

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

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PART I

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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 and humane manner.

- Ed. SR

AT FIVE O'CLOCK IN THE afternoon of August 31, 1995, when residents of India's Punjab state thought that the terrorism associated with the Sikh separatist movement for fifteen years had finally come to an end, a massive explosion rocked the parking lot in front of the modernistic secretariat building in the state capital, Chandigarh. In the blast that shuddered through the impressive complex of government buildings designed by the French architect, Le Corbusier, the chief minister of the state, Beant Singh, was literally blown to pieces. Fifteen of his aides and security guards were also killed, and several cars were demolished in the conflagration that followed. In the smoldering heap that minutes before was his official vehicle, only Beant Singh's Sikh bracelet (*kara*) remained to identify the chief minister.

Among the mangled and limbless bodies was one believed to belong to the bomber himself. The car that brought him to the site stood empty nearby; the accomplice who was supposed to drive it away had apparently panicked and fled. By tracing the license plate, the police were able to identify and apprehend several of the alleged conspirators. All were members of one of the Sikh movement's deadliest guerilla cells, the Babbar Khalsa. They and members of several other groups, including the Bhindranwale Tigers and the Khalistan Commando Force, had been both victims and perpetrators in the reign of terror in Punjab since early 1980s.

The suicide bomber behind the explosion that killed the chief minister was identified as Dilawar Singh, a tall young man in his twenties. The details of his last days were revealed by his accomplices in response to what the police described as "rigorous interrogation" - a term that many Sikhs understand to be a code name for

torture. According to their testimony, Dilawar had practiced for the event for several weeks preceding the explosion in the middle-class suburb of Mohalli. As he left the comfortable, modern house to commit the crime that he knew would lead to his death, Dilawar scribbled a sentence in Punjabi on a piece of paper stating that his act was "in memory of the martyrs" - presumably the martyrs of early Sikh history. Quite likely, though, he was also referring to his own colleagues, the many members of the Babbar Khalsa, the Khalistan Commando Force, and other groups who had fallen in their futile struggle against the Indian police.

Thousands were killed between 1981 and 1994 on both the police and rebel sides, with many innocent citizens caught in between. Perhaps none of the killings was more spectacular or influential, however, than the assassination of India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, which the murder of Chief Minister Beant Singh replicated. By grim coincidence, one of Mrs. Gandhi's assassins was also named Beant Singh, although he was unrelated to the man who later became Punjab's Chief Minister. The killer Beant Singh - like the alleged accomplices in Chief Minister Beant Singh's death - was a member of the security forces of his victim. He and another guard, Satwant Singh, turned on Indira Gandhi with automatic rifles as they accompanied her on a lovely floral path in her home to her office to meet with the British actor Peter Ustinov, who was waiting in the gardens for an interview to be aired on British television.

The assassin, Beant Singh, was killed on the spot, and his partner, Satwant Singh, and one other accomplice were brought to trial. They were convicted and hanged for the murder of Mrs. Gandhi. Although they were the only ones convicted, rumours of wider conspiracy continued for some years. One scenario was forced out of the co-assassin, Satwant Singh, in a "rigorous interrogation" conducted by the police immediately after Mrs. Gandhi was killed. In his confession he allegedly implicated several Sikh leaders, including Kehar Singh, an elderly activist, and a former police official, Simranjit Singh Mann.

Mann was said to be the ringleader. Mann had resigned from the Indian Police Service in protest against the Operation Bluestar, joined with militant Sikhs in criticizing the government, and gone to hiding. Within several weeks of Mrs. Gandhi's murder, he was caught by the Indian police attempting to flee the country by truck over the Nepal border, disguised as a construction worker. According to some accounts, Mann had colluded with a leading militant, Atinder Pal Singh, in an intricate plot to kill the prime minister. The only evidence, however, was Satwant Singh's forced confession. Although Mann was held for some time in harsh confinement, he was never tried or convicted of the assassination. His relation with the most militant Sikhs have been ambivalent: sometimes they have supported each other, and at other times a clear lines has been drawn between them. When Punjab's chief minister was killed in 1995, Mann was living comfortably but still under police surveillance in a pleasant two-storey house blocks from the government secretariat where the bombing took place.

