THE KHALISTAN MOVEMENT IN PUNJAB, INDIA, AND THE POST-MILITANCY ERA

Structural Change and New Political Compulsions

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Abstract

A Sikh militant movement in Punjab is unlikely to reemerge in the near future because of exhaustion from the militant era, the shift toward federalism in the Indian political system, the increased importance of state level parties, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the emergence of coalition politics.

Key words: India, Khalistan, Punjab, Sikhs, religio-political movements

From approximately 1980 to 1992, the Indian state of Punjab was riven by an internecine, anti-state conflict involving a movement to establish a separate independent Sikh state of Khalistan. It is estimated that upward of 25,000 people were killed in this time period, the majority of whom, in spite of the communal rhetoric of the movement, were Sikhs. In 1992, an election for the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, the unicameral legislative assembly, was held that was boycotted by all the factions claiming to represent the Sikhs; it was won by the Congress Party with an abysmally low turnout of 23.91%. The poll was widely disparaged as a sham.
that would change nothing and was analyzed as an election in which those calling for a boycott won.¹

The election ultimately began a period that decisively ended militancy. Attempts by individuals, groups, and factions to restart the movement have been met with determined opposition by all other parties; the state and local governments; and, it seems, the exhausted population, most of whom refuse to vote for those advocating religious nationalism by any name. Even the most determined proponent of Khalistan must concede that few are interested in that subject today in Punjab. What discussion there is has been kept up, to no small degree, by the diaspora community, members of whom were figuratively on the front lines from the movement’s inception. Notably, the first explicit call for Khalistan was an advertisement taken out in the New York Times by an expatriate.

The rapid escalation of the Sikh separatist movement, whether defined as greater autonomy within the Indian union or a separate nation-state, has parallels with other religious nationalist or ethnic movements of the same period in India and South Asia. But the Punjab situation is unique in terms of its precipitous end, after seeming irremediable. Why then did this movement that took currency with the local rural population so quickly end just as quickly, without any of the outstanding issues—structural and political developments identified by analysts as causes of the conflict—being addressed or rectified? In an even more paradoxical development, why and how did the traditional leaders associated with Punjab political parties and Sikh institutions, who had been marginalized during the militant era, reemerge? Their factional struggles and political failures had played a part in exacerbating militancy. Nonetheless, the same individuals reestablished themselves, and the same political parties and institutions reconsolidated power after a struggle involving alternative loci of a religious-based authority drawing on Sikh tradition.

The current political situation is not dissimilar from that of the late 1970s. Agriculture is in some cases unremunerative, and there is still a lack of alternative avenues of employment, resulting in a high rate of migration out of this relatively wealthy state. Furthermore, the ongoing contention over Sikh identity has led to recent violent clashes between Khalsa Sikhs (that is, followers of Guru Gobind Singh, the last of a line of 10 Sikh gurus who exhibit the outward symbols of Sikhism), and followers of a sant,²

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² The term sant refers to a devout individual, usually male, who often resides with his followers in a rural institution. They not only provide religious instruction but are often considered to be able to bestow spiritual and material blessings. Some sants have a large number of devotees and for this reason wield significant political influence.
Gurmit Ram Rahim, who propagates syncretistic beliefs and practices. This conflict closely resembles an altercation with the Nirankaris in 1978, an event to which many date the beginning of the separatist conflict. Further, the outstanding demands or issues associated with the Sikh political party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (Army of the Devotees of Akal [the Timeless One, a name for God], SAD) have not been addressed. These include the status of Chandigarh built to be the capital of Punjab but serving as the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana States; the incorporation of certain Punjabi-speaking areas into Punjab; the status of the Punjabi language in the neighboring states; the issue of river water allocation; and, a more recent demand, justice for the victims of the anti-Sikh pogrom in 1984 that followed Indira Gandhi’s assassination by two of her Sikh bodyguards.

Even so, militancy is not likely to reemerge, at least in the short term, given: (1) structural changes within the Indian political system toward increased federalism; (2) the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party, BJP) as a national force and the emergence of coalition politics at the state and central levels; and (3) the related current anomalous situation in which one Akali Dal faction controls all three state-level arenas of political contestation. This undercuts the ability of an opposition party to play one faction against another, as well as limiting the incentive for factional groups to increase rhetoric or actions that appeal to religious or emotive issues.

3. Khalsa Sikhs believe that the last Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, conferred religious authority on the Sikh scriptures and on the community as a body. The Sant Nirankaris are considered heretical because they follow a living guru, who has added his own writings to the Sikh scripture. When the Sant Nirankaris held a conference in the holy city of Amritsar on an important Sikh religious holiday, violence broke out between them and some Khalsa Sikhs during which a number of people, mostly Sikhs, were killed. A hukamnama (religious edict) was issued that instructed the Khalsa Sikhs to have no social interchange with the group, and the Sant Nirankari guru was later assassinated.

4. There is also a demand for justice for the large number of victims, many of them innocent, of extra-judicial killings by the state, which also had a clear policy of torture. See Amiya Rao et al., Report to the Nation: Oppression in Punjab (New Delhi: Citizens for Democracy, 1985). That a prominent human rights activist, Jaswant Singh Khalra, was abducted and killed by the police in 1995 while investigating secret police killings and cremations demonstrates the volatility of this issue and the extent of a police cover-up; but it is tempered with frustration with the excesses of the militants, and an attitude that “loafers with guns” should be killed (personal communication). Puri, Judge, and Sekhon argue that villages that had supported the militants asserted excesses by the police, while those villages that had fought against the militants did not complain of overzealousness by the police, but just the opposite. Harish Puri, Paramjit Singh Judge, and Jagrup Singh Sekhon, Terrorism in Punjab: Understanding Grass Roots Reality (New Delhi: Har-anand Publications, 1999), pp. 32–33.

