

Sikh Separatism in India

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On 31 October 2021, the US-based *Sikh for Justice (SFJ)* held *Punjab Independence Referendum*, a non-binding and non-governmental referendum in London to determine whether Punjab should be separated from India and become a separate state, i.e., 'Khalistan' (the land of Khalsa/pure).¹ The organisation intends to conduct the referendum in other parts of the UK and other countries including the United States, Canada, and Australia. It aims to utilise these non-binding results to request the United Nations to hold an official binding vote for the creation of a separate homeland for the Sikhs living in India.² The success and the actual impact of such measures on the international level still remains a question.

Historical Background

The phenomenon of Sikh separatism in India has evolved over the years. The issue is multilayered and very complicated. Whereas India projects the movement as an extension of separatism, extremism, and terrorism, the Sikh community in India has a history of political, economic, and ideological grievances against the Indian state for years.³ It is important to note that the movement for the rights of Sikhs in India was not always separatist. A glimpse into history shows the chronology of injustices and exploitations of the Sikh community which ultimately led to the bloodshed of 1984 inside the Golden Temple, a sacred focal point for Sikhs, an event that changed the course of history for Sikhs and the Indian state.

Before the 1984 massacre, Sikh diaspora had minimum to no interest in the local politics of Punjab

but *Operation Blue Star* greatly hurt the Sikhs around the globe.⁴ It was seen as an inhuman, extreme, and direct attack on their religious identity. Operation Blue Star prompted the Sikh diaspora to initiate their political struggle in order to preserve their identity.⁵ The Indian state has long been trying to merge Sikh identity with Hindu identity. In 1948, the Indian legislature referred to Sikhs as Hindus in Article 25(2) of its draft Constitution draft. The Sikhs obviously refused to sign the said draft.⁶ The refusal to sign the draft was rooted in preserving the Sikh identity which is unique and comparatively new in the larger scheme of world history.

The Sikh population was already in minority in India. So, a compromise on their distinct identity was not an option, which is why in 1925, the Sikh *Gurdwara Act* was promulgated with the assistance of Governor Malcolm Hailey and Fazal-e-Hussain (a leader of the Muslim League). The Act provided the necessary clarity on the Sikh identity and sharpening the Sikh image, thus, separating it from the Hindu identity.⁷ The demand of Sikhs to have a self-governed province was not unjust and novel. Before partition, Jawaharlal Nehru guaranteed the Sikh leadership fulfillment of their demands of civil liberties and protection by the Indian state.⁸ As a response to Akali Dal's (Sikh's only political party at the time) demand of a separate state for Sikhs, Nehru, while speaking at Calcutta in 1946, asserted:

"The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set up in the North, wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom."⁹

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This encouraging statement made the then Sikh leadership choose India (a secular state) over Pakistan (an Islamic state).

Post-1947 Scenario and Sikh Identity

For Sikhs, their ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity has always remained at the core of the issue. Soon after independence, Akali Dal's leader, Master Tara Singh presented their demand for a Sikh majority province.¹⁰ A memorandum was presented by the Sikh members of the Punjab Assembly to the Constituent Assembly demanding fifty percent seats in the Punjab legislature, five percent in the central legislature, and forty percent of the government positions to be reserved for Sikhs. And the alternative to these demands was a separate province for Sikhs.¹¹ Neither of the demands of the Akali Dal party were accepted and the Congress clearly refused to accept any demands made along religious lines as well. The refusal added to the grievances of the Sikhs from the pre-independence era. They felt alienated and unheard from the very start of their political journey in their new homeland.

In addition to being a religious minority, the 1951 and 1961 census disowned *Punjabi* as a mother tongue. This served as yet another reminder for the Sikhs that they had been reduced to a linguistic minority too.¹² Political parties like Arya Samaj tried to vilify the religious identity of Sikhs, referring to them as an extension of Hinduism. Furthermore, in an effort to sabotage the demands of a separate province, the communal parties of India including the Arya Samaj, Jana Sangh, and Hindu Mahasabha proposed the creation of a larger Punjab by inducting all the neighboring states in it.¹³ Later on, in 1953, the State Recognition Commission (SRC) too did not concede the demand for a separate province. Tara Singh saw it as a decree of Sikh annihilation'.¹⁴ After a long-drawn protest by Akali Dal, the present state of Punjab was carved out in 1966 on linguistic basis. But the Akali Dal was unable to attain full and secure political power in the region. Thus, the struggle to secure state autonomy continued which resulted in the Anandpur

Resolution of 1973 that stressed redefining the state-center relationship and autonomy of the state.

