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The Sikh Diaspora and the Quest for Khalistan: A Search for Statehood or for Self-preservation?

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Introduction

In today's globalized world, where people are no longer defined solely by their ethnic or national origins, Diaspora communities are however, becoming larger and more prominent. These communities are increasingly becoming inextricably involved in homeland politics, often creating global satellite battlefields for the governments of their 'home' states. Therefore, a firm grasp of Diaspora-homeland relations is essential to understand the security, economics, and social development of any state with a significant migrant population. This paper will reexamine the role of the Sikh Diaspora in the Sikh separatist movement, commencing in the 1980s, that loomed over the political, security, social, and humanitarian makeup of the Indian state of Punjab for over a decade. It will also attempt to analyze why, how, and to what extent the Sikh Diaspora organized and aligned itself with the Sikh separatist movement in Punjab.

The Sikhs are a unique group of people, in that their religion, beliefs, and collective identity are relatively new in the larger scheme of world history and their population very small, with estimates ranging between 18 to 30 million people globally; and still they have managed to make a prominent mark in the realm of Indian and global affairs. The Sikh Diaspora has maintained a solid connection both with their homeland of Punjab and with their religion, since the first migrants left the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century till the present day through economic and emotional support.¹ However, the Diaspora's involvement in Punjab's political

affairs was minimal if not non-existent before the 1980s; its subsequent political mobilization resulted from the assault on the Golden Temple under Operation Blue Star in June 1984 and the backlash of violence against the Sikh community after the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October 1984.² The Diaspora's role in the Sikh separatist movement was significant in several ways but most importantly because it quickly internationalized an internal Indian conflict – creating multiple battlefronts for the Indian government in different countries of the world.

¹ See C Christine Fair, "Diaspora Involvement in Insurgencies: Insights from the Khalistan and Tamil Eelam Movements," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1, April 2005, pp. 125-56.

² Interview with Dr. Inderjeet Singh Jaijee, Chandigarh, 11 August 2007.

Evolution of the Sikh Separatist Conflict

From being perceived as a threat to the very foundation of the Indian Union – undertaking the assassination of an Indian Prime Minister, prompting an attack on one of the holiest Sikh shrines, and instigating violence that claimed tens of thousands of lives – Punjab politics have played a role in defining Indian politics over the last century and, most notably, with the agitation in the late 1970s, and the eventual Sikh separatist movement in the 1980s. There was, however, no viable claim for secession in Punjab in independent India before the 1980s, and the separatist or *Khalistani* movement only gained popular ground after Operation Blue Star in 1984.³ Nevertheless, the chaos and political turmoil observed in Punjab over the last few decades took roots from a century-long history of political, economic, and ideological grievances and agitational politics in the region.

The concept of Sikh nationalism and autonomy dates back to the early 20th century against the larger backdrop of the Indian nationalist movement and the striving for Indian Independence from British colonial control.⁴ When talks began for dividing Punjab, prominent Sikh leaders were weary of their position as a Sikh minority in a Hindu majority state, and expressed several concerns about the protection of their rights in the future Indian state. They also felt that if Muslims were to gain Pakistan and Hindus gained India, then why could Sikhs not have an ‘Azad’ Punjab?⁵ However, the Sikhs, bereft of any organization to establish a separate state, were offered protection and civil liberties by both Jinnah and Nehru if they

joined either Pakistan or India respectively. Feeling more secure among Hindus and more reassured by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Sikh leaders decided to join the Indian Union.⁶

Sikh nationalism and separatist leanings subsided once this decision was taken and its resurrection did not occur until the late 1970s. Nonetheless, it was the events in Punjab’s political and economic environment between this hiatus after Partition and the late 1970s that ignited the simmering grievances of the Sikh population in Punjab, and set the stage for a full blown separatist movement, later.

Following Partition, the mass relocation of Sikhs to the Indian Punjab changed their status of a small minority at 13 percent to a more significant 35 percent of the population. The majority Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, sought a government to represent the Sikh population in this new state and also hoped thereby to gain more political leverage in provincial politics. They feared the fragmentation and dissolution of the Sikh population into the Hindu masses, and a priority on their political agenda was the creation of a distinct territory in which they would become a majority.

The first of several Sikh grievances arose from this attempt to create a Sikh majority territory by the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state and the central government’s initial resistance and slow response to recognizing Punjabi as an official language of the Indian Constitution. This *Punjabi Suba* movement was refused by the central government in the initial stages out of fear regarding its possible promotion of communal agitation between the Hindus and the Sikhs in Punjab and the perception

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 286.

