

# THE BITTER DRAMA OF THE SIKHS

ROGER BALLARD

**R**ECENT events in the Punjab have unfolded like a medieval drama around the glittering serenity of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. It began with Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his supporters. Their cool moral certitude, bright turbans, flowing beards, and fearsome but casually displayed weaponry, provided some unforgettable images for the western media.

Through interpreters, Bhindranwale explained that he and his followers were not afraid to die in defence of their cause—and so it proved. When the hard-pressed authorities, who accused Bhindranwale and his close associates of more than a dozen murders, finally unleashed the army on the Golden Temple complex, there was much slaughter. Nearly a hundred soldiers, and several times as many Sikhs lost their lives in Amritsar, their holy city. It may well be this bloody battle will have as large implications in the long term as did General Dyer's infamous massacre at Jallianwala Bagh—only a few yards away—in 1919. Many see that as the beginning of the end for British rule: what moral base it had was undercut, and the Congress Party under Mahatma Gandhi turned to militancy.

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale came to a bullet-riddled end. But he is already a more potent symbol dead than he ever was alive. For Sikhs—as for Shia Muslim, in Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran—martyrdom is a familiar and glorious concept. And martyrs can stand for much more than living men. Symbols of perfection, they can by definition do no wrong. For Sikhs everywhere, Bhindranwale has become an embodiment of the ideal selfless soldier-saint whom everyone should strive to emulate.

That image is now central to Sikhism. The religion was founded nearly 500 years ago by the contemplative Guru Nanak. The only way to God, he taught, was through single-minded devotion to the Truth; the formalistic rituals of both Islam and Hinduism were of no utility. Nanak's stress on equality and justice, and his rejection of priestly hierarchies proved most attractive to many Hindu peasants in central Punjab. As the sect grew it became more and more important politically—especially under the tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh, who died in 1708.

It was he who transformed the Sikhs into a tight community, marked off by a deliberately militaristic uniform of turban, beard and sword. Since Gobind's time, the Sikhs have seen themselves as warriors for Truth, always prepared to defend righteousness and especially local autonomy. This has often brought them into conflict with Delhi-based rulers—from the Mughals through the British to Mrs. Gandhi.

Though quiescent in times of peace, the Sikhs have always closed ranks when they felt their interests were threatened. So it is that Bhindranwale's death, and the desecration and destruction of the Sikhs' most sacred shrine, has unified the Sikh community worldwide. It has also led to cries of vengeance, directed both at Indira Gandhi's government and at Hindus at large.

Even in their "own" state, Punjab, the Sikhs, only have a bare majority. They feel themselves threatened. This has led to a danger of civil war, not just in Punjab, but in other Indian cities to which Sikhs have migrated. As violent conflicts between Hindus and Sikhs become more commonplace, the spectre of yet another bloody partition in Punjab will begin to loom. It was divided at Independence between Pakistan and India. No wonder a huge military presence is being maintained in the state.

Yet Delhi's problem is more than one of law and order. If Mrs Gandhi does respond to the outraged Sikhs' demands for greater autonomy—and it is difficult to see how the credibility of the Indian Union can otherwise be restored—then many of India's other peripheral regions will promptly demand the same concessions. It is not just the Nehru family's almost continuous control of India's destiny over the last 30 years that is at risk. So personally central is Indira Gandhi to Indian politics that the stability of the world's largest democracy is also under threat.

These issues have been much discussed over these past weeks. What has been much less closely examined is the context within which these events occurred. How was it that Bhindranwale gathered such a militant following around himself? What was the attraction of his teaching? Why has it had such an explosive impact?

Sikh militancy may be a consequence of economic change, but it is far from being a straightforward result of poverty. In the last decade, Punjab has become India's richest state. New varieties of seed, low-cost irrigation systems, and artificial fertiliser, have allowed Punjabi farmers—almost all of whom are Sikhs—to increase their yields many times over. This Green Revolution has also been accompanied by an industrial revolution. Building upon traditional metal-working skills, local Sikh craftsmen have begun to manufacture a wide range of goods, from bicycles through wheat-threshers to sewing machines. The newly affluent Punjabi farmers need them and have the money to buy them. The whole region has become increasingly prosperous.

Punjabis, and especially Sikh Punjabis, have also been successful migrants, both within India and overseas. Many have settled in Britain, but even larger numbers have gone to Canada, California and the Persian Gulf. The Sikhs may not be the very richest of India's many communities, but as a result of their vigorous entrepreneurship, they are certainly not poor. Nevertheless, they do feel themselves to be deprived. They often describe themselves as second class citizens. It was precisely this sense of grievance which allowed Bhindranwale to build up his following in the first place. What is its source?