5. The three arenas of political maneuvering are the ministerial wing of the SAD, the organizational wing of the SAD, and the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (Supreme Management Committee of the Gurdwaras [Sikh temples]) (SGPC), described below.
One of the most basic demands of the Akali Dal has been a restructuring of state-center relations giving greater autonomy to the states. This would, at least theoretically, allow the Sikhs, as the majority community in Punjab, to control their own affairs. The demand for autonomy has a long history within the Sikh community, many of whom believe that independence, or quasi-independence, was in the cards during Partition but was mishandled by Sikh leaders. For these Sikhs, some type of autonomy should and will persist as a long-term goal. This demand was articulated in the Shiromani Akali Dal’s 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution, which, among a list of economic, political, and religious demands, calls for a type of federalism in which the central government’s writ would be limited to defense, foreign relations, currency, and communication. The document has been used as the basis for political demands; the Congress Party has countered that it is secessionist. As recently as February 2009, there was a furor when a major Akali Dal leader mentioned implementation of this resolution as a goal of the party.7

There has, in fact, been a move toward greater regional autonomy because of structural changes in the Indian political and economic systems having little to do with the central government devolving power to the states through negotiations. Rather, this shift toward federalism has stemmed from the growing importance of state-level parties in this era of coalition politics at the center, along with the move away from centralized planning. The latter is seen in the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms that also transfer power to the states. Furthermore, the S. R. Bommai v. Union of India decision of the Supreme Court of 1994 made it more difficult for the central government to intervene directly in state level politics by dismissing state governments in a partisan fashion. That is, rather than the central government deciding that the state level cabinet had lost its mandate, the ruling party must be allowed to try to prove its majority in a vote in the house.

Another major structural change in the Indian political party system that has impacted politics in Punjab is the rise of the BJP as a national party and its relationship with the Akalis in coalition governments there. Since the reorganization of the state’s boundaries in 1966, which gave a majority to the Sikhs in Punjab, an essentially two-party system has existed


in the state: the Akali Dal in opposition to the Congress Party, with Akali Dal governments drawing support from the Jan Sangh Party (the predecessor of the BJP). From 1966 to 1997, no Akali-led government lasted its full term, falling victim to factional fights within the Akali Dal that were manipulated by the Congress Party at the center. (Within Indian politics, the ruling party at the center has a variety of tools it can use to destabilize opposition parties in the states.) The situation has been reversed with BJP-led governments or potential BJP-led governments at the center restructuring this dynamic. Therefore, two changes that have stabilized Punjab politics have occurred.

First, coterminous coalition governments between the BJP and the Akali Dal at the state and central level have given stability and credibility to the state government. The BJP has stood resolutely with the Akali Dal’s chief minister of Punjab, Parkash Singh Badal, in the face of factional fights and attempts to pull down his government from within. It has supported him on every stage including inducting his son, Sukhbir Singh Badal, as a minister at the center. National leaders of the BJP even countenanced the recent appointment of Sukhbir Singh Badal as deputy chief minister of Punjab (and therefore heir apparent), in spite of strong opposition at the state level. This is the opposite of the situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Brass argues, Mrs. Gandhi as prime minister fundamentally restructured state-center relations by centralizing power and repeatedly intervening in state level politics to maintain Congress control. In the case of Punjab, this meant extending political patronage to extremists in an effort to split the Akali Dal and opposing and undermining moderate Akali Dal leaders by refusing to allow them a political victory in negotiations. Mrs. Gandhi viewed Punjab politics largely through the lens of this state’s impact on politics in the neighboring Hindi-belt; she also harbored resentment against the Akali Dal’s active protests against the Indian state’s repressive measures during the “Emergency” of 1975–77.

Second, in a related development, Badal has been able to consolidate his personal control over the three bases of political power that were previously

8. The coalition arrangement is functional for both parties as their support bases are completely separate. It is also problematic as few of the policy concerns of the Akalis are echoed by the BJP. In fact, the BJP has maintained until very recently that Sikhs are Hindus, a position that is anathema to many Sikhs. See Virginia Van Dyke, “‘Jumbo Cabinets,’ Factionalism, and the Impact of Federalism: Comparing Coalition Governments in Kerala, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh,” in India's 2004 Elections: Grass-roots and National Perspectives, eds. Ramashroy Roy and Paul Wallace (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 116–47.

more likely to each be controlled by a separate factional leader: the Akali Dal’s organizational wing, its ministerial wing, and the SGPC, described below. For the time being, these two developments effectively marginalize other Akali Dal factions and limit the influence of other parties or groups on internal party politics.

It may be suggested that such a stranglehold on power will squeeze other would-be leaders out of this straitjacket. These leaders—either from opposition to Badal’s ideology of Punjabiyat and alliance with the BJP, or under more-political compulsions—might then stage challenges whose ideology draws on the legacy of the militant movement. Although this has in fact occurred, particularly in response to frustration over Badal’s unsubtle grooming of his son as successor, reactions are touchy to anything that looks like an inducement to militancy. Constituents do not currently vote in large numbers for factions opposing Badal’s that appear to be calling for a return to the 1980s. Table 1 illustrates the instability of the political system prior to 1992 and its stability thereafter. In India, elections are mandated every five years, so a government that ends sooner is ending prematurely.

