

The Khalistan Movement of 1984: A Critical Appreciation

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ABSTRACT

The month of June reminds us of the incursion by the Indian law-enforcing agencies in the Golden Temple of Amritsar in 1984 and killing of the Sikh freedom-fighters who had taken cover there along with their leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. The Sikhs who were present inside the Golden Temple were spearheading the Sikh separatist movement, known as the movement for ‘Khalistan,’ which refers to their Sikh-majority independent homeland. The movement for establishing such an independent Sikh state was then raging with full fury in the Indian Punjab. The Indira Gandhi Government in New Delhi had already labeled these Sikh freedom-fighters as ‘terrorists’ and using that pretext had attacked the Golden Temple, claiming that it was being used by the Sikhs as a hideout for their ‘anti-state’ activities. Indira Gandhi had intended to deal a mortal blow to the hitherto uncontrollable Sikh uprising which had outgrown its original borders of Indian Punjab and whose serious political and diplomatic ramifications were being felt internationally, specifically, in the countries where the Sikhs had emigrated from India, especially in UK and the US.

Key Word: Sikhs, Khalistan, Akali Dal, Indra Gandhi, India

Introduction

On 1-8 June 1984, Indian Government, without caring for the religious feelings of an important part of its own citizenry, violated the UN Charter and attacked the Golden Temple with full military might. Many Sikh freedom-fighters present in the Golden Temple were killed. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Blue_Star)

The attack had the immediate effect of weakening the Sikh’s armed and political struggle for Khalistan Movement temporarily. The leadership of the Khalistan Movement was dispersed. A number of the top Sikh leadership was killed in the bloody events of June and the prolonged draconian government clampdown which followed while others escaped to foreign lands to wait for another opportune moment to revive their movement for a Sikh homeland. Regardless of the harsh government crackdown on Sikh activists in Punjab the dream of an overwhelming number of Sikhs, in India and overseas, many from the younger generations, remains one of a fully independent Sikh state which would in its ideology, politics and demography fully reflect the Sikh ideals of a homeland. (McLeod, 1975: 4) Therefore, while this study intends to survey the origin, development and repercussions of the Khalistan movement, it also in the post-

1984 scenario, intends to demonstrate that the Sikhs whether living in India or overseas are dissatisfied with the policies of the Indian government regarding their politico-religious status in India. Their strong sense of betrayal at the hands of founders of modern India since its beginnings in 1947 has since been reinforced time and again by the injustice they perceive as being meted out to their 'targeted' community by the central government based in New Delhi and some of its political agents based in Punjab itself. The nationalist Sikh elements strongly feel that they should have not opted to join India in 1947 on the false promise of the establishment of a separate Sikh state in India.

In a so-called secular country like India large and/or historically prominent religious communities like Muslims, Sikhs and Christians have never felt comfortable due to very active groups of extremist Hindu elements. The Sikh community of Punjab was deeply caught up in the communal politics of the province in the 1930s and 1940s. They eventually decided to accept the promises of the Congress for a Sikh homeland in India so nearly all of them moved to India in 1947. In post-colonial India many members of the Sikh community became a part of the civil and military administration but large numbers continued to be small land-owners and cultivators. With such a background, one is forced to ask what made the Sikhs so hostile to the Indian state that they started a freedom movement for an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. Although a wide variety of work has been produced regarding the armed Sikh struggle for Khalistan and its aftermath, however, (Sieberer, 1991, 177) historians have yet to fully analyze the wide-ranging causes and effects of the Khalistan movement. Therefore, this study attempts to understand the origin and development of the Khalistan Movement which reached its peak in the Indian Punjab in the 1980s. It will also try to investigate and explore the effects of the Khalistan Movement on the Sikh diaspora.