⁵ Harjot S Oberoi, “From Punjab to ‘Khalistan’; Territoriality and Metacommentary,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 60, Spring 1987, pp. 59-72.

⁶ Singh, n. 4, p. 288.

that Punjabi was not distinct enough from Hindi for the creation of a linguistic state.⁷ This delay in creating a Punjabi-speaking state soured the relations between the Akali party and the centre but, the *Punjabi Suba* was finally accepted in 1966 by Indira Gandhi in response to the gallant role of the Sikhs in the 1965 war with Pakistan, and her desire to harness the Akalis as potential allies in her political struggle against the dissident members of her Congress Party. However, this new state provided only a slim 56 percent Sikh majority and as the vote was split, it did not guarantee the Akalis assured political power in Punjab. For maintaining support when they were not in power, the Akali Party decided to pursue a course of agitational politics to give further vent to the grievances of the Sikh population in Punjab.

Agriculture was and is still the mainstay of Punjab's economy and the livelihood of a majority of its population and the resultant politics continues to play a major role in Punjab's political environment. The Green Revolution in Punjab was characterized by the use of technology to promote rapid agricultural growth through the use of hybrid high-yielding, disease-resistant seeds with shorter growing seasons. However, the poorer Sikh farmers felt marginalized by the consequences of the agricultural boom accompanying the Green Revolution. The two other states carved out of Punjab during the creation of the *Punjabi Suba* were Hindi-speaking Haryana and Himachal Pradesh and ever since, Sikh farmers have felt that their territorial river waters were being unfairly redirected towards other states.⁸ This posed a major problem as the harvest season required greater amounts of water to which these farmers did not have the right of use. They also needed more fertilizers. Since most of the wholesale grain merchants were wealthy Hindus and the poorer Sikh farmers did not have the access to the

resources needed to take advantage of the Green Revolution, many of them began to feel marginalized by the government.

What further exacerbated their economic grievances was the prosperity gained during the Green Revolution by and its effect on the wealthier Sikh farmers. With the influx of money coming to these Sikh farmers there was also a loss of religious values, orthodoxy, and non-observance of the Khalsa practices in the community. Wealthier Sikhs started shedding the symbols of their faith, like observance of the Khalsa precepts, confirming the Akali fear that the Sikh community would be absorbed into the Hindu population.

In response to the perceived marginalization and fear of dissolution of the Sikh community, an attempt followed to purify the Sikh faith by returning to its roots and identity as a separate community. The Akalis came up with a list of grievances of the Sikh community – the Anandpur Sahib Resolution – which tackled, many issues concerning the rights and governance of Punjab, amalgamating the economic grievances of the Sikh community with their religious ones to create a deep sense of hurt and deprivation at the hands of the centre. This is when the agitation, that would lead to mass separatist sentiment and a decade of violence, took root.

Indira Gandhi now proceeded to break up the power of Akali Dal party by encouraging a new leader, who would counter the propaganda of the Akali Dal. She found for her purpose, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a preacher advocating the shunning of worldly vices that had entered Punjab due to its economic prosperity and a return to embrace the roots and purer form of Sikhism or the *Khalsa*. This was a grave miscalculation on Mrs. Gandhi's part and her advisors, as the politicization of Bhindranwale's cause gained mass support, especially amongst the rural Sikh farmers, already resenting their economic deprivation. The agitation eventually turned

⁷ Rajiv A Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 208.

⁸ Interview with Dr. Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, Chandigarh, 26 July 2007.

into an armed movement leading to several violent clashes in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

As the political situation in Punjab became increasingly chaotic and violent, Bhindranwale moved into the Golden Temple Complex and led his movement within its precincts. In June 1984, Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army into the Golden Temple complex to quell the operations of Bhindranwale and expel his followers. Operation Blue Star was the turning point of the conflict in Punjab; it was to radically change the political situation in the state for a decade to come. The fact that the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, often referred to as the 'heartbeat' of Sikhism, was invaded and became a bloody battlefield between Bhindranwale and the Indian government was traumatic for the Sikh community, not only in India but around the world. Hundreds of people were killed, the majority being innocent pilgrims; Bhindranwale perished in the attack and the army succeeded in its operation, but the consequences were grave and triggered the assassination of Indira Gandhi in October the same year by her Sikh bodyguards, outraged by the attack on the Golden Temple.