Suffering of Simranjit Singh Mann

When I talked with Simranjit Singh Mann at his home in Chandigarh less than a year after the explosion that killed Beant Singh, he denied involvement in the assassination of either the chief minister or Indira Gandhi. But, he said, "no tears

were spilled” when either of these political leaders were killed. Mann compared their executions to the attempts to kill Hitler. “It was an act of punishment,” he said, referring to the killing of Chief Minister Beant Singh. He added that “people rejoiced” throughout the Punjab on hearing the news.

The killing of the chief minister also showed the desperation of the militant Sikhs in their attempt to assert power, Mann told me. He said he did not expect the assassination to change things. What he called the “repression” of the Indian government toward the Sikhs would likely continue, he said. But this act did achieve a symbolic victory: it demonstrated to the world that the struggle would continue. “This is a war situation,” Mann told me. “If we open our mouths we’re in jail.” Although the most militant wings of the movement had been crushed and there had been very few signs of overt hostility since Beant Singh’s assassination, Mann still regarded the movement as potent. He saw himself as a kind of soldier. “It’s a war situation still,” he said.

What made Mann’s statement remarkable was not only the apparent serenity of Punjab’s post-1995 political landscape, but also the comfortable circumstances of Mann’s own home. Despite his sometimes militant words, he has become an established political leader in the Punjab. When I interviewed him in 1996, he was living - not in a bunker or a guerilla hideout but - in a two-storey suburban house that can only be described as upper middle class. The living room boasted of a large Kashmiri carpet and carefully chosen furniture. On the wall were etchings of Punjab life taken from nineteenth-century British travel books. He was surrounded by the trappings of middle-class success, including a graceful, articulate wife who served tea, a son who studied business in the United States, and a friendly cocker spaniel named May.

Mann looked exactly like the career civil servant he had intended to become after he finished college in Chandigarh and joined the police service, serving as the head of posts in Faridkot and elsewhere in Punjab as well as in Bombay. As his family name indicated, Mann was a member of one of the Punjab’s most prestigious subgroups within the leading Jat clan, and when he resigned from government service in protest against the Indian army’s invasion of the Golden Temple during Operation Bluestar in 1984, it was major news. In his resignation letter to the President of India, Zail Singh, Mann compared the government’s heavy-handed action to the British atrocities against Indian protestors at Amritsar’s Jallianwala Bagh square in 1919. In even stronger terms, he accused the Indian government of being “bent upon committing the genocide of the Sikhs”. The Indian government regarded it as an insult that someone with his qualifications and rank in the government’s elite civil service would turn against them, and it was no surprise that he would be accused of complicity in Prime Minister Gandhi’s assassination a few months later.

Since then Mann had been on the run, under investigation, or in jail - including five years of what he described as solitary confinement. He accused his captors of torture and showed me what he claimed to be evidence of their brutality. Mann pulled back his beard and showed scars where he said his beard hair had been pulled out. Other scars were evident on his legs. Toenails and teeth were missing; these he said had been broken or yanked out by his captors. He also claimed that his genitals had been injured from having electric wires attached to them. One

testicle, he said, had shrunk and was now loose in his scrotum. Mann's imprisonment was officially an act of detention as he awaited trial. Although he was arrested thirty-two times, Mann was not convicted of a single offence. Mann said that this torture and harassment were characteristic of the Indian government's heavy-handed response to Sikh militancy and had helped to swell the ranks of the movement.

In addition to 'conspiracy to commit violence', charges levelled against Mann and then dismissed, included treason and sedition. Mann, told me, however, that he was not waging war against India as such. It was not the Indian nation that he disdained, but its government. He described the government sometimes as "secular," and sometimes as "pro-Hindu," offering the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as evidence of the government's religious preferences. When militant Sikhs attacked supporters of the BJP being bused through Punjab on a Unity March en route to Kashmir in January 1992, killing five and wounding sixteen others, they asserted that this notion of India's religious unity was precisely what they were against. The Unity March "absolutely had to be stopped," Mann said, even "by force."

Yet the Sikh movement began long before the rise of the BJP, and the Sikh's Akali Party - though not Mann's faction of it - eventually joined the BJP in forming electoral coalitions. So the Hinduization of India's politics could not have been the sole cause of the Sikh rebellion of the 1980s and early 1990s. Mann said that the purpose of the movement was not simply to rebel against Hindu power but to "protect the Sikh community" from secular influences. The movement was also aimed at enlarging the Sikhs' ability to assert what they felt to be their rights and their warranted demands. Sikhs were a "national ethnic minority," Mann said, that had to look out for themselves.

