The Punjab Crisis

During the 1980s, Punjab was engulfed by a separatist movement which was transformed into a campaign of terror and which has been aptly described by some as a low-intensity war and a dangerous crisis for the Indian nation.

The genesis of the problem lay in the growth of communalism in Punjab in the course of the twentieth century and, in particular, since 1947, and which erupted into extremism, separatism and terrorism after 1980. Before 1947, communalism in Punjab was a triad with Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communalisms, opposing one another, and the latter two often joining forces against the first. After August 1947, Muslim communalism having disappeared from the Punjab, Hindu and Sikh communalisms were pitted against each other.

From the beginning the Akali leadership adopted certain communal themes which became the constitutive elements of Sikh communalism in all its phases. We may discuss them briefly, as they developed before 1966 when the present Punjabi-speaking state of Punjab was created.

Denying the ideal of a secular polity, the Akalis asserted that religion and politics could not be separated as the two were essentially combined in Sikhism. They also claimed that the Akali Dal was the sole representative of the Sikh Panth which was defined as a combination of the Sikh religion and the political and other secular interests of all Sikhs.

A second theme put forth by the Akalis was that Sikhs were being continuously subjected to discrimination, oppression, persecution, humiliation and victimization, and that there were all sorts of conspiracies against them. There was also constant antiHindu rhetoric. Hindus were accused of designs to dominate Sikhs, of imposing Brahminical tyranny over them, and of threatening their 'Sikh identity'. The Congress and the 'Hindu' Nehru, 'who ruled from Delhi', were made special targets of Akali anger for representing the Hindu and Brahminical conspiracy against Sikhs. Above all, echoing the Muslim League credo of the 1940s, the Akalis raised the cry of Sikh religion in danger.

While the relatively extreme Akali leaders were more virulent, even the more moderate leaders were not far behind in articulating these communal complaints. Moreover, with the passage of time, the extremists' influence kept on growing, and was in any case met with little criticism or disavowal from the more moderate Akalis. For example, addressing the All India Akali Conference in 1953, Master Tara Singh, who dominated the Akali Dal as well as the Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) at the time, said : 'Englishman has gone [sic], but our liberty has not come. For us the so-called liberty is simply a change of masters, black for white. Under the garb of democracy and secularism our *Panth,* our liberty and our religion are being crushed.'[1]

Interestingly, no evidence other than that of the denial of the Punjabi Suba was offered for this long list of grievances. The only concrete allegation regarding discrimination against Sikhs in government service was found to be baseless by a commission appointed by Nehru in 1961. The

political scientist Baldev Raj Nayar was to point out in 1966 that though Sikhs 'are less than 2 per cent of the Indian population, they constitute about 20 per cent of the Indian army, have double their proportionate share in the Indian administrative services, and that in the Punjab their share in the services, as also in the legislature, the cabinet, and the Congress Party organisation, is higher than their proportion in the population (of the state)'.[2]

Another significant feature of Akali politics during this period was the use and manipulation of the institutions and symbols of the Sikh religion in order to harness religious sentiments and fervour to communal appeal. Significant in this respect was the Akali use of the SGPC, which controlled over 700 Sikh gurudwaras, to promote Akali politics and to organize Akali political movements. In particular, consistent use was made of the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

Akali politics also witnessed factionalism resulting in intense rivalry and competition between different Akali groups with regard to communal extremism, and also the control of the gurudwaras and the Golden Temple. This rivalry also led to constant multiplication and escalation of demands and the more moderate among the Akalis consistently yielding to the extremist and emerging groups.

Hindu communalism was also very active in Punjab during the Nehru years. Though not as strident or wedded to religion as Sikh communalism, it continuously acted as a counter-point to the latter.

Secular Response to the Punjab Problem

Before we discuss the two major issues around which communal politics in Punjab revolved till 1966, let us briefly consider how the secular parties dealt with Punjab's communal problem. As we have brought out earlier, Nehru adopted three basic rules for dealing with militant agitations and their demands: no negotiations or political transactions with the leaders of a movement or acceptance of their demands if they had secessionist tendencies, if they took recourse to violence, or based their movement or demands on religion or communalism. Nehru was more than aware of the fascist character of extreme communalism, including its Akali variety under Master Tara Singh's leadership.