In contemporary times most of the states are experiencing challenges brought on by ethnic conflicts on their soil. Quite obviously multi-ethnic societies, especially those who have failed to develop or properly implement structures for post-independence cooperative living are more prone to such internal challenges. As an independent political entity since 1947 India has been the testing-ground for a large number of such claims and movements. Such movements have demanded varying levels of autonomy or even full independence from the controls of the central government in New Delhi. (The Telegraph, 2014) In this paper, however, our goal would be to focus solely on the Sikh's movement for either greater autonomy within India, barring which, their struggle for an independent Sikh state known as 'Khalistan'. Sikhism is relatively a new religion on this soil but it has passed through many phases of history, especially the turbulent one which has produced a strong sense of identification of the Sikhs at large with their religion, historical struggles (history), cultural identity, language and, especially, the land of Punjab with Amritsar being their holiest city. All these have simultaneously, though to varying degrees in different times, shaped the outlines of a historical Sikh identity, both individual and collective. Politically, they are very aware of the

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fact that, as a group, they have always, except in times of Sikh rule, struggled against a powerful central authority, from the times of the Mughals to the present day. In addition, they have had a very powerful historical figure in the form of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who ruled Punjab in late eighteenth and first decades of the nineteenth centuries. (Prinsep, 1979:142-43.) and the distinct development of a rich Sikh culture around the Gurmukhi strain of Punjabi language (Brass, 1974:278) have rendered it distinctly different from Hinduism although it shares some important concepts with Hinduism especially in the religious arena.

So these factors need to be kept in mind while discussing any Sikh movement for autonomy or independence in India. In the heated religion-based politics of their options, however, were limited and they were forced to choose one of either India or Pakistan. (<http://www.ukessays.com/essays/history/an-analysis-of-counter-nationalism-history-essay.php>) Owing to partition a large scale Sikh migration from the west Punjab to East Punjab was observed which converted them from 13 % to 35 %. (Grewal, 1996, 111-112).

A number of factors have contributed to the unrest of the Sikh community in India. In the post-1947 period Sikhs have mostly been represented by Shiromani Akali Dal. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiromani Akali Dal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiromani_Akali_Dal) In light of their history and their struggle for self-identity referred to above, Sikhs have, since India's independence, repeatedly demanded greater autonomy more akin to home-rule, in Punjab, the only province in India in which they are in a majority. The center has, however, always resisted such a demand laying the groundwork for an endless round of friction and occasional political upheaval and volatility. Early in post-colonial top-level Sikh leadership quickly grew circumspect by the central government's attitude towards their community; slowly, the relationship between the Akali Dal, the major provincial Sikh party and the central government, moved from accommodation to confrontation. (Mirz, 1985, 29). Shortly after independence Sikh leaders under the leadership of Sant Fateh Singh started to call for a Punjabi Suba with in Indian State where Punjabi speaking Sikhs were in majority. (Oberoi, 1987, 38) The demand of creation of Sikh State on linguistic basis was genuine as Jawaharlal Nehru himself had said in 1947 that there was nothing objectionable in yielding the area in north of India where Sikh nation might also experience freedom. (Mirz et al ,1985,30)

Demand for Khalistan State in post-colonial India

Akali Dal was the major Sikh political party that wanted to form a government in the newly-formed state of Indian Punjab because they did not want the mixing of Sikhs with Hindus so their priority was to concentrate all Sikhs in one territory where they could rule on the basis of majority. The Congress Party remained in power in the postcolonial Punjab and that generated tussle between Akali Dal and the Congress because of Congress policies towards the Sikh demand for a Sikh State. That was the stage when they were totally disillusioned by the tricky

politics of Hindus and now were shifting their stratagem from accommodation to confrontation. The mother tongue of the whole Punjab was Punjabi but Muslims raised their support towards Urdu while Hindus were in favour of Hindi. This made Sikhs the only supporter of Punjabi language so shortly after independence Sikh leaders under the leadership of Sant Fateh Singh started to call for a Punjabi Suba within Indian State where Punjabi speaking Sikhs were in majority. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiromani_Akali_Dal.) The demand of creation of Sikh State on linguistic basis was genuine as Jawaharlal Nehru himself had said in 1947 that there was nothing objectionable in yielding the area in north of India where Sikh nation might also experience freedom.