**Genesis of the Conflict**

The socioeconomic changes and political developments that have been seen as precipitating the militant movement include: the impact of the Green Revolution; the lack of non-agricultural employment, particularly limited options to enter military service; the social changes related to modernity that undermine a separate Sikh identity; and the political machinations by the central government. Dissatisfaction with economic, social, and political conditions found a voice in the late 1970s in a charismatic Sikh preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who was able to articulate these grievances as discrimination against Sikhs and the intentional undermining of Sikh identity. After initially offering Bhindranwale political patronage, the center responded in 1984 to the growth of militancy and to terrorist acts with a disastrous, heavy handed army action in the city of Amritsar, “Operation

10. Punjabiyat refers to a type of identity based on belonging to Punjab that could supersede divisive religious-based identity.

11. Punjab was one of the primary states where the Green Revolution was introduced in the 1960s. The new high-yielding varieties of seeds—used along with pesticides, fertilizer, and increased mechanization—led to the growth of a class of wealthy, largely Jat Sikh farmers. However, over time farmers, particularly small farmers, are finding the costs of Green Revolution technology leading to growing indebtedness. Two social results of this change have a bearing on the militant movement. One argument is that the growth in economic inequity was disturbing to Sikhs whose values included equality. Another view is that the sons of small farmers were frustrated by their life chances, particularly because there were few non-agricultural opportunities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chief Minister</th>
<th>Composition of Government</th>
<th>Date In</th>
<th>Date Out</th>
<th>Cause of Termination of Cabinet</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice Gurnam Singh</td>
<td>SAD (Sant)-SAD (Master) and various minor parties</td>
<td>3/1967</td>
<td>11/67</td>
<td>Gill defected, supported by Congress</td>
<td>New cabinet formed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lachhman Singh Gill</td>
<td>(Minority government)</td>
<td>11/1967</td>
<td>8/1968</td>
<td>Lost Congress support</td>
<td>President’s Rule imposed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parkash Singh Badal</td>
<td>SAD-Janata Party* - CPM</td>
<td>4/1977</td>
<td>6/1977</td>
<td>Dismissed when Congress returned to power at the Center</td>
<td>Elections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darbara Singh</td>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>2/1980</td>
<td>6/1980</td>
<td>Dismissed due to rising violence</td>
<td>President’s Rule</td>
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<td>President’s Rule</td>
<td></td>
<td>7/1980</td>
<td>10/1983</td>
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<td>Elections</td>
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<tr>
<td>President’s Rule</td>
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<td>10/1983</td>
<td>9/1985</td>
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<th>Chief Minister</th>
<th>Composition of Government</th>
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<th>Date Out</th>
<th>Cause of Termination of Cabinet</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<tr>
<td>Surjit Singh Barnala SAD (Longowal)</td>
<td>SAD</td>
<td>9/1985</td>
<td>5/1987</td>
<td>Becomes minority govt. when Akali factions withdraw; Congress later withdraws support for failure to control militancy</td>
<td>President’s Rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Rule</td>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>6/1987</td>
<td>2/1992</td>
<td>Chief minister assassinated by militants</td>
<td>Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beant Singh</td>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>2/1992</td>
<td>8/1995</td>
<td>Chief minister forced to resign after party’s poor showing in elections</td>
<td>New cabinet formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajinder Kaur Bhattal</td>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>1/1996</td>
<td>2/1997</td>
<td>Scheduled elections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkash Singh Badal</td>
<td>SAD-BJP</td>
<td>3/2007</td>
<td>Present</td>
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NOTE: CPM is the Communist Party India (Marxist).

*The Jan Sangh was part of the Janata Party in 1977.*
Bluestar” (discussed in detail below). This attack was followed by mopping-up operations known as Operation Woodrose in which the state killed or incarcerated innocent young men and terrorized their families.¹²

Political demands stem from the 1966 redrawing of the boundaries of Punjab State following, belatedly, an India-wide policy to reorganize political boundaries along linguistic lines. Sikhs then became the majority community in a much smaller state. This fulfilled a long-standing demand from the Akali Dal that the center implement polices that jibe with Nehru’s often quoted statement, “I see no wrong in an area and a set-up in the North wherein the Sikhs can also experience a glow of freedom.”¹³ Sikhs view themselves as having opted for India during the process of decolonization; the large majority of Sikhs that were living in the area that became Pakistan migrated to India.¹⁴

The way in which this last restructuring was done created long-standing grievances. Punjab was the last state to be reorganized, after two Sikh political leaders had gone on a “fast-unto-death” and after Punjabi-speaking Hindus in the state had told census canvassers that their mother tongue was Hindi, in order to block Punjab’s reorganization. Furthermore, certain issues remained outstanding. For example, the capital city of Chandigarh was not transferred to the state, and certain Punjabi-speaking areas were also left out. Other issues that created a sense of injustice included the amount of control still wielded by the central government over agricultural policy and licenses for industry; control over the dispensation of water rights to neighboring states; and smaller issues, such as a license to set up broadcasting from the Golden Temple.

Scholars disagree on the importance of the introduction of the Green Revolution as a factor in the Khalistan movement.¹⁵ Certainly, many of the

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¹⁴. Punjab was one of two states partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947. Today, there is a Punjab state in both India and Pakistan. The location of the boundary was drawn on the basis of the religion of the population. Pakistan gained the larger part of the British colonial state of Punjab, including most of the canal colonies, areas where the colonial government had developed a prosperous, irrigated agricultural sector, and kept the capital city of Lahore. Pakistan lost an all season road to the disputed area of Jammu and Kashmir. During Partition, it is estimated that almost a million people were killed in the transfer of population overall; more than four million crossed the border from the Pakistani to the Indian side in Punjab and had to be resettled. In 1966, in response to a long agitation known as the Punjabi Suba Movement, Punjab was trifurcated on a linguistic basis, and became a much smaller, albeit Sikh majority, state.