At the same time, Nehru, being very sensitive to the feelings of the minorities, tried to conciliate the Akalis by accommodating, as far as possible, their secular demands. This approach led him to sign pacts with the Akali Dal twice in 1948 and 1956 when it agreed to shed its communal character. The accommodative strategy failed, however, to stem the growth of communalism in Punjab. New leaders soon emerged and resurrected the Akali Dal on a more extreme ideological and political basis, formulating and putting forward new lists of demands and grievances. Simultaneously, the Congress accommodation of the Akalis strengthened Hindu communal forces.

Nehru gave full support to Pratap Singh Kairon, Punjab's chief minister, as he was dealing firmly with both Hindu and Sikh communalisms. Neither Nehru or Kairon, however, took steps to check the communalization of Punjabi society through a mass ideological campaign or to

confront communalism frontally at a time when it was not difficult to do so.

The CPI was quite strong in Punjab and a very strong force for secularism. It also opposed the Hindu and Sikh communalisms, politically and ideologically, throughout the 1950s. However, after 1964, its two offshoots, the CPI and the CPM, formed alliances with the Akali Dal for making electoral gains, thus giving Akali politics a certain legitimacy.

Roots of Post-1947 Communalism

Two major issues, which were in themselves secular but were communalized by Sikh and Hindu communalists, dominated Punjab politics till 1966. The first issue was that of state language: to decide what was to be the language of administration and schooling in bilingual Punjab. The Hindu communalists wanted this status for Hindi and the Sikh communalists for Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script. The government tried to resolve the problem by dividing Punjab into two—Punjabi and Hindi—linguistic zones. But the Hindu communalists opposed the decisions to make the study of Punjabi, along with Hindi, compulsory in all schools and Punjabi being made the only official language for district administration in the Punjabi linguistic zone. Even more contentious was the problem of the script for Punjabi. Traditionally, for centuries, Punjabi had been written in Urdu, Gurmukhi and Devanagari (Hindi) scripts. However, dissociating Punjabi from its common cultural background, the Akalis demanded that Gurmukhi alone should be used as the script for Punjabi. The Hindu communal organizations insisted on Devanagari also being used along with Gurmukhi. The issue was given a strong communal complexion by both the Sikh and Hindu communalists.

The second issue—that of the Punjabi Suba—proved to be more emotive and divisive. After the SRC was set up in 1955, the Akali Dal, the CPI, many Congressmen and Punjabi intellectuals put before it a demand for the reorganization of the state on linguistic lines, which would lead to the creation of Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana. The SRC rejected the demand on the grounds that there was not much difference between Hindi and Punjabi and that the minimum measure of agreement necessary for making a change did not exist among the people of Punjab. After a great deal of haggling, an agreement was arrived at in 1956 between the Akali Dal and the Government of India leading to the merger of Punjab and Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU).

However, the Akali Dal under the leadership of Master Tara Singh soon organized a powerful agitation around the demand for the formation of a Punjabi Suba. Giving the demand a blatantly communal character, the Akali Dal alleged that the non-acceptance of the demand was an act of discrimination against Sikhs. It argued that the Sikhs needed a state of their own in which they could dominate as a religious and political community because of their population preponderance. The Jan Sangh and other Hindu communal organizations and individuals strenuously opposed this demand on the ground that it represented an effort to impose Sikh domination and Sikh theocracy on Punjab. They denied that Punjabi was the mother tongue of Hindus in the Punjabi-speaking part of the state and asked the latter to register themselves as Hindi-speaking in the Census of 1961.

Interestingly, the Harijan Sikhs, known as Mazhabi Sikhs, who were mostly landless agricultural labourers, also opposed the demand for a Punjabi Suba because they were afraid that the new state would be dominated by their class opponents, the rich peasants, who as Jat Sikhs were the main supporters of the Akali Dal.

Nehru refused to concede the demand for a Punjabi Suba mainly because of its communal underpinnings. He felt that the acceptance of a communal demand would threaten the secular fabric of the state and society. Nor was there a broad consensus in the state on the demand. Apart from a large section of Hindus, two stalwart Sikh leaders of the Congress, Pratap Singh Kairon and Darbara Singh, were bitterly opposed to the demand, as it was communal. Nehru should perhaps have accepted the demand as it was inherently just, especially as it was also being supported on a secular basis by the CPI, the PSP and a number of intellectuals and as, by 1960, the rest of India had been reorganized on a linguistic basis.

