and official corruption. Yet he also felt that the militant movement had gone far beyond these purposes in the quixotic quest for power through armed struggle.

In explaining the years of terror visited on the Punjab, Narinder Singh concluded that sometimes "the boys - as the Sikhs militants were commonly described in the Punjab - "were hot-headed." It was this passion that was their eventual undoing. "Eventually the people became sick of all the killings," he explained in accounting for why the movement came to an end. Someday, he added, the movement will rise again. But not now, he said. "All the boys are dead."

**End of Part II**  
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