¹⁵. Brass argues that while socioeconomic issues are important during times of “normal” politics, the crisis should be located in the politicization of a conflict over the cultural and
Akali Dal demands were directed at policies impacting farmers who had adopted Green Revolution technology. These included subsidized electricity, availability of water, credit for farm machinery, and the procurement prices for grain. Sikhs, particularly the dominant Jat Sikhs, mainly reside in rural areas and are agriculturalists. The Green Revolution had an uneven impact on farmers because the larger capitalist farmers were in the best position to adopt the new technologies. The ultimate result was an increasing number of larger farms and a concomitant growth in the number of smaller farmers presumably selling their land. But, the larger farmers were worried as well about whether input costs and grain sales prices would continue to make agriculture viable.

The dependence of the state’s farmers on the central government was easily placed within the context of discrimination against Sikhs, particularly in the framework of the larger assertion that Punjab was being used as a colony to produce cheap primary goods while no investment was made in industry. A major concern was the lack of off-farm employment possibilities, especially given that, as Oberoi points out, Jat Sikh young men were unwilling to take jobs as laborers on someone else’s farm or as poorly paid laborers in the industries that existed. Many families had legacies of military service preceding and during the colonial period, when the British categorized the Sikhs as a “martial race.” However, Indira Gandhi’s stated plan to bring down the levels of Sikhs employed in the military to their percentage of India’s population created the perception of blatant discrimination.

Sikh identity also became an issue in the late 1970s. A hotly debated question is whether there is, or could be, an underlying Punjabiyat identity that transcended identities based on religious nationalism. Furthermore, there was a question whether Sikh identity was open to a multiplicity of interpretations or limited to a definition that only incorporates the Khalsa Sikhs—those who exhibit the most visible symbols of Sikh identity, particularly uncut hair and a turban. The changes in religious practices with
the impact of modernity were a primary emphasis of Bhindranwale when he began preaching. He would visit villages and exhort young people to be good Sikhs, not cut their hair, and not use narcotics. This concern over orthopraxy manifested itself also during the militant movement as certain militant groups attempted to instigate cultural and religious reform along fundamentalist lines, impacting the consumption of alcohol, clothing, and the behavior of women.

The morcha (agitation) launched by the Akali Dal in the early 1980s was a protest against the policies of the central government that seemed to discriminate against Sikhs. After 1980, when Congress won both the assembly and parliamentary elections in the state (aided in part by Akali factionalism), terrorist acts in Punjab began to rise. In 1982, Bhindranwale entered the political struggle led by the Akali Dal against the policies of the central government. The Akalis had an uneasy relationship with him, but no one could disown him completely because he appeared to be working for the Panth (Sikh community).

Bhindranwale created a power structure that dominated Punjab politics outside of electoral channels. In fact, when he did sponsor candidates for election, few were successful. Rather, he drew on his personal charisma, the Dam Dami Taksal (a “mint” or Sikh seminary), and the coterminous creation of new institutions that supported him. The latter included the Dal Khalsa (Army of the Khalsa), created in 1978 (many believe by Congress leaders); the Akhand Kirthani Jatha (Organization for the Ceaseless Singing of Devotional Songs), also formed in 1978; and the All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF). In fact, it has been argued that Bhindranwale had three sponsors in succession: Congress, sections of the Akali Dal, and Pakistan, which was said to have promised him military support in a showdown with Indian forces over establishing Khalistan.19

Whether this latter assertion is true, Bhindranwale had his own agenda and a very clear sense of himself in history. He seemed to have a prescient knowledge of his own death, believing it would usher in a social and political transformation: “I am a Sant, no one can harm me . . . it is not easy to kill me. If I die there will be floods and disaster. Those persons who are against me . . . will be taken care of by god.”20 In fact, Oberoi considered Bhindranwale’s movement to be millenarian because he stressed divine intervention and identified with “apocalyptic thinking.”21

Bhindranwale was implicated in the murders of two prominent individuals considered anti-Sikh but was protected for political reasons. The first

of these murders was that of the Sant Nirankari guru discussed above; the Home Minister of India commented in Parliament that Bhindranwale was not involved, in spite of his active participation in the violent clash and the rhetoric that followed. The second murder was of a Hindu newspaper owner, Lala Jagat Narain, a supporter of the Nirankaris, whose writings were seen as supporting the Hindu community in opposition to Sikhs. Bhindranwale was arrested by the Punjab government but released because of the direct intervention of the central government. He ultimately took up residence in the Akal Takht (Throne of the Timeless) itself, the shrine that symbolizes temporal power within the Golden Temple complex, and established something of a parallel government to the state system.

In 1984, the Indian army launched an attack on the Golden Temple complex to remove the militants who had fortified it; the action created martyrs and completely disaffected the Sikh population, including the diaspora. Estimates of the number of casualties vary widely. The number is high because the complex was filled with a large number of pilgrims and the battle went on for close to three days. It is uncertain because bodies were cremated en masse and not counted in any organized fashion. An Indian government White Paper puts the number at 493 civilians killed and 83 men from the army; civil rights organizations, such as the Movement against State Oppression, estimate the number “exceeds 10,000”; and Mark Tully, one of the few journalists to witness the events, estimates that “1,600 people were unaccounted for” above and beyond the government figure (although not necessarily killed). The intense reaction of the Sikh community apparently was not anticipated by the government as the army moved into the Sikhs’ holiest religious center, damaging much of the structure and destroying by fire, deliberately or not, irreplaceable manuscripts in the library. As phrased by Pettigrew, the goal of the attack was “to suppress the culture of a people, to attack their heart, to strike a blow at their spirit and self-confidence.”