However, the way for the creation of a Punjabi Suba in consonance with Nehru's criteria was cleared by two later developments. First, Sant Fateh Singh, who ousted Master Tara Singh from the leadership of the SGPC and the Akali Dal, declared that the demand for a Punjabi Suba was entirely language based. Second, major political and social organizations in Haryana demanded a separate Hindi-speaking state and those in Kangra asked for its merger with Himachal Pradesh. Consequently, in March 1966, Indira Gandhi, the prime minister, announced that Punjab would be split into two states: Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana, with Kangra being merged with Himachal Pradesh.

But one question still remained: Where would Chandigarh go? To settle the matter, Indira Gandhi appointed the Punjab Boundary Commission, whose terms of reference were accepted by both sides. The Commission by a majority of two to one awarded Chandigarh along with the surrounding areas to Haryana. The Akali Dal, however, refused to accept the award. Indira Gandhi, not willing to displease the Akalis, announced that Chandigarh would be made a Union Territory and would serve as a capital both to Punjab and Haryana. Dissatisfied, the Akali Dal launched, immediately after the creation of the new state in November 1966, a vigorous agitation for the inclusion of Chandigarh in Punjab. However, after some time, its leadership agreed to submit the question to arbitration by the prime minister and to abide by her decision. Once again Indira Gandhi yielded to Akali pressure and, in 1970, awarded Chandigarh to Punjab with two Punjab tehsils (subdivisions), Fazilka and Abohar, having Hindu majority, being transferred to Haryana. This decision, too, was not implemented because of the Akali Dal's refusal to agree to the transfer of the two tehsils.

The acceptance of the Punjabi Suba demand was, we believe, a correct step, but it should not have been seen as a solution of the Punjab problem. The heart of that problem was communalism and unless that was eradicated the problem would remain, though it might take ever newer forms.

Akali Politics and Militancy

With the creation of the Punjabi Suba, all the concrete major demands that the Akali Dal had

raised and agitated for over the years had been accepted and implemented; no real, meaningful demands were left which could enthuse its followers for long and therefore be sustained for long. It was, therefore, faced with the problem of where to go politically. The option of giving up communal politics and becoming either a purely religious and social organization or a secular party appealing to all Punjabis was seen by the Akali leaders as committing political harakiri. Akali communalism therefore inexorably moved towards separatism as was the case with the Muslim League after 1937. The fact is that the logic of minority communalism, especially when it is repeatedly 'satisfied' is separatism, just as the logic of majority communalism is fascism.

Another problem was that of acquiring power through democratic means and the electoral process. Even in the newly created Punjabi Suba the Akali Dal failed to secure a majority in the 1967 and later elections. For one, the population arithmetic did not favour it as the Sikhs constituted less than 60 per cent of Punjab's population. Second, the Scheduled Caste Sikhs, constituting 25 to 30 per cent of the Sikh population, had, as agricultural labourers, a basic class contradiction with the rich and middle peasants, who were the main social base of the Akali Dal. They, therefore, voted for the Congress and the Communists till 1980. Third, and most important of all, Sikhs did not vote exclusively along communal lines. Most often, a good majority of Sikhs voted for the Congress and the Communists.

In fact, from 1952 to 1980, the Akali votes hovered between 35 and 45 per cent of the Sikh votes. The only time the Akali Dal was able to form the government in Punjab was in 1967 in alliance with the Jan Sangh, the Hindu communal party which had bitterly opposed the demand for a Punjabi Suba, and in 1977 in alliance with the Janata Party whose major constituent in Punjab was the Jan Sangh. In the 1980 elections to the Punjab assembly, just before launching its most militant and communal movement, the Akali Dal secured only 26.9 per cent of the total vote. This meant that less than 50 per cent of Sikhs voted for it and that the majority of Sikhs rejected the Akali politics and ideology.

Having lost the elections in 1980 and in order to widen their support base among Sikhs, the Akalis began to intensify the communal content of their politics and to continuously escalate their demands, the so-called moderate leaders keeping in step with the extremists. In 1981, the main Akali Dal, headed by Sant Longowal, submitted to the prime minister a memorandum of forty-five religious, political, economic and social demands and grievances, including the issue of the sharing of Punjab's river waters between Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan and the question of the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, and launched a virulent campaign around them. Very soon, implementation of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR), adopted in 1973, became the most prominent demand. The resolution, which had many versions, was openly communal and separatist in all its versions.

Simultaneously, the Akalis took up in a more blatant and strident manner all the communal themes we have discussed above. There was a more open use of religion as a mobilizing tool. Gurudwaras were the focal points of the Akali movements.