Sikhs are not the only Indians who feel themselves to be at a disadvantage. Many groups whose roots lie outside the heavily populated Ganges plain feel the same. (This plain stretches from the Himalayas right across north India, and down to the sea at Calcutta. Traditionally it was known as Hindustan. The Indian capital, Delhi, sits firmly on its soil.) But Punjabi farmers have their own specific grievances. They complain that too little of the water diverted from the rivers that flow across the Punjab is used for irrigation locally. Above all, they say that the price at which the Delhi government buys their wheat is far too low.

Within the Punjab, most Sikhs are small peasant farmers. These farmers are overwhelmingly members of the Jat caste, who make up 50 per cent of the rural population. Though largely self-sufficient, Jat farmers have always sold their surplus grain to the merchant caste (chiefly Hindus) in the local markets, and used the proceeds to buy consumer goods from members of the same community. Farmers' and merchants' interests have always been in conflict. The one's profit was the other's loss. But over the past century this contradiction has been given an extra dimension. The Punjabi merchants have given increasingly enthusiastic support to revivalist Hinduism. The Jat farmers have responded with an even more determined commitment to Sikhism. This dynamic is a major component in the current crisis.

### **The Untouchables and the immigrants**

Apart from the urban merchants and the rural Jats, there are two other important segments of the population. First, there are the "Untouchable" landless labourers, who make up nearly a quarter of the rural population. In the past they worked for the Jats, but today they have left the land wherever possible, not least to escape the severe social subordination of their traditional role. They have joined the industrial proletariat in the booming towns. Wages are higher, and their relationship with employers is more impersonal.

Second, Punjab now has a large immigrant population of its own. Migrants come to work there for reasons very similar to those which drew Sikhs to Britain: (relatively) high wages and readily available jobs. Most of Punjab's immigrants come from much poorer areas far away to the east in Hindustan. Many now work for Jat farmers. But more and more of them are now beginning to compete with former landless labourers for the better-paid industrial jobs. As in Britain, there is a good deal of tension between the indigenous and the immigrant sectors of the Punjabi working class.

Yet, despite their differences, all the non-Sikhs in Punjab—merchant, landless labourer and migrant—have some degree of common cause. They are all, in some sense, Hindu. All have their own quarrels with the Jats. Politically, they have moved into an uneasy alliance. This has not yet undermined the Jats' long political dominance. But it is certainly challenging their numerical preeminence. What with Hindu immigration into Punjab, and Sikh emigration out of it, the Sikh majority has fallen in recent years from a comfortable 60 per cent to a narrow 52 per cent. The Sikhs see Hindus as the enemy within.

The Jats still dominate the Punjab legislative assembly. Local politics has mainly been a competition between Jat factions. Some of these have linked up with Indira Gandhi's Congress Party. Others have coalesced around the Akali Dal, an explicitly Sikh communalist party.

The Akalis won a majority of the seats in the last state elections in 1981, and came to power. But as in other states with non-Congress governments, Mrs Gandhi regarded this as a threat. She promptly set out to destabilise the Akalis. Among other things, she gave the then obscure Bhindranwale tacit encouragement. Eventually, the Akali government did collapse, and President's rule from Delhi was imposed six months ago. But this only reinforced

Sikh hostility towards Hindus. It drove the Akali moderates closer to Bhindranwale, and to his demand for an autonomous, or even independent, *Khalistan*, as a homeland for the Sikhs.

In earlier, surer days, Mrs Gandhi would have found some way of splitting the Sikhs, and striking a deal with a more moderate faction. But she has failed completely. She detained many of the Akali leaders, and then, after weeks of dithering, ordered her troops to take decisive action against Bhindranwale—but with disastrous effects. She has desecrated the Sikhs' most sacred shrine. She has given them a new martyr to unite around. She has left herself with no one to negotiate with.

Despite their new-found unity, however, the Sikhs are by no means a homogeneous group. Leaving aside smaller castes, whose interests and strategies there is no room to discuss here, the Jats themselves are internally divided. Though Sikhs are strongly committed to an ideal of equality, substantial differences in wealth have emerged in recent years. These differences have been made worse by the Green Revolution.