Another blow was struck against the Sikhs when upward of 2,000 Sikhs in Delhi and several other cities were murdered by rampaging mobs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in retaliation for the army action. Complicity of members of the Congress Party in not only condoning the killings but actually organizing the pogrom, is irrefutable. Justice for survivors has been

23. When Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was killed during Operation Bluestar, many refused to accept his death. Many believed that a blue horse had come down from heaven and spirited him away.
25. Tully and Jacob, Amritsar, pp. 183–85.
non-existent; in fact, two of the main accused Congress Party leaders continued as members of Parliament until pressure built up against them in 2009.

In 1985, elections were held in the state that were widely heralded as a positive move and evidence that Rajiv Gandhi, as the new prime minister, would follow a less interventionist policy. This was an encouraging sign after an ominous beginning, when the conflict in Punjab and the assassination of Indira Gandhi by two Sikhs were used to whip up communal support for the Congress Party in the preceding national elections in December 1984. The elections followed an accord signed behind closed doors between Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, a prominent and moderate Akali leader, and Rajiv Gandhi. This was perceived as a sellout by the militants, leading to Longowal’s assassination. The accord itself fits the model, according to Gurharpal Singh, of “symbolic agreements accompanied by non-implementation.” That is, not only was the agreement not implemented, but the center was negotiating with members of the AISSF at the same time, while keeping them away from the negotiations with Longowal.

In the subsequent elections, the Akali Dal came to power without coalition partners for the first time, but, ultimately, factional fighting left the government at the mercy of Congress. The central government then toppled the Akali Dal in 1987, dismissing the state government and imposing direct President’s Rule, under the premise that terrorism was not being contained by the moderate Akali government. This was the last time state level elections would be held until 1992 and, at this point, power shifted to the militant groups. Battling state forces and each other, these groups attempted to legitimize their actions through institutions such as the Akal Takht, the putative supreme seat of Sikh authority, or various “Panthic Committees,” described below. As Wallace points out, there was no obvious second string of leaders who were ready to take over after Bhindranwale, although certainly such claims were made by his father, Joginder Singh, and Bhai Mokham Singh of the Dam Dami Taksal. What emerged was a plethora of militant groups that engaged in internecine and revenge killings. The main groups—the Babbar Khalsa (Lion of the Khalsa), the Khalistan Commando Force, the Khalistan Liberation Force, and the Bhindranwale Tiger Force—each split into an astounding number of factions. Ultimately, along with independent groups, “a total of at least 162 terrorist groups” could be counted.

Political Structures

Within Sikh politics, there are parallel structures of political power that correspond to those of the Indian state, both institutional and ideological. Just preceding and during the era of militancy, more-traditional structures constituted during the colonial period were displaced by individuals and groups. These associations sought to establish their legitimacy in newly re-formulated religious concepts or by foregrounding new or less-well known institutions. The charismatic leadership of Bhindranwale, grounded in institutions that were associated with him, created a template used after his death in which those perceived as having a religious authority vied for power, or were used by others aspiring to political power. Once Punjab’s electoral politics resumed in 1992, it set off a struggle between these alternative loci of religio-political authority and the formerly established political parties and institutions.

These latter include both the Akali Dal and the SGPC, which controls and administers the historical Sikh gurdwaras. 30 Both of these grew out of a movement in the 1920s to remove control of the gurdwaras from private and non-Akali Sikh hands and restore them to the community. As such, both are ethnonationalist organizations; the SGPC has been referred to as the “religious parliament of the Sikhs.” 31 It controls a large amount of both material and ideological resources, employing a vast contingent of people from the ragis (who sing in the gurdwaras) to those in charge, the jathedar. The SGPC also defines orthodoxy and orthopraxy within Sikhism and claims to speak as the voice of the Sikhs. Elections to the SGPC are held by the state itself; electoral success in this area may serve as a stepping stone for those who aspire to a career in “secular” politics. The institution also provides an arena in which factional fights play out. The SGPC is unique in its role. By contrast, Hindu nationalists can only aspire to create such an “institutionalized” Hinduism.

Among the gurdwaras managed and controlled by the SGPC, five are accorded special reverence because of their association with the lives of the gurus. These are referred to as takhts (thrones). The most important of these is the Akal Takht, located within the Golden Temple complex immediately opposite the Harimandir Sahib, the Golden Temple itself. The Akal Takht is important both for its history and its symbolism. It was originally constructed as a large raised platform by the sixth guru, from


31. Puri, ibid., p. 301. This is a common expression. Puri uses this phrase but makes clear that it does not originate with him.
which he would hold court, to demonstrate his assumption of temporal along with spiritual power. Later, when the bands of Sikhs were scattered across Punjab, they would gather for meetings in front of the Akal Takht. It was destroyed twice, once in 1764, and again by the Indian army in 1984. The Akal Takht was rebuilt by the Indian government, trying to quickly repair wounds left by the 1984 attack. It was pulled down and rebuilt with voluntary labor organized by the Sikh community. The Akal Takht continues to represent the union of temporal with spiritual power; important edicts issued by the SGPC are announced from this site.32

There are also ideologies and institutions that provide an alternative source of authority or legitimacy. Although they were not absent previously, they came to the fore during the era of militancy. The tenth guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1720), is believed to have invested authority in the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib* (*granth* refers to a book; *sahib* is an honorific), and the Sikh community (Sangat). This latter is known as the ideology of Guru-Panth (the idea that the guru is present when the community is assembled). When the community is called together in a Sarbat Khalsa (the entire Khalsa, or community), the guru is considered present, and the consensus of the community is invested with the authority to make decisions. Another concept also stemming from stories around the life of Guru Gobind Singh establishes that five upright Sikhs, known as Panch Piaras (Five Beloved), may make decisions that are binding on the community. This institution today may be composed of any five Khalsa Sikhs, but of course it becomes complicated as to who can actually make decisions for the community.