Thus, the logic of the communal ideology and politics of the Akalis since 1947 was separatism and the demand for a sovereign theocratic state. After 1981, the terrorists were to follow this logic to its conclusion. The failure of Akali agitations, which did not and could not succeed to the full,

along with the heightened, unrequited sense of deprivation being preached for over thirty years, led to the belief among the more honest believers that violence offered the only remedy; and if organized mass violence was not possible and the militant mass movement had proved futile, then terrorist violence was the only answer.

Also, clearly, in practice, the Akali view was that the Akali demands had to be necessarily met, negotiations being only a matter of form. Moreover, often, the Akalis would accept an award, only to reject it later if found inconvenient. After a demand was met they would mount a fresh agitation around a new set of demands. Any agreement with them provided only a temporary and short-lived respite. Their basic approach was that Punjab, because of being a 'Sikh' state, and the Akali Dal, being a 'Sikh' party, were above the political norms and structure of the country, or the interests of the other neighbouring states, or a democratic, federal mechanism for the resolution of interstate disputes.

Terrorism in Punjab

Parallel to Akali militancy, terrorism made its appearance in Punjab in 1981 as a partial culmination of communal politics since 1947 and the policy of appeasement towards communalism followed by the Punjab Congress leadership, especially since the early 1970s. The initiator of terrorism was Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who emerged in the late 1970s as a strong campaigner of Sikh orthodoxy. In this campaign he received the tacit support of the Punjab Congress led by Giani Zail Singh, who hoped to use him to undercut the Akalis. He was, however, to soon become a Frankenstein and turn against his erstwhile patrons.

The terrorist campaign by Bhindranwale and the All India Sikh Students Federation, headed by Amrik Singh, began on 24 April 1980 with the assassination of the head of the Nirankari sect. This was followed by the killing of many Nirankaris, dissident Akalis and Congress workers. In September 1981, Lala Jagat Narain, editor of a popular newspaper and a critic of Bhindranwale, was killed. Bhindranwale was shielded from government action by Giani Zail Singh who had in 1980 become the home minister at the Centre. To protect himself, Bhindranwale moved in July 1982 to the sanctuary of Guru Nanak Niwas, a building within the Golden Temple complex from where he directed the campaign of terrorism in Punjab. He now emerged as a central figure in Punjab politics.

Till September 1983, terrorist killings were confined to Nirankaris, petty government officials and Sikhs who disagreed with Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale was, however, since 1981, carrying on a verbal campaign of hatred against Hindus and 'fallen' Sikhs, that is, members of reformist Sikh sects, and inciting violence against them, especially through widely circulated audio cassettes.

A new dimension to terrorist activity was added when from September 1983 he started targeting Hindus on an increasing scale, and indiscriminate killing of Hindus began; this could be done with relative impunity as the Punjab administration and police were in a run-down condition and the Government of India was hesitant to take action against terrorism. He also organized the looting of local banks, jewellery shops and home guard armouries, the killing of Nirankaris and

government officials and random bomb explosions. In April 1983, A.S. Atwal, a Sikh deputy inspector-general of police, was killed just as he was coming out of the Golden Temple after offering his prayers. From now on there was a marked and continuous increase in terrorist operations as also communal passions among Sikhs and Hindus. Bhindranwale also gave a call for a separation from and an armed struggle against the Indian state, emphasizing the separateness and sovereignty of Sikhs.

Fearing arrest, in December 1983, Bhindranwale moved into the safe haven of the Akal Takht within the Golden Temple and made it his headquarters and armoury, and a sanctuary for his terrorist followers, many of whom were criminals and smugglers. He smuggled on a large scale light machine-guns and other sophisticated arms into the temple, and set up workshops there for fabricating Sten-guns, hand grenades and other arms. He erected pillboxes in and around the Akal Takht and other buildings, where he provided weapons training to new recruits and from where he sent out death squads and conducted his campaign of murders, bombings and loot. A large number of other gurudwaras were also used as sanctuaries and bases for terrorist activities.

Led by Bhindranwale, the Khalistanis, the extremists, the militants, the terrorists—by whatever name they may be called— hoped to gradually transform terrorism into a general insurgency and an armed uprising. They were fighting for political and ideological hegemony over the people of Punjab. All their activities were designed to prove that the Indian state was not capable of ruling in Punjab and, therefore, separation from India was a realizable objective. Their bullying of the Press and the judiciary, their killing of police officials (and their families) and those suspected of cooperating with the police and administration, their successful diktats to administrators to do their bidding, their collection of 'parallel taxes', their silencing of intellectuals and political workers, their coercion of the peasants in giving them shelter, and their random killings—all were designed not only to facilitate their activities but also to convince the people of Punjab that they had the capacity to challenge the Indian state and that they were the rulers of tomorrow. To achieve this objective, they made no distinction between Sikhs and Hindus. Nearly 55 per cent of those killed from 1981 to 3 June 1984 were Sikhs.