The Sikh movement contained a diversity of points of view, however, and one of the most strident of its advocates - someone whom Mann admired - saw the struggle almost solely in religious terms. This leader was Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a rural preacher from central Punjab who became the spokesman for Sikh militancy from its first stirrings in 1978 until his movement's nadir - and Bhindranwale's martyrdom - in the tragic events of 1984. Bhindranwale was a homespun village preacher who called for repentance and action in defence of the faith. Mann regarded him as one of Sikh history's most impressive leaders because of his ability to summarize great themes in simple phrases and clearcut images. According to Mann, he "articulated the hegemony of Hindu power and the injustice suffered by Sikhs, and he did it all with a consciousness of Sikh history and tradition."

I was particularly interested in Mann's comments about Bhindranwale, since it was Bhindranwale's sermons that triggered my interest in the relationship between religion and violence and led to my first article on this topic. In that study I examined a collection of audio and videotapes of the radical Sikh leader and rough transcriptions of the sermons that had been made by Prof. R.S. Sandhu, who kindly shared these materials with me. I found that what Bhindranwale disdained - indeed loathed - above all else was what he described as "the enemies of religion." These included "that lady born in a house of Brahmans" - the phrase he used to describe Indira Gandhi. But it also included his fellow Sikhs, especially those who had fallen from the disciplined fold and sought the comforts of modern life. Even his dislike of Indira Gandhi was grounded in a hatred of secularism as much in an opposition to

Hinduism; in fact, he often regarded the two as twin enemies. He reflected an attitude held by many Sikhs - that what passes for secular politics in India is a form of Hindu cultural domination. So conscious are many Sikhs of what they regard as the oppressiveness of Hindu culture that they react strongly when scholars locate the origins of their tradition in a medieval Hindu milieu.

So it is understandable that the image of Bhindranwale cast a shadow over the Sikh community long after his death. Bhindranwale's role as exemplar was brought home to me several years ago, during the height of the militant movement, when I met with young Sikh activists in a room adjoining a gurdwara (a Sikh house of worship) in Delhi. The subject had turned from their own potential encounters with the Indian police and their probable deaths to the martyrdom of their hero, Bhindranwale. They would like to die as he died, the young told me: they wanted to take life to the limit. Unlike the stance of easy compromise taken by most politicians, they said that Bhindranwale "went to his death for what he believed."

During its heyday, from 1981 to 1994, thousands of young men and perhaps a few hundred women joined the movement. They were initiated into the secret fraternities of various rival radical organizations. These included the Babbar Khalsa, the Khalistan Commando Force, the Khalistan Liberation Force, the Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan, and extremist faction of the All-India Sikh Students Federation. Their enemies were secular political leaders, head of police units, some Hindu journalists, and other community leaders. Over time the distinctions between valid and inappropriate targets became blurred, and virtually anyone could become a victim of the militants' wrath. By January 1988, more than a hundred people a month were killed; 1991 was the bloodiest year, with over three thousand people killed in the Punjab's triangular battle among the police, the radicals, and the populace. One of the more spectacular incidents in 1991 was the attack by Sikh extremists on the Indian ambassador to Romania in Bucharest. The Romanian government helped to capture the Sikhs. They were killed, and later that year militant Sikhs kidnapped a Romanian diplomat in Delhi in retaliation.

Accompanying the increase in violence was a general collapse of law and order, especially in rural areas of the state near the Pakistan border. The young activists had intimidated the older Sikh leaders, who became virtual pawns of the militants. The only authority in some areas came from those who ruled by gun at night. **This was due in part to the erosion of idealism in the Sikh movement and in part to the movement's exploitation by what amounted to street gangs and roving bands of thugs. In addition, the Sikh movement had failed to achieve its political goals, leaving a cynical and demoralized public in its wake. In the absence of a legitimate government in the Punjab, the rural area became a no-man's-land in the battle between militants and armed police.**

In the 1990s older and more responsible leaders in the Jat Sikh community found themselves in a quandary. They could not capitulate to the urban Hindu leadership of the central government because that would mean abandoning their religion and race. They needed the young Sikh militants' support, but at the same time, they wanted to regain some semblance of political control over them. One might think that it would be in the best interests of the central government to help them do that, but the Congress Party leaders were hesitant. For one thing, they resented the fact that moderate Sikh leaders identified with the Sikh's Akali Party rather than the Congress

Party or one of the national coalition parties. More important, they feared that any concessions they made to Sikh leaders would have repercussions throughout India. Muslims would immediately demand similar rights, as would leaders of separatist movements in northeastern India and Kashmir.