The challenge to the traditional structure of Sikh politics emerged in 1986. This period followed the army action in the Golden Temple complex and occurred during a time of intense political upheaval. Although there was an elected Akali Dal government in place at the time, a group of militants who were associated with the Dam Dami Taksal called for a Sarbat Khalsa to be held outside the strictures of the SGPC. The militants issued a call for the creation of Khalistan and appointed a council of five called the Panthic Committee (the committee to represent and lead the Panth). A militant group, the Khalistan Commando Force, was created that would act for the council. This was the first real call for the establishment of Khalistan, although Bhindranwale had alluded to it. Until 1988, when the movement splintered, this type of religious authority was considered sufficient by many to legitimize the militants in the face of the complete discrediting of the normal political process.

In tandem with these efforts was the attempt to promote the *jathedar* of the Akal Takht as the ultimate political and religious authority. Sikhism has no priesthood, and the *jathedar*s are appointed by the SGPC. During the militant era and after, there was an effort to create an ecclesiastical hierarchy that would supersede the SGPC. The goal was to enable other groups or individuals to get their man into that position; among the hopeful were central government officials, who hoped to control the Sikhs by controlling the appointment of a cooperative *jathedar*.

When the militants called the Sarbat Khalsa in 1986, they also dissolved the SGPC, which had the authority to appoint the *jathedar*, and appointed their own. When that person did not appear to be doing their bidding, Gurbachan Singh Manochahal, a militant who started his own group, the Bhindranwale Tiger Force for Khalistan, appointed himself *jathedar* by force. Other *jathedar*s appeared to have made a deal with the central government.

The obvious difficulty with these lines of authority within the community was that they involved contestation over who could call a Sarbat Khalsa, who had the right to appoint the Akal Takht *jathedar*, and who could be part of the Panch Piaras. Competing Panch Piaras have, in fact, historically given contradictory decisions. When the militant movement began to fracture, competing factions disowned the legitimacy of the original Panthic Committee and established their own. There were also multiple, competing *jathedar*s, who were discarded when they would not acquiesce to demands from certain militant groups. Once power had shifted to quasi-religious institutions and individuals, how would a secular-elected government be able to reassert itself?

**The Cessation of the Conflict**

Peace was restored to Punjab through draconian policing measures under the now legendary (or infamous) Punjab Director-General of Police K. P. S. Gill. He had been reinstated in this position by the newly elected Congress Party government in 1991. He was aided by the fact that the militants, many of whom were not ideologically motivated (at least in the latter stage), had lost the support and sympathy of an exhausted rural population. One prominent pro-Khalistan politician blamed the leaders of the militant groups, saying, “The youth were given AK-47s and they were not given any moral training so they went about looting and plundering.”

Aside from out and out criminals joining their ranks, there are also other explanations why the militants did not seem to be working for the good of the community. There is a widely held belief, backed up by considerable evidence, that the militants were motivated by material gain rather than a desire to bring about a Khalistan.

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33. Interview in Punjab, July 1997.
evidence, that the Indian government promoted anti-social elements and introduced government loyalists into militant groups to divide, confuse, and mislead them. Another goal was inciting them to commit crimes, particularly inter-group violence. Gurharpal Singh relates this to what he terms “managed disorder,” the idea that ebbs and flows in violence were part of a controlled design to aid the Congress Party.34 Certainly, former militants, known as “cats,” were induced by the security forces to work for them. This sometimes produced disastrous results when it became apparent that criminal behavior was supported by the government.35

Anthropological works have identified fun and excitement, along with expressions of masculinity, as explanations for why young men join militant, religious nationalist groups.36 Puri et al. identify “fun” as one of the primary reasons young men, undereducated or even illiterate, and with few job prospects, joined pro-Khalistan militant groups. Only 5% of “militants” joined in pursuit of Khalistan, according to this study.37

Joyce Pettigrew identifies “Jat Sikh social structure and political culture” as crucial in understanding how the movement was undermined. According to her, the Sikh community—especially its Jat segment—is characterized by factionalism and a desire to ally with whoever is in power in order to gain the upper hand in village struggles and feuds. She describes how, over several visits to Punjab in the early 1990s, she could see loyalties shift from the militants to the state itself as the movement disintegrated into personal feuds, vendettas, and internecine fighting fueled by the government’s infiltration and subversion of militant groups. Chaos was also exacerbated by Pakistan’s policy of handing out arms “indiscriminately,” its goals apparently falling short of “liberating” Punjab.38

36. For a very insightful examination of young men joining religio-nationalist militant groups for “fun” and the “spectacle,” see Oskar Verkaaik, Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Although he focuses on urban street culture, one could draw parallels with the frequently asserted attraction for young men in rural Punjab for a motorcycle and a gun.
37. Puri et al., Terrorism in Punjab, pp. 68–71. The methodology of this study is such that all of the interviews were conducted after the era of militancy was over, and actual participants were not interviewed to give their own assessment. But, using villages as a unit, it is suggestive of how rural Sikhs viewed the militants’ motivation.
Divisions among the Sikhs also undermined the movement. Pettigrew points out that non-Jat urban Sikhs did not want to live in a “Jatistan.” Pramod Kumar expands this further, arguing that differentiation of the population stemming from the Green Revolution ensured a lack of unity. There is in fact an argument that the effort by Akali Sikh leaders to place economic issues (such as the procurement price of grain) in the context of danger to the Panth was precisely to gloss over these differences and unite the Sikhs behind issues of more concern to the wealthier, capitalist farmers. Other divisions stem from the traditional preference for military or police service as a career choice: 65% of the police force in Punjab were Sikhs in the 1980s. Gill famously referred to the conflict as Jat against Jat.