Post-1947 Scenario and Sikh Identity

From 1947 till the mid-1960s the Sikh grievances did not aggravate violence because the government style of Prime Minister Nehru kept districts and states free of the centre's interventions, thus, giving them considerable autonomy.¹⁵ However, the scenario drastically changed after the death of Nehru in 1964 and with Indira Gandhi's rise to power. With Indira Gandhi at the helm of affairs, Congress lost its secure position by losing power in half of the Indian states.¹⁶

It could not handle Akali Dal very well and the Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. The attack on the temple, the killing of Bhindranwale along with hundreds of other Sikhs started decade-long civil unrest in Punjab which led to a loss of 20,000 Sikh lives.¹⁷ The introduction of Bhindranwale in politics was a political move by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who wanted to damage the position of the leading Sikh political party *Akali Dal* which was allying with the Janata Party and had a stronghold in Punjab. Bhindranwale was a revolutionist who gathered massive support from the Sikh farmers by highlighting Akali Dal's failure and ineffectiveness to settle Sikh issues to their satisfaction and in no time Bhindranwale gathered the support and was seen as the true custodian of Sikhs. Bhindranwale brought with him his brand of militant politics. Soon after, violence erupted in Punjab resulting in several clashes in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The politicisation of Bhindranwale was to ensure Congress' stronghold in the country and damaging Akali Dal's position was an absolute and terrible miscalculation by Indira Gandhi and her advisors.¹⁸ Later, Indira Gandhi took extreme measures against the Bhindranwale. Indira's government launched *Operation Blue Star* against the protestors resulting in a massacre. This is an example of how the Indian government tried to exploit the Sikh sentiments and beliefs for its own political point-scoring. The

incompetence of Indira Gandhi's government turned to be the ignitor of the Sikh separatism in India which not only affected the Sikhs around the globe but invited international attention to it.

Recent Developments

Another current event that grabbed huge international attention was the farmer's protest held in India. The protest started on 9 August 2020, and is still ongoing. In a period of 15 months, more than 600 farmers have lost their lives. These farmers are Sikhs from the North-Western state of Indian Punjab and Haryana representing the grievances of the Sikh community. The protest was triggered by the enactment of three new laws by the central government concerning the production, purchase, and storage of agricultural commodities.¹⁹ The government did not take the farmers into confidence before passing these laws.

The farmers demanded the repeal of the laws.²⁰ As agriculture has always been the backbone of Punjab's economy, the privatisation of the sector came as a threat to the Sikh farmers. But instead of resolving the issue, the Indian government began calling the farmers *anti-national*. The farmers were accused of being an agenda-tool of the separatist movement. The ministers have been recorded referring to the Sikh farmers as *Khalistanis*, and completely dismissed their claims.²¹ Such remarks and branding of Sikh citizens as *separatists/Khalistanis* by the serving ministers and government officials are reflective of the overall attitude that the government of India has towards its Sikh citizens. Direct parallels were drawn between the Sikh protest and the events of 1984. Indian media also spread fake news and propagated a government-controlled narrative. It referred to the farmers as 'rogue elements linked to Khalistani outfits' who will cause terror in the city.²² So, even those who are not associated with any separatist wing are treated no differently.

Be it 1984 or 2021, media censorship is a reality in both cases. Through censorship, the government develops and spreads whatever narrative

it wants to sell. Censorship in the past enabled the Indian government in developing a narrative of ethno-terrorism against the Sikh community across the world. In 2021, however, this is not fortunately the case. One cannot hide the realities from the outside world for very long no matter how censored and controlled the media outlets are. Social media is a window to the world now. The farmers' protest not only gained internal support but also grabbed the attention of the international world.

Conclusion

From a non-violent struggle for political, social, and economic rights to the militant-politics of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the resultant bloodshed of 1984, there is an enduring history of false promises, exploitations, and injustices by the Indian government which kept on adding to the grievances of the Sikh community. But today, the organisations like Sikh for Justice (SFJ) are playing a very substantial role in internationalising their struggle and by educating the world of Indian atrocities against Sikhs in India. The Khalistan movement has garnered significant support and empathy from the international world including countries like Canada, the US, the UK, Europe, South East Asia, and Australia. The ongoing systematic persecutions of Sikhs in India are not a secret anymore. The Sikhs do not feel safe under Indian Union, and they dread that the future of their coming generation is at risk. So, they consider it is the responsibility of the international human rights organizations to avert future catastrophes and protect the Sikh community.

The world community has not only questioned India on its unjust behaviour towards minorities but has also rejected the Indian rhetorical stance of secularism. India is a country unsafe for its minorities, be it Sikhs or Muslims. The 2002 Gujrat riots, the inhuman siege of Jammu and Kashmir, and the plight of Sikhs, all reflect the same story of violence, injustice, and oppression. The biggest democracy in the world has the blood of its

minorities on its hands and the future in that regard does not seem promising either.

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