Terrorists and the Akalis

The attitude of the Akali leadership towards the terrorists was ambivalent. While not joining them and even harbouring a certain hostility towards them, they kept quiet out of fear, and even supported them out of expediency. The moderation of the party's majority wing was also not backed by political action, positions and statements. There was no open stand against the terrorists or unequivocal condemnation of their activities or the senseless killings or the vitriolic propaganda of Bhindranwale. Instead, even the moderate Akali leaders defended, directly or indirectly, those accused of terrorist acts. They condemned every concrete action of the police against the terrorists. They objected to any government action against Bhindranwale. Longowal, for example, said in 1981: 'Entire Sikh community supported Bhindranwale.'[3] When, on rare occasions, the Akali leaders did condemn violence and individual killings, they put the blame on the government and the Congress, accusing them of organizing the violence and killings in order to

tarnish the Sikh image. They took no action against the occupation and desecration of the gurudwaras and the Golden Temple by the terrorists. In fact, feeling that their leadership of the Sikh masses was in danger, they tried to keep up with Bhindranwale. As they lost ground to the latter, they took up more and more extreme positions, competing with him in demands and aggressive political and ideological posturing.

What made it difficult for the Akali leaders to oppose Bhindranwale was the fact that they shared a common political ideology with him and the extremists, even though they had tactical and strategic political differences. The Akalis equally whipped up communal feelings; and the public manifestations of the Akali ideology were indistinguishable from those of Bhindranwale and the extremists and, in fact, echoed them.

Indira Gandhi and Terrorists

Instead of boldly confronting the communal and separatist challenge to the Indian polity, Indira Gandhi gave way to indecisiveness; her response, uncharacteristic of her political style, was to dither and vacillate between a policy of appeasement and tactical manoeuvring and firmness. She refused to take strong action against terrorist killings for three long years, from 1981 to 1984, or to fight extreme communalism, ideologically and politically, and to counter communal propaganda effectively. She also did not realize that there was a basic difference between paying heed to minority feelings and appeasing minority communalism.

Indira Gandhi carried on endless negotiations with G.S. Tohra, Parkash Singh Badal and H.S. Longowal. Knuckling under the Akali and terrorist threats, she failed to evolve what the situation demanded, namely, a strategy of combating communalism, secessionism and terrorism. She also did not realize that when it came to a crunch she would not be able to unilaterally accept the Akali demands and ignore the strong and unanimous opinion of the people and political parties of Haryana and Rajasthan.

The result of the weak-kneed policy followed by Indira Gandhi was to send wrong signals to secessionists and the terrorists as well as to the people of Punjab. As K.P.S. Gill, former director-general of police in Punjab who directed the successful phase of the antiterrorist campaign there, has pointed out: 'Nothing encourages the terrorists to greater audacity than the spectacle of weakness in the political leadership, and of confusion in the security forces.'[4]

Important in this respect was the failure of the government to act at the time of A.S. Atwal's murder in April 1983 within the precincts of the Golden Temple itself and which left the people of Punjab outraged. Atwal, a deputy inspector-general of police, had come to the temple to offer prayers when he was shot and killed in broad daylight. The situation in Punjab deteriorated rapidly in 1984. Akali militancy grew by leaps and bounds. The leadership called for a fresh round of militant agitations starting from 3 June. It also increasingly and publicly expressed solidarity with Bhindranwale.

An increasingly dangerous feature of the situation was Pakistan's growing involvement in Punjab affairs. As a part of its strategy of waging low-intensity warfare against India, Pakistan

had started providing training, weapons, ideological indoctrination, safe areas for hiding, and military guidance to terrorist organizations. Certain extremist Sikh groups abroad were also giving increasing encouragement to the secessionists and helping them with money and weapons.

By June 1984, the situation had reached an explosive point as terrorist activity escalated. There was in Punjab and in the country as a whole an intense feeling of danger to the peace and unity of the country. Fear and panic were spreading among Hindus in Punjab with an increasing number leaving the state. More and more gurudwaras were being fortified and turned into arsenals. Clearly, a situation of insurgency was building up in Punjab. At the same time, the government was losing its prestige and getting discredited.