Furthermore, the pogrom following Indira Gandhi's assassination in November 1984 resulted in the death of over 2,717 Sikhs in New Delhi. In many instances, they were led by Congress workers armed with voter's lists targeting Sikh households in Delhi, with complicit police officers and security officials allowing the killings to take place, claiming to be waiting for orders to react. The massacre made headlines around the world, and led the Sikh community, not only in India, but globally, to question their protection in India. Sikhs began to feel threatened by the government and an armed militancy to ensure their survival and the creation of an independent and sovereign state took shape. These events that mobilized Sikhs all over the world from neutral bystanders to sympathizers with the

separatist cause led to a decade-long militancy, President's rule, oppression, and large-scale violence in Punjab.⁹

⁹ Jaijee, n. 2.

History, Development, and Sentiments of the Sikh Diaspora

There have been three distinct movements of Sikhs out of the Indian subcontinent into foreign lands; hence they have a long history of migration out of the region. The first instance of Sikh migration reaches back to the very beginning of the British colonial era in South Asia. The Sikh Diaspora was initially established by the movement of Sikh civil servants, soldiers, policemen, labourers, and indentured servants throughout the British Empire. The Sikh immigrants reached North America in the early 1900s and the first migration to Britain came about in 1950 when men from Punjab sought work in British industry due to its shortage of unskilled labor.¹⁰ These people were for the most part less educated agriculturalists, and labourers, and their host communities were generally unwelcoming and held racist and hostile attitudes towards these early Sikh immigrants. Such discrimination isolated them from the larger community and created many barriers to their success in these countries, providing them only low-paying jobs and pinning them to the lowest economic levels of society.

The first large-scale movement of Sikhs out of India occurred after 1960 due to the liberalization in immigration laws and the concurrent availability of a surplus in Indian skilled labor. After World War II, the barriers against Asian immigration to the United States were significantly lowered, especially after India became an independent nation. In the wake of Independence, Nehru and other Indian policymakers saw the need for experts to aid in India's economic and industrial

development, and thus the government sponsored many young scientists to be trained abroad and bring their expertise back home, which contributed to the rapid growth of educational institutions within India. Unfortunately, there was a mismatch between the growth of education and the growth of industry resulting in a surplus of young professionals within the country. In this situation, many young educated Sikh professionals sought economic betterment abroad. This second migratory group between 1960 and 1984 was therefore, educated and successful, and able to establish the Sikh Diaspora as an important Diaspora community in their respective countries.¹¹

The third and most recent wave of Sikh migration out of the Indian subcontinent occurred in 1984 in the wake of Operation Blue Star and the ensuing violence and oppression faced by the Sikh community in Punjab. As mentioned earlier, the attack on the Golden Temple, the death of Bhindranwale, and the violence against the Sikh community in 1984 became a fertile launching pad for an armed movement led by several separatist groups. The movement was ultimately crushed by the use of brute force by the Indian armed forces. Unfortunately, while eliminating terrorism many innocent Sikhs disappeared, were kidnapped, arbitrarily arrested and tortured by the Punjab Police.¹² Sikhs left their homes in Punjab to escape persecution due to the political and communal turmoil of the state. According to Inderjeet Singh Jaijee, a former Punjab MLA, "Sikhs were being targeted from 1983 onwards and from 1984-

¹⁰ "Sikhism in Britain," *BBC*, 29 August 2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/_sikhism/history/_britishsikhism.shtml. Accessed on 20 August 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Brian Keith Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2002, pp. 411-28.

1987 there was a large out-flux of Sikhs trying to save themselves.”¹³ These immigrants were barely educated young men from the villages of Punjab, unaware of their future abroad, but desperate to find any way to ‘get out’ and avoid economic deprivation and arbitrary arrests, torture, and death in Punjab.¹⁴ This new wave of immigrants also included some members of the Punjabi elite classes. Public figures like the current chief minister of Punjab, Prakash Singh Badal, sent their children abroad to protect them from the violence.¹⁵ Other political figures like Jagjit Singh Chauhan, claiming to be members of the Khalistani government in exile, also constituted the face of the Diaspora during the separatist movement. It is this third group of people that became the link between Punjab and the Diaspora community – some migrated to protect their lives and those of their families, others left due to the chaos in Punjab, and inevitably some went to spread the message of Khalistan.