In 1953 a new state of Andhra Pradesh was created in the south of India. (Suri, 2016, 7) This development led to a heightened Sikh demand for a state on a linguistic basis. Politically the Akali leaders wanted a safe provincial constituency for political leverage which only a Sikh-majority province would have given them. After passing of the new constitution it was announced that the first general elections would be held in 1952 so Akalis found it as a good occasion to promote their demands and their election manifesto was stated as

“The true test of democracy, in the opinion of the Shiromani Akali Dal, is that the minorities should feel that they are really free and equal partners in the destiny of their country to bring home this sense of freedom to the Sikhs it is vital that there should be a Punjabi speaking language and culture. The Shiromani Akali Dal is in favour of the formation of provinces on a linguistic and cultural basis throughout India, but it holds it is a question of life and death for the Sikhs for a new Punjab to be created immediately.” (Kapur, 211)

Patiala and East Punjab States were joined in the union named PEPSU by the rulers of Punjab's pre-partition eight Princely States on May 1948. The administration of this state was in hands of Sikhs where they were in majority of population but this proved a short term alliance between Akalis and the Congress as the central government headed by Congress, on recommendations of the commission, in November, 1956 announced the merger of PEPSU (Encyclopedia Britannica) with other Punjab. After this decision Akali leaders along with Haryana leaders met with Prime Minister to show their concerns over the decision. As a result of their talks a compromise was evolved according to which both Hindi and Punjabi were accepted as regional languages with Punjabi as the medium of instruction in all Punjabi-speaking areas and Hindi serving the same purpose in Hindi-speaking areas. But pro-Hindi people intertwined which led Akali leaders to revive their move for the formation of Sikh dominated State.

However, a States Reorganization Commission was again formed by Government in 1953. (Sieberer, 1991, p. 177). Sikhs from Punjab and Hindus from Haryana presented separate memorandums for separate states but the commission's report published in 1955, as earlier before the constitution was

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drafted, rejected the demands of separate Punjab and Haryana provinces. The commission also recommended the Government to merge PEPSU with Punjab.

The hindrance in creating a Punjabi province was souring the relations between the centre and the Akali party but in 1966 the Punjabi *suba*(State) was finally accepted by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. However, this new state provided only a 56 percent Sikh majority and as the electorate brought split results, it did not convey a solid assurance to the Akalis of their hold long-term hold on political power in Punjab. That's why the Punjabi *Suba* agreed to by Indira Gandhi was highly unsatisfactory for Sikh leadership. (The Tribune ,2016)

Secondly the issue of Chandigarh as the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana also proved an explosive one in the Punjab problem of eighties. Despite issue of Chandigarh green revolution also proved turning point in Sikh separate movement (Gill ,1984, 603-08) and Akalis came up with a long list of grievances of Sikh community but Central Government miscalculated the issue and eventually this movement turned into violent one in early 1980's.

Armed Struggle

The armed struggle by Sikh leaders for a separate homeland started to create serious problems when some rebellious Sikh elements started killings of gazetted officials, civil servants, and Hindu and Sikh citizens. The Golden Temple attack which followed angered Sikhs and two of her Sikh guards as a result assassinated Indira Gandhi. As a reaction by the Hindus there was widespread killing of Sikhs in the Indian capital, New Delhi and in other cities of India. The responsibility of higher authorities and their inefficiency of dealing the issue made those Sikhs to support Khalistan movement who were not previously supporting the separatist cause. (George Sieberer,1991,180)