### **The farmers' interests**

It was the larger Jat farmers—with 20 acres or more—who were the backbone of the Akali Dal party. Despite their prosperity, they had their own complaints against Delhi: too little water, too little electricity and diesel for their tube-wells, and above all low wheat prices. But their interests, as well as those of Sikh civil servants and factory owners, were reformist. The last thing they wanted was to lose their markets in the rest of India—which might occur if *Khalistan* became a reality.

The smaller Jat farmers—with, say, no more than five acres—found themselves in a very different position. They and their children have benefited least from the Green Revolution. They are steadily being forced off the land. This has a major impact on their social status. For a Jat, to lose land is to lose honour. To work for wages for someone else is more degrading still.

Poorer Jat families have tried all sorts of strategies 'to avoid the slippery slope to landlessness. Emigration was one, to Britain and elsewhere. But now even opportunities in the Persian Gulf are shrinking away. Another possibility was social mobility through education. But large numbers of young Jats with BA (pass) degrees have joined India's huge army of educated unemployed. They flocked to Bhindranwale's standard.

At one level, Sikhism is a deeply contemplative faith. But it insist on the legitimacy of militant action in pursuit of justice, as well as absolute equality within the *Khalsa*, the community of the faithful. Bhindranwale's charismatic preaching, and his demand for a return to the fundamentals of the faith, were particularly attractive to the rising generation of Sikhs from poorer Jat families. Fundamentalism gave them a new sense of pride, purpose and dignity. Bhindranwale's political crusade allowed them to articulate their hostility to all those they felt opposed their interest: their elders for going soft, and forgetting Sikhism's true principles; the Akali Dal for compromising, not fighting; Indira Gandhi for failing to respect their rights, and for not giving them jobs; and, last but not least, the local Hindus, for doing better than they should.

Before the attack on the Golden Temple, most of the older and better-off Sikhs were doubtful about supporting Bhindranwale and his youthful supporters. They respected his moral fervour, but they felt a total break with Hindu India made no sense. Now, with his death, all that has changed. Sikh honour has been impugned, they have closed ranks.

What will happen next is, most uncertain. The whole of Punjab is now under siege, and the curfew intense. That would be bad enough at the best of times, but with temperatures rising to over 100 degrees every day, tempers must surely rise faster. Yet the army cannot be withdrawn. Already there is loud support from overseas Sikhs for the establishment of a wholly independent *Khalistan*. There is tacit support from Pakistan because of the long rivalry with India. If the Indian army left, the Sikhs might well declare urn. The army is also the only guarantor of civil order. If it withdrew, an unprecedented wave of killing and counter-killing between Sikh and Hindu is likely.

Mrs Gandhi may not find it possible to sit tight. Sikhs occupy important positions in India, from the President downwards. They are particularly numerous in the army. Several Sikh regiments have already mutinied. This is not surprising, because most Sikh soldiers come from the kinds of families which gave strong support to Bhindranwale. There is also the question of Hindu reaction to Sikh militancy. Many Hindu are quietly satisfied that the rebellious Sikh militants have been taught a lesson. But if the Sikhs kill any more Hindus, the Hindus are bound to call for vengeance too. Mrs Gandhi's problems are severe. There is no easy way out. These problems are partly of her own making. At the same time they are a consequence of the uneasy structure of the Indian state, and of the inequalities generated in the midst of rapid economic development.

### **The haves and the have-nots**

The greatest tragedy of these events is that they endanger the prospects for further growth in north west India—a region which had begun to look as if it was following the same path as countries like Taiwan, Korea and Japan. All that is now in jeopardy. Ageing, tired and increasingly hesitant, Mrs Gandhi seems to have no answer to India's many regional and sectarian movements, most of which use religious symbolism to bind interest groups together into powerful political forces. As India becomes richer, so there is more to compete for, not just between haves and have-nots, but also between all sorts of not so rich groups jostling for access to limited resources. Tensions of this kind lay behind the recent bloody events in Bombay and Assam, as well as in Amritsar. If Mrs Gandhi cannot keep these forces in check, the world's largest democracy could collapse in chaos.

The Sikhs, with their militant tradition, their capacity for corporate action, and their strongly supportive international Diaspora, are a dangerous group for her to have tangled with. "Death to Indira Gandhi, long live Khalistan" chanted the angry demonstrators marching through central London. Even if this wish were fulfilled, the internal contradictions of the Punjab social order would remain. The Sikh Gurus who challenge Mughal imperialism did so in the name of justice for all Punjabis—Hindu, Moslem and Sikh. Will those inspired by the new martyr be so generous?