It is apparent that the Sikh Diaspora is very diverse with members coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds and professions – all with very different reasons for migration. There is great variation that challenges the unity of and creates factions within the diasporic community as is visible in the historical factions within the Sikh community in Punjab. Despite these differences, the common link binding the Sikh community abroad is its affinity for and attachment to Punjab as its ‘homeland’ for both its culture and religion. As obtains elsewhere in a vast multiethnic and multicultural country like India, regional sentiments tend to come before national sentiment, and Sikhs also see themselves as definitively more Punjabi than Indian. Part of this attachment is due to the fact that Punjab itself has been strongly cohesive throughout Sikh history. It is the birthplace of the Sikh religion, language, and culture,

which also informed the early immigrants who were not acceptable to their host societies. The Diaspora has staunchly maintained its culture and religion thus emphasizing the attachment to their homeland. Punjab is the only place in the world where Sikhs form the majority population, every corner is laden with Sikh history, and according to D S Tatla, Punjab can be considered to be the ‘center’ of Sikh identity formation.¹⁶ Punjab also houses the holiest of the Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple. It is comparable in its importance to the Sikhs as Mecca is to Muslims. Pilgrimage to the Golden Temple is a priority for the Sikhs, regardless of their level of devotion or orthodoxy. No trip to Punjab is complete for Diaspora families until they have visited Amritsar and the Golden Temple. It is precisely this emotional attachment to their culture, religion, and link to Punjab – all of which are inextricably mixed – that underlines their role in the Sikh separatist movement.

¹³ Jaijee, n. 2.

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Ranbir Singh Sandhu, Chandigarh, 19 July 2007.

¹⁵ Jaijee, n. 2.

¹⁶ Darshan Singh Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p.43.

Mobilization of the Sikh Diaspora

The Sikh Diaspora's unique history and migration out of the Indian subcontinent provided a fertile ground for developing close connections with Punjab. This connection was bolstered by the Diaspora's desire to preserve their identities in foreign lands and their familial roots in Punjab. Their attachment was almost entirely emotional and nostalgic; in fact, the number of Diaspora Sikhs taking active interest in Punjab affairs prior to Operation Blue Star was extremely low. Sikhs abroad were not much interested in Punjab's political events as in the preservation of their identity and religion.¹⁷ Operation Blue Star was seen by them as an invasion of the Golden Temple and an attack upon the entire Sikh community, sending a major shockwave throughout the Diaspora. Dr. Ranbir Singh Sandhu, an immigrant and resident of the US for over 30 years, said, "[After the attack] there was a feeling of consternation and disbelief among us."¹⁸ Operation Blue Star and the Delhi pogroms justified the Sikh call to action. Members of the Diaspora community wished to do something to help the oppressed members of their community in India – including supporting the creation of a separate Sikh state. The Diaspora contributed to the movement through social, financial, and diplomatic means.

Sikh temples or *Gurdwaras* played an important role through which the Sikh Diaspora was able to rally itself and reach consensus on the situation and developments in Punjab. Gurdwaras have traditionally served as central social and religious institutions throughout Sikh history and the Sikh concept of *Miri-Piri* – the inseparability of religion and the state – validates and emphasizes this dual role of

the Gurdwara.¹⁹ From the earliest days of Sikh migration, the Diaspora community have used Gurdwaras to nurture their faith but also to provide social contacts and survival mechanisms in foreign societies, as they allowed for interaction between the small Sikh populations abroad, but gave them an opportunity to speak Punjabi and reminisce about their days back home. The fact that Gurdwaras were the primary social institutions of the Diaspora by the 1980s made them the perfect political platform from which to seek their involvement in the separatist movement.

The outward flow of Sikhs from India after 1984 provided a key testament for the distraught Sikh Diaspora to understand the chaotic events in Punjab. Amongst this group, many had sought asylum as they were apprehensive regarding their rights and civil liberties in Punjab while others left partly in fear for their lives and those of their families and partly to continue the fight for Khalistan on foreign shores.²⁰

Regardless of their background or their motives for leaving India, the Gurdwaras were the first and foremost destination for these immigrants, and became an essential institution for the development of the separatist movement since they were the primary link between the Diaspora and Punjab. The Gurdwaras provided the human rights activists, the advocates of Khalistan, and other members of the community a platform to speak out against the oppression, the lack of law and order in Punjab, and the Indian government. They became the location for heated debates and aggressive postures between pro- and anti-Khalistan speakers, resulting in some instances of politicizing and polarizing the Gurdwaras themselves. Massacre art became a common sight, adorning the walls of

¹⁷ Sandhu, n. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Dhillon, n. 9.

²⁰ Sandhu, n. 14.

Gurdwaras with pictures of tortured bodies, referred to as *Shabeeds* or martyrs, which depicted the violence in Punjab and further touched the emotional chords in the Sikh psyche. The hurt caused by the events at the Golden Temple, coupled with the disturbing news and moving speeches about the chaos in Punjab made before the congregations at the Gurdwaras, set the foundation for the Diaspora's mobilization.