This movement by Sikh leaders for a separate homeland and autonomy started to create serious problems when some rebellious Sikh elements started killings of gazetted officials, civil servants, and Hindu and Sikh citizens. The year 1984 became a turning point in the conflict and in June of that year Indian Army hit the Sikhs' holiest place of worship, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which had been converted into an armed camp by Sikh followers of Bhindranwala.(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalistan_movement) In these attacks thousands of civilians were killed most of them were Sikhs. This operation outraged the whole of Sikh community at large and the demand for an independent state of Khalistan caught boom. (Singh,1987,1268) As a result of it on 31 October, 1984, two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the consequences of her death were so bad that there was widespread killing of Sikhs in the Indian capital, New Delhi and in other cities of India. (Khan, 2016) The responsibility of higher authorities and their inefficiency of dealing the issue made those Sikhs to support Khalistan movement who were not previously supporting the separatist cause. (George Sieberer,1991,180))

After the Operation Blue Star the security agencies have adopted various brutal ways to curb the uprising by arresting many Sikhs, by torturing them, by the judges handing them long-term imprisonments and extra-judicial killings of persons by government agencies to be terrorists. (Aulakh, 2010) Rather than decreasing support for the Khalistan cause, Operation Blue Star and its aftermath have given the movement a strong fillip as the demands for a Khalistan state have increased with several major organizations and many smaller groups acting independently or sometimes in concert with one another to project their demand. In fact, it was alleged that major Sikh organisations such as All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF), Babbar Khalisa, World Sikh Organistaion (WSO), International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) were all getting support from the Sikh diaspora in United Kingdom, Canada, United States and other countries. (Purewal,2012)

Efforts by Sikh political leaders and central government officials to negotiate a political settlement have had little success so far. The stalemate has been due in part to the central government's failure to follow through with promised reforms and measures to meet Sikhs' demands so they persist with their demand for a separate Sikh state. (Dawn,2015)

Major reasons for the Khalistan Movement

There were a number of factors which alienated the Sikh community in India and abroad. Some of the important issues between the Sikhs and the Indian government were: the water issues, Chandigarh problem, agitational politics, power dispute and Religio-constitutional demands, etc. A few are highlighted below:

Tracing the genesis of communal awareness among Sikhs and to locate its development into a separate identity through the rising demands of a separate Punjabi Suba, then on to the operation Blue Star and convergence of this movement into Khalistan demands. (Rajiv A. Kapur, 1986, p. 208),

The Sikhs were working up for a Punjabi province from the time of India's independence and they already had an idea of autonomous Sikh state in their minds. However, according to author the accession of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her worker in Punjab Giani Zail Singh who fanned the flames of separatism which ended in Operation Blue Star. (Khushwant Singh,2004)

There has been immense support of the Sikh communities for the Khalistan cause by Sikh expatriates based in United States, Canada and England. Sikhs immigrated to these countries for religious, social, cultural and economic reasons. (Weiss,2002)

But above all, the broken promises of the India government toward the religious freedom and the creation of an autonomous Sikh state. They felt betrayed and slowly but surely the Indian government tried to adopt those constitutional measures which aimed at succumb Sikh minority into majority. This alarmed

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Sikhs in diaspora and they were involved in supporting the Khalistan Movement. (Tatla)

Mishandling by Indira Gandhi of the Sikh separatist movement was one of the main factors which triggered extreme nationalism among the Sikh community. (Malhotra, 1989) She not only used divide and rule policy to weaken the Sikh separatist movement but also exercised brutal force to crush the armed struggle and showed no respect for the most sacred Sikh monument. She ordered army to attack it claiming that it had turned into the main hideout of the Sikh armed movement. (<http://www.referendum2020.org>) It was not only against the secular constitution of the Republic of India but contrary to the UN charter for protection of religious buildings. There is no comparison of Mahmud of Ghazni's attack on Somnath Temple, also invaded the Temple with almost identical excuses. At the time of Mahmud there were no nation states, no constitutions, no claim to universal ethical values and no UN Charter, therefore, his attack to eliminate the conspirators against him or with the purpose of looting and plundering treasures in the temple can be understood in the lights of then prevailing ethics of the warfare. They have produced an enormous amount of literature to breed the Hindu nationalism and to malign the Muslim rulers especially Mahmood Ghazni's attack on Somnath by declaring him plunderer and iconoclast. But Indira Gandhi's government of a vastly Hindu-majority India has tried to crush the Sikh movement through state-terrorism and cannot be justified on any grounds whatsoever. Indira Gandhi chose to use state force instead of persuasive measures that has left permanent hatred in the Sikhs against the Hindus, against the Indra Gandhi government and therefore she was assassinated by two Sikhs shortly after the attack on the Golden Temple in 1984. (Jayakar: 1992)