One of the most worrisome features of the situation was the increasing Hindu–Sikh divide in Punjab and the spread of Hindu communalism in the rest of the country, especially in North India. A warning came from Haryana when anti-Sikh rioting broke out in February.

By the end of May, it was clear that decisive action against terrorists could no longer be put off and that the use of drastic force to flush out the terrorists holed up in the Golden Temple and other gurudwaras had become necessary. And so, finally faced with a dead end so far as political manoeuvres were concerned, the Government of India undertook military action, code-named Operation Blue Star. While there was no alternative to military action once the situation had worsened to the extent it had, there is no doubt, as later events were to show, that the operation was hastily conceived, undertaken without adequate information and proper planning and poorly executed, with the result that its political and emotional cost proved to be far higher than its planners had anticipated.

On 3 June the army surrounded the Golden Temple. It entered the temple on 5 June. There it found that the terrorists were far greater in number and also far better armed than the government sources had assumed. Rather than lasting an hour or two, as a surgical operation, the military operation turned into a full-scale battle, with the army having to deploy tanks in the end. What was worse, over a thousand devotees and temple staff were trapped inside the temple and many of them died in the crossfire. Moreover, the buildings in the temple complex were severely damaged, with the Akal Takht being virtually razed to the ground. Harmandir Sahib, the most hallowed of the Sikh shrines, was riddled with bullet marks, even though the army had taken special care at the cost of the lives of its soldiers not to damage it. Among the dead were Bhindranwale and many of his followers.

Operation Blue Star produced a deep sense of anger and outrage among Sikhs all over the country. It was seen by most of them as a sacrilege and an affront to the community rather than as a necessary though unpleasant effort to deal with Bhindranwale and the terrorists. While much of the hostile reaction to the operation represented an emotional outburst, there was a great deal to be said for its critics who held that some other way than the military storming of the temple should have been found. Later, critics were to point to the success of the skilfully planned and executed Operation Black Thunder in 1988 which forced the terrorists, once again occupying the temple in a manner similar to that of 1984, to surrender to the police in a relatively bloodless fashion.

However, despite its many negative repercussions, Operation Blue Star had certain positive features. It established that the Indian state was strong enough to deal with secession and terrorism; it put an end to the charismatic Bhindranwale and his gang; and it created that minimum of law and order which enabled secular parties such as the Congress, CPI and CPM to move among the angry people and counter communal politics by explaining to them that the real responsibility for the Punjab situation lay with Bhindranwale, the terrorists, and the Akali communalists.

Operation Blue Star and After

Following Operation Blue Star, the terrorists vowed vengeance against Indira Gandhi and her family for having desecrated the Golden Temple. On the morning of 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two Sikh members of her security guard. Earlier she had rejected her security chief's suggestion that all Sikhs be removed from her security staff with the comment: 'Aren't we all secular.'

The assassination of the popular prime minister, in an atmosphere of heightened communalization in North India during 1981–84, led to a wave of horror, fear, anger and communal outrage among people all over the country, especially among the poor. This anger took an ugly and communal form in Delhi and some other parts of North India, where anti-Sikh riots broke out as soon as the news of the assassination was announced and the highly exaggerated rumour spread that many Sikhs were celebrating the event. In particular, for three days from the evening of 31 October itself mobs took over the streets of Delhi and made Sikhs targets of their loot and violence. There was complete failure of the law and order machinery in giving protection to Sikhs and their property. The three-day violence in Delhi resulted in the death of over 2,500 people, mostly Sikhs, with the slums and resettlement colonies of Delhi being the main scenes of carnage. The November riots further alienated a large number of Sikhs from the government.

Rajiv Gandhi succeeded Indira Gandhi as prime minister on 1 November 1984. He moved quickly after the general elections in December 1984 to tackle the Punjab problem. In January 1985, the major jailed leaders, including the Akali Dal president, H.S. Longowal, were released. A month later Rajiv Gandhi ordered an independent judicial enquiry into the November riots. The political tide in Punjab was also turning in a positive direction despite Operation Blue Star and the November riots. The terrorists were down and out and the Akalis had lost a great deal of their credibility. Moreover, though the Akalis were not willing to fight the terrorists, they were no longer helping them.

Rajiv Gandhi soon initiated negotiations with the Akali leaders in the belief that a settlement with them would provide a lasting solution to the Punjab problem. The result of this policy, however, was that the advantage accruing from Operation Blue Star was lost, the fight against terrorism and communalism virtually abandoned, and the latter given a new lease of life.