Another view of the ending of the militancy focuses less on social structure and the venality of the militants, and more on political will. It also points to the overwhelming use of security forces to induce villagers (unsure as to whom the winner was going to be) to switch sides. Gill describes the change in policy this way: “... the provision of adequate force in the state, backed by an uncompromising policy of non-interference. ... There was no back-street driving from Delhi, no dubious political moves and maneuvers, no deals with the terrorists and their over-ground agencies, undermining strategic and security initiatives.”

After the killing of a number of prominent militants and the surrender of others, the rural populace stopped showing up for the various ceremonies and political demonstrations called by the militants that had been a hallmark of the post-1989 period. The militant era, in essence, was over. This followed on the heels of the 1992 assembly elections in the state. In spite of the low turnout for those elections, voters ultimately supported democracy with a turnout of 70% for municipal council elections held later in 1992, followed by panchayat (local level), elections in January 1993 with an even higher participation percentage.

The 1992 state assembly elections and the boycott of these by all militant groups and major Akali Dal factions have produced a number of competing explanations as to the motives and compulsions of the different players, e.g., why elections were held when they were? The year before, announced elections had been suddenly called off at the last minute after many candidates had defied the militants’ boycott order. Many of the candidates had been killed by militants. In spite of Chief Election Commissioner

T. N. Seshan’s contention that the cancellation of the elections occurred because of the situation on the ground, it seems clear that the decision was made because of concern over the prospective results that would have disfavored the Congress; certainly this was a disincentive for Congress to hold elections.

The traditional Akali leaders, who had stood by virtually helplessly through five years of President’s Rule and militancy, began to reconsolidate their power. However, at this point, there were multiple Akali Dal factions. The militants were, for the most part, eliminated or, in some cases, rehabilitated through a government policy. But possible alternative forms of authority—embodied in the Dam Dami Taksal, the Panthic Committees, the AISSF, and the Akal Takht jathedar—continued to provide a new, and for some, empowering vision of what politics and leadership could look like. However, the Dam Dami Taksal’s head, Baba Thakur Singh, was quite elderly. Until 1995, the institution continued to maintain that Bhindranwale was alive in the hopes of maintaining unity, but this was to no avail as the leadership split into different factions. The AISSF also split. Given the centrality of religious nationalism to the militant movement, and to Sikh politics more broadly, a number of sants put themselves forward or were put forward by others, as potential leaders, particularly in relation to the 1996–97 parliamentary, state assembly, and SGPC elections.

There was an effort made to center politics around the figure of the Akal Takht jathedar, and much discussion about the need to change the method of his selection so as to represent all Sikhs. The jathedar, Professor Manjit Singh, tried to unite all the Akali factions by appeals and threats, presumably at the urging of Gurcharan Singh Tohra, the head of the SGPC, who was competing with Parkash Singh Badal for leadership at the time. Badal, however, resisted the jathedar’s attempt to create a unified Akali Dal under his dictate. Unity with Tohra and other Sikh leaders would have diluted Badal’s more moderate position and emphasis on a Punjabiyat identity. In order to achieve this end, Manjit Singh summoned Badal to the Akal Takht on the threat of excommunication for refusing to join the united Akali Dal. Badal, however, arrived with such a large contingent of supporters that the jathedar was unable to act against him.

Parliamentary, assembly, and SGPC elections were held in 1996–97. (The government is mandated to hold the SGPC elections every five years, but after a span of 17 years, the joke was that the sitting members would be too elderly to travel to the meetings.) Badal’s faction of the Akali Dal won all

42. Interview with T. N. Seshan in Delhi, 1996.
three elections decisively. This reasserted the dominance of the traditional parties in the face of challenges by militant-associated factions.

Conclusion

The ideal of autonomy has a long-term attraction to Sikhs who feel a strong identity as a nation, who draw on the historical Sikh kingdom of Ranjit Singh as an idyllic precedent, and who view Sikh history as a long struggle for Khalistan. It is not uncommon for Sikhs to share the idea that Sikhs have contributed to India in ways far beyond what their mere numbers would suggest, such as in the nationalist movement, prominent roles in the military, and in developing Punjab as the breadbasket of India. Many feel that their reward has been various forms of discrimination.

Working against this long-term goal of an autonomous or independent state (at least for those who desire it) are migration trends. As Sikhs move out of Punjab and go abroad, workers from less developed states move in, undermining Punjab's position as a Sikh majority state. Symbolic issues surrounding Sikh identity continue to energize groups that were prominent between 1980 and 1992, such as the current agitation against certain religious leaders who are viewed as being heretical and/or insulting to Sikhism and the Sikh gurus. As mentioned earlier, there are a number of sants in rural areas in Punjab associated with institutions known as deras (religious headquarters)—9,000 by one count. Most of these do not challenge orthodoxy. Growth in their numbers is such that McLeod referred in 1987 to the “Sant phenomenon in modern Punjab.”44 Their numbers have multiplied since the militant era, as various religious leaders took advantage of the money available from the SGPC for rebuilding gurdwaras, and then established their own roles.45 Sants are thought to have a great deal of influence over their followers' political beliefs and behavior. Political leaders make well-publicized visits to seek the blessings of these individuals in the run-up to an election, which then has the effect of increasing the status of the sant being patronized.

Recently, several religious leaders have been seen as violating orthodoxy in such a way as to inflame the SGPC and pro-Khalistan groups. The most prominent of these is Baba Gurmit Ram Rahim, who claims to have moved beyond mundane definitions of religious divisions. Still, Ram Rahim had himself pictured in an advertisement dressed like Guru Gobind Singh and


replicating the symbolism of the ceremony at which the 10th Sikh guru inaugurated the Khalsa in 1699. Following publication, the resulting furor included violent clashes between the Khalsa Sikhs and Ram Rahim's followers. One protestor, now known as a martyr, was killed by Ram Rahim's bodyguards. The then-jathedar of the Akal Takht issued a hukamnama, instructing Sikhs not to have any social interaction with this group. The Akal Takht has demanded that the dera, called Dera Sacha Sauda, be closed and Ram Rahim arrested. Certain Khalsa Sikh groups have organized themselves into a Khalsa Action Committee to enforce the edicts.  