Globalization has sharpened the Sikh nationalism because it has changed the Sikh national character. Globalization has severed the concept of nation and state. It is argued that this diaspora nationalism is challenging the predictable narratives of Sikh nationalism. (Sandhu, 2016) They tend to construct their argument through the lenses of Sikh migration from Punjab to foreign countries and their strong attachment for their sacred places across Punjab's borders.

Another factor behind armed struggle in the 1980s is attributed to the strained relations between the Congress and the Akali Dal. It is alleged that Congress had used Bhindranwale to contain the Sikh politics but when they found him difficult in managing so they decided to dispose him, thus they started Operation Blue Star. (Jyoti Grewal, 2007)

Conclusion

The Sikh rule in the Punjab under Ranjit Singh enabled themselves to translate some of the central ideas of the Sikh Gurus into action. Previous to Ranjit's rule they had emerged as a powerful, religiously-driven group, which overpowered the Muslim rule in Punjab. (The Friday Times, 2014) The Sikhs, except for their

Gurus who were upper-class Hindus, belonged to the Jat community, who were mostly cultivators and small landholders. But when the Land Alienation Acts of 1900 and 1907 was introduced it not only enraged the Hindu money-lenders but also generated strong communal feelings in the Sikh community who thought these measures were meant to appease the Muslim landed-class as well as to curb the growing economic and political interests of the Hindu and Sikh communities. After the introduction of Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, the Sikhs also formed their political parties thus Akali Dal and other parties and groups emerged which voiced demands for Sikh rights. However, the Congress remained an important political party by claiming that it represented all the religious communities in India including the Sikhs. Sardar Baldev Singh was one of the main spokesmen of the Sikh community when the Cabinet Mission Plan was agreed upon. However, after the 1940 Lahore Resolution some Sikh leaders also demanded a separate homeland for themselves. Neither the Sikh leaders nor the Congress High Command took this demand seriously but Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah offered to create a Sikh State in the proposed new state of Pakistan if Punjab was not divided. But the unwritten Hindu-Sikh alliance seemed to have been working against the interests of the Muslims and the Muslim League. (Chawla, 2008, 111)

In short, after the partition of India in 1947 Sikh community was slowly being absorbed into the Hindu fold because of constitutional amendments and creation of new provinces. Therefore, many politically aware Sikhs always wished to have a separate homeland of their own and name it Khalistan where they could live without any fear for their identity. In this connection they adopted constitutional means and on their failing they took to armed struggle. The Indian government failed to satisfy the Sikh community in India and abroad. Though the Indira Gandhi government Through the military attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar codenamed "Operation Blue Star," in 1984 the armed struggle was temporarily suppressed; it had blamed Pakistan for sponsoring and nurturing the armed struggle as an excuse for the military operation.

Indian government has always found it convenient to blame Pakistan for all its internal troubles especially in states which border Pakistan as with its inability to control problems in JOK. The failure of the Sikh political struggle in 1984 to create an autonomous Sikh state should not be understood to have weakened the common bonds between members of the Sikh community, both in India and abroad, into one nation. On the contrary they are growing stronger and the recent activities of Sikh Diaspora across the globe, mainly in Canada, should not simply be declared as a conspiracy against the Indian government by a neighboring country, rather it should serve as an eye-opener for its rulers. There is a strong alienation of the Sikh community inside India from the central government and this alienation can once again erupt into a crisis not unlike that of 1984.

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