In Kashmir, where Muslims were the majority community, the rise of the Hindu nationalism throughout India had spurred a separatist movement. Protests erupted in 1986-87, led by the Muslim United Front. In 1988 some elements of the opposition took a more strident course, forming a paramilitary operation: the Kashmir Liberation Front. Allegedly supported by Pakistan, the Front called for secession from India. It organized demonstrations and responded to police attempts to suppress it by throwing bombs and firing automatic weapons, leading to bloodshed on both sides. In May 1989, the separatists began calling themselves *mujahedeen* (holy warriors) and characterized their conflict with the government as a holy war - a war that continued through the 1990s.

Although the Sikh and Kashmir separatist movements were not related, any concessions made to the Sikhs would certainly have been demanded by the Kashmiris, and vice versa. At the same time, the Indian government could not be too harsh on one group without intimidating the other. In the same week that Punjab's chief minister Beant Singh was assassinated in 1995, for example, the Indian government was involved in delicate negotiations for the release of foreign hostages in Kashmir and could not have afforded to renew hostilities with the Sikhs.

The rise of Hindu nationalism in India coincided with the decline of the Sikh movement. As we noted earlier, the attitude of Sikhs toward Hindu politics has been mixed. After the BJP gained strength in several northern Indian states, culminating in the formation of a national coalition government in 1998, some moderate factions of the Sikh's Akali Party did indeed join forces with the BJP. But these Akali-BJP coalitions achieved greater electoral success among the urban constituencies, which were both Hindu and Sikh, than in the rural Sikh stronghold. The suspicion of Sikhs toward Hindu politics, like the hatred between many activist Sikhs and the secular Congress Party, was never completely overcome.

In 1990, in a poignant attempt to break the vicious cycle of hatred and reprisal, the Congress Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in what was virtually his last act of office, released Simranjit Singh Mann from prison. This was an extraordinary act, since Mann was awaiting trial for his alleged participation in the plot that led to the murder of Rajiv's mother, Indira Gandhi. Mann had won a parliamentary seat after campaigning from prison, but Rajiv claimed that his pardon was due not to Mann's electoral success but to his own desire to "heal wounds."

Following Mann's release from prison, the major factions of the Akali Party united under his leadership. The unity was brief, however, and in the years that followed there was considerable erosion of Mann's support. The party broke apart, and Mann's faction became one of the smallest of several groups at the Akali periphery. Mann's political power had come largely from his ability to broker alliances between moderate wings of the Sikh leadership and the militants. The militants had respected Mann not only for his radical rhetoric but also because of the persecution he had experienced from his alleged role in Indira Gandhi's murder. When the armed police

were unleashed in 1990 and the reign of the militants came to an end, Mann's influence declined as well.

According to Mann, the tide began to turn against the militants in 1992. They were, in his opinion, destroyed from within as much as from without. It was a problem of leadership, Mann said. When many of the leaders were captured, they were enjoying the fruits of their spoils, using air conditioners and driving expensive cars. "They advocated puritanical ways to the masses," Mann told me, "but they lived in luxury themselves." The standards within the movement degenerated. "Guns controlled the party," he said, adding that "it should have been the other way around." Internal disputes were rife, and many of the militants were killed by members of rival factions rather than by the police.

In the late 1990s Mann was among the few activists who had not been killed, jailed, or sent into hiding abroad - mostly in Pakistan, England and the United States. Like the former militants with whom I talked in India and the United States, Mann expressed bitterness at both the Indian government, which he felt had persecuted the movement, and the extremist members of the militant cadres, who he believed had destroyed the movement from within.

I asked Mann if he thought the militancy of the movement was a mistake. He said that given the geography of the Punjab, surrounded by the rest of India with its vastly superior military resources, the movement could not have launched a productive military venture - with the exception of those instances where "punishment" and "retribution" called for violence, as in the assassinations of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Chief Minister Beant Singh. But in most other cases, he said, the violence was counterproductive in that it provided the government with a reason for exterminating the movement. Mann would have much preferred a peaceful solution, such as the one proposed for the separation of Quebec from Canada. But, Mann said, he was not opposed in principle to the use of force for a righteous cause. His disagreement with the use of violence in this instance was not "a moral decision," he said, "but a strategic one."

**End of Part I
(To be concluded)**

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