There is a caste component to this conflict as well, as many of the followers of Dera Sacha Sauda, and other deras where the religious affiliation is syncretistic or less clear-cut, are dalits or scheduled castes—both terms refer to the same lowest group within the caste hierarchy. Such a dera, according to Ronki Ram, provides the “socio-spiritual space” for non-Jat Sikhs that is both a political threat and a “serious challenge to the Sikh-Khalsa identity.” Ram argues that the low-caste adherents of these deras who have run afoul of orthodoxy represent a “near-exodus of dalits from Sikhism.” This impacts the Jat-dominated SGPC and Akali Dal, which have never commanded the unwavering support of lower caste Sikhs, who often vote for the Congress. In fact, Baba Gurmit Ram Rahim had instructed his followers to vote for the Congress in the last assembly election in 2007, and many observers attribute Congress’s win of 12 seats in an Akali stronghold to this factor. So, this conflict relates to power issues, as well as issues of identity.  

Chief Minister Badal, however, apparently does not want to alienate the followers of these types of deras or the Sikhs who are opposed to them. For this reason, his response has been measured. Ronki Ram argues that the response to this controversy is tempered within the Akali Dal by a concern for the “hard earned peace in the state.” Still, more militant groups are calling for direct action by the community, and disparaging Badal’s moderate stance, in a scenario that looks much like 1978.  

Certainly, the electoral responses to those attempting to generate enthusiasm over ideas drawn from the militant era do not suggest much support.  

49. Ibid., p. 4071.
Kumar argued in 1999 that history was to some extent repeating itself as Badal and SGPC President Tohra attempted to outdo each other in showing who was most sympathetic with the symbols of militancy, thereby reintroducing a “competitive religiosity” that stems from factional fights. Yet, ultimately, this factional division was reconciled by the voters. Tohra was at that time allied with Akal Takht Jathedar Bhai Ranjit Singh, whose life sentence for killing the head of the Sant Nirankaris back in the 1980s had been commuted in 1997 by the president. Once released from prison and installed as jathedar (he had been appointed from Tihar Jail in 1990), his pronouncements resonated as a possible harbinger of renewed militancy, although Bhai Ranjit Singh argued that he was never a supporter of Khalistan, only a proponent of a distinct Sikh identity. His insistence that gurdwaras outside of India do away with the tables and chairs that had been introduced for eating the communal meal (langar) and resume eating seated on the floor in the traditional manner, led to violence in Canada between those who supported this move and those who opposed it.

The factional fight between Badal and Tohra led to Tohra pulling his supporters out of the Badal ministry and creating his own party, the Sarb Hind Shromani Akali Dal (All India SAD, SHSAD) in 1999. This faction contested the general elections that year in alliance with several Akali Dal factions, including the pro-Khalistan Akali Dal (Amritsar), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (Party of the Majority, BSP). The SHSAD did not win a single seat (although it did win 5% of the vote), while the SAD (Amritsar) won one, the seat of pro-Khalistan politician Simranjit Singh Mann. The SHSAD along with its allies failed to win any seats in the 2002 assembly elections, although it had expanded its scope and renamed itself the Shromani Akali Dal Panthic Morcha (SAD Front of the Sikh Community), now comprising several Akali Dal factions and organizations of sants. Gurcharan Singh Tohra then reconciled with the Badal faction in 2003. Again, in the run up to the 2007 assembly elections, various militant-affiliated factions, and/or factions opposed to Badal’s dominance of the party, attempted to create a viable opposition to Badal. This was exemplified by a very public and physical clash when Simranjit Singh Mann and his supporters tried to gain entrance to the dais on which a program was being held in honor of the birthday of a historical Sikh saint. The Badal faction

of the Akali Dal and the SGPC had organized the events on the stage, and refused to allow Mann and his colleagues access. Following this altercation, Akali Dal factions and militant groups attempted to create a common platform to contest the elections. These groups included the SAD (Mann), the Dal Khalsa, Prem Singh Chandhok’s SAD (Longowal), Paramjit Singh Sarna’s SAD (Delhi), the Akali Dal (1920), along with other splinter groups, and former militants. This effort was not successful and, in fact, some of these faction leaders were coopted by Badal’s faction of the Akali Dal even before the elections. Some politicians may have joined hands with the dissidents to create an advantageous position for themselves in negotiating a return to Badal’s faction. Some had an ideological predisposition that Akali politics should be religious-based and reflect a uniquely Sikh identity. However, the poor election results for those associated with militant politics demonstrate the importance of democracy in limiting extremism.

How then does this argument relate to arguments that have been put forward in explaining the Khalistan movement? Brass argues that politics by the Congress Party that undermined moderates while promoting extremists is significant in explaining why this movement initially gained so much salience. This argument has become part of “commonsense” explanations by Akali politicians who see any statement that can be construed as pro-Khalistan as coming from those allied with Congress or “playing the Congress game,” that is, trying to divide the Akalis by promoting a pro-Khalistani view. Yet, the political situation is quite different now. As argued earlier, the Congress is no longer able to promote factionalism in the Akali Dal to bring governments down as it did before, for two reasons: the alliance between the Akalis and the BJP, and changes in the power structure within the Akali Dal itself. Further, a shift toward federalism increases the likelihood that a functioning democracy will not be readily undermined. However, because some of these conditionalities may be only short-term, it would be too extreme to state that militant politics can never reemerge.