After their release the Akali leaders were divided, confused and disoriented. On the one hand, many of them, including Longowal, tried to consolidate their position *vis-á-vis* the terrorists by

taking recourse to militant rhetoric. On the other hand, it was clear to most Akali leaders that mass agitation could no longer be revived nor could militant politics be carried on. Longowal, therefore, even while talking tough, entered into secret negotiations with the government.

Finally, in August 1985, Rajiv Gandhi and Longowal signed the Punjab Accord. The government conceded the major Akali demands and promised to have others reviewed. In particular, it was agreed that Chandigarh would be transferred to Punjab, a commission would determine which Hindi-speaking territories would be transferred from Punjab to Haryana, and the river water dispute would be adjudicated by an independent tribunal. Elections to the state assembly and the national parliament were to be held in September 1985.

On 20 August, the day Longowal announced that the Akalis would participate in the elections, he was assassinated by the terrorists. The elections were, however, held on time. Over 66 per cent of the electorate voted as compared with 64 per cent in 1977 and 1984. The Akalis secured an absolute majority in the state assembly for the first time in their history.

The Akali government, headed by Surjit Singh Barnala, was, however, from the beginning riven with factionalism and, consequently, immobilized. Its most important administrative step was the release of a large number of persons accused of terrorist crimes, most of whom rejoined the terrorist ranks, giving terrorism a major fillip.

The Akali government found that it could not agree to the transfer of any of Punjab's territories to Haryana as compensation for the loss of Chandigarh; the Haryana government, however, would not agree to the latter without the former. The Akali leadership also went back in regard to the judicial adjudication of the river water dispute. The major terms of the accord were thus once more under dispute. The fact is that the accord had been, as was the case with Operation Blue Star, prepared in haste without considering its feasibility.

The militant groups soon regrouped taking advantage of the soft policies of the Barnala government. There was, over time, a resurgence in terrorist activities, and the state government, riven with factionalism, was unable to contain them. Consequently, the central government dismissed the Barnala ministry and imposed President's Rule in Punjab in May 1987.

The fact is that the Akali Dal and an Akali government, sharing the ideological wavelength of the extremists and the terrorists, were incapable of confronting or fighting communalism and separatism. It was, therefore, a strategic error on the part of the Rajiv Gandhi government to stake all on Barnala and his supporters and see them as the frontrunners in the campaign to decommunalize Punjab, separate religion from politics and fight commmunal terrorism.

Also, Rajiv Gandhi regarded the Punjab Accord as the solution to the terrorist problem rather than as the opening gambit in, or the gaining of an opportunity for implementing, a long-term strategy of which a political-ideological struggle against communalism would form a basic part. Simultaneously, there had to be the realization that separatism, terrorism and violence had to be firmly dealt with. Besides, even the moderate communalists had to be first rescued and protected from the terrorists before they could function politically in their own communal mode. It is quite significant in this respect that Longowal spoke openly against terrorism and then signed the accord with Rajiv Gandhi only after Operation Blue Star had eliminated Bhindranwale, destroyed the

myth of the invincibility of the terrorists and checked terrorism to a large extent. Likewise, the Akalis boycotted the elections in 1992 when terrorism was still ravaging Punjab, but agreed to participate in them in 1997 when it had been brought to a virtual end.

Resolving Terrorism

Despite President's Rule, terrorism in Punjab went on growing, going through phases of waning and resurgence, especially as after 1985 it had begun to be openly funded, supported and even directed by Pakistan.

We need not discuss at length the growth of terrorism and despoliations after 1985 since they have been dealt with at length by K.P.S. Gill in his *Punjab—The Knights of Falsehood.* Increasingly, most of the terrorist gangs took to extortion, robbery, smuggling, drugs, abduction and rape, land grabbing, murder of innocents, and a lavish lifestyle. From 1987, they also began a systematic campaign to acquire political and ideological hegemony over the people. Their ban on meat, liquor, tobacco, and the use of sarees by women, their effort to determine the dress of schoolchildren, their restrictions on marriage rites and practices, their hoisting of the Khalistani flag on public buildings, their collection of parallel taxes, were all designed to convince the people that they were the rulers of tomorrow. Periodic statements by well-meaning persons, sometimes repeated by the prime minister himself, advocating negotiations, conditional or unconditional, between the central government and various groups of the terrorists tended to have the same impact.

Imposition of President's Rule in Punjab in 1987 was a short-term measure to salvage a rapidly deteriorating situation. It should have been seen as a tactical part of a long-term strategy which had to be based on the understanding (i) that no soft options were available in Punjab since 1982 when communalism entered a stage when it had either to be conceded or defeated, (ii) that moderate communalists could not be depended upon to fight extreme communalism or terrorism and (iii) that a policy of firmness combined with political ideological struggle would yield results only if it was followed for a sufficient length of time and was not interrupted by efforts to appease the terrorists and the communalists. The perspective had to be of years and not months. After 1986, the Rajiv Gandhi government several times came near getting an upper hand over the terrorists, but it lacked the determination to run the full course; and, misguided by weak-kneed advisers, it talked of and even initiated negotiations with one or the other secessionist groups. It, thus, lost the advantage gained by strong state action, and inevitably led to higher levels of state violence against terrorism every time.

The policy of 'solving' the Punjab problem through negotiations with and appeasement of the terrorists and extreme communalists was followed even more vigorously by the governments of V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar during 1990 and 1991. In the meantime the number of the victims of terrorism went on increasing.

The state did finally take strong action. A preview of such action was Operation Black Thunder,

undertaken by the Punjab police and paramilitary forces in May 1988, which succeeded in flushing out the terrorists from the Golden Temple.

A hard policy towards terrorism was followed from mid-1991 onwards by the Narasimha Rao government at the Centre and after the February 1992 elections by the Congress government led by Beant Singh in Punjab. The police, often aided by the rural people, became increasingly effective though a large number of policemen—over 1,550 from 1988 to 1992 alone—lost their lives in its operations. Also, the leaders and cadres of the two Communist parties, the CPI and CPM, and a large number of Congressmen played an active and courageous role in fighting terrorism, often paying a heavy price in terms of life and property. By 1993, Punjab had been virtually freed of terrorism.

An Assessment

Despite the depredations of the terrorists for over ten years, there were several redeeming features in the situation. Though there was some degree of a psychological divide between Hindus and Sikhs, especially in the urban areas, and a few incidents of Hindu– Sikh clashes, there was not even one major communal riot in Punjab throughout the years of the terrorist sway; on the whole the people of Punjab remained secular. The mass of Hindus did not support the efforts of the Shiv Sena and other Hindu communal organizations to create a volunteer corps of Hindus alone to fight terrorism. Similarly, the majority of Sikhs offered strong resistance to the terrorists in many areas.

The refusal of the people of Punjab to imbibe the values and ideology of the terrorists and the extreme communalists was mainly because the secular tradition was quite strong in Punjab, thanks to the work and influence of the Ghadr Party and the Ghadri Babas, Bhagat Singh and his comrades, Kirti Kisan groups, the Communists and the Socialists, the militant peasant movement and the Congress and the national movement.

The mass of Sikhs refused to accept that the separatists and the terrorists were fighting in defence of Sikh religion and Sikh interests. To most Sikhs it gradually became clear that the terrorists were abusing and betraying their religion, debasing Sikh institutions and the teachings of the Sikh gurus and defiling the gurudwaras. Of the 11,700 killed by the terrorists in Punjab during 1981–93, more than 61 per cent were Sikhs.

The Punjab experience is quite relevant to the country as a whole as it could face similar problems in the future in other parts of it. There are important lessons to be learnt. First, communalism has to be confronted both politically and ideologically; separation of religion from politics has necessarily to be enforced. In particular, the Punjab experience emphasizes the centrality of the struggle against communal ideology. The major weakness of the struggle against terrorism was the failure to grasp that the real and the long-term problem in Punjab was not terrorism but communalism. The roots of the former lay in the latter. Extremism and terrorism were directly linked to the Akali communal ideology and the blatant use of religion by the Akalis for political ends. As already indicated, communalism cannot be appeased, placated or assuaged —it has to be opposed and defeated. Appeasement of communal forces can at most provide

temporary respite. The time thus gained has to be used to counter communalism among the people; otherwise communalism gets strengthened and pushed towards extremism.

Second, communal violence in all its forms, including as terrorism, has to be handled firmly and decisively and suppressed as quickly as possible through the full and timely use of the law and order machinery of the state. No amount of popular will and opposition can defeat violence and terrorism on its own; it can play an important role only in support of and as a supplement to the measures of the state and its security forces.

Third, communalists, however moderate, cannot be expected to or depended upon to fight extreme communalism or communal terrorism despite real political differences between the two because the two share a common communal ideology.