The financial support that went into the separatist movement was funneled through the Sikh Diaspora. Activists were able to take advantage of Gurdwaras to rally the local Sikh population for making financial contributions and fundraising for humanitarian, political, and social causes throughout Punjab. However, remittances have always been an important source of revenue, and date back to the first wave of Sikh migration out of Punjab. As evident from their history, these early Sikh settlers came from poor backgrounds with very little education and it was with the support of their family and community in Punjab that they were able to seize the opportunity to make a new life abroad. Once they were settled outside Punjab, they regularly sent money back to repay those who had supported their journey and to enhance the respect of their families in their home communities. Most Diaspora Sikhs understood the roots or complexity of the conflict in Punjab and their financial support was motivated by emotional attachment and compassion for the people at home after hearing about the atrocities committed in the state. Although funds did get funneled into the violent agitation it was a relatively meagre amount, compared to the massive amounts of money that the Indian government was pouring into its counter-insurgency operations. What is important is that the Diaspora was involved in the collection of funds and in raising public consciousness of the separatist conflict.

The vocal advocates of Khalistan and various groups pressing the cause of Sikh autonomy became the crucial players in the

diasporic involvement in the Punjab movement. The most organized groups were the Khalistan Council, Dal Khalsa, Babbar Khalsa, International Sikh Youth Federation, World Sikh Organization, and Council of Khalistan. The first four groups had their base in Punjab and openly supported violent agitations for the achievement of Khalistan. After the Indian government's crackdown and the mounting of militancy in Punjab, they started several chapters abroad, specifically in the US, UK, and Canada from where they conducted their plans and operations. Prior to 1984, there was no real organization of the Sikh Diaspora. In July 1984, following Operation Blue Star, however, US Sikhs held a major conference in Madison Square Garden where they decided under the leadership of Major General Jaswant Singh and Didar Singh Bains that the faith and heritage of the Sikhs would only be safe in an independent state. The World Sikh Organization and the Council of Khalistan were both US-based organizations that supported a peaceful movement for Sikh autonomy through public awareness and education campaigns promoting the cause of Khalistan.²¹ These organizations, centred around leading advocates of Khalistan, were able to garner attention, and in some cases, the support of the Diaspora and the international community. They pursued the media, made headlines and appealed to international organizations, and thus brought the Punjab conflict to international attention in an attempt to pressure the Indian government and establish their state.

One of the most vocal and notorious advocates of the Khalistan movement was Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan, leader of the British-based Khalistan Council, a former finance minister of Punjab, who migrated to the UK in 1971 and was banned in 1980 from returning to India. Dr. Chauhan took every opportunity to bring his cause to the notice of the international media having started his advocacy of Khalistan in the early

²¹ Sandhu, n. 14.

1970s most notably through a full-page advertisement published in *The New York Times* on 13 October, 1971 in which he denounced the oppression of Sikhs in India, stating, “The Sikhs demand an independent state in India...the only guarantee for peace on the subcontinent. No power on earth can suppress the Sikhs. They are a people with a destiny. There will always be a Sikh nation.” Dr. Chauhan gave regular interviews to the BBC, distributed significant amounts of published materials, and appealed to various government officials including US senators like Mark Hatfield and Sam Nunn. He even went to the extent of issuing Khalistani passports, bank notes, and stamps.

Chauhan and other groups functioning out of the Diaspora were also believed to be linked to and receiving help from Pakistan in their efforts for the creation of Khalistan. Some Sikhs did travel to Pakistan, ostensibly to support a violent struggle for Khalistan. However, there is no clear evidence of financial or logistical support being received from Pakistan in the movement. What is known is that cadres from such groups traveled to Pakistan to promote their cause of Khalistan – distributing pamphlets and discussing the cause at the historic Nankana Sahib Gurdwara. This was the same location where Sikhs assembled a few times during

the year to open a face-to-face dialogue between the Diaspora community and the Sikhs of Punjab.

Dr. Gurmit Singh Aulakh, like Chauhan, was and remains a firm advocate of Khalistan and is the leader of the Council of Khalistan. Dr. Aulakh focused his attention on appealing to international organizations and policymakers regarding Khalistan by lobbying governments and focusing his efforts on influencing international public opinion in favor of autonomy for the Sikhs. His strategy has been in publicizing human rights violations in not only Punjab but other areas of unrest within India like Kashmir and the Northeast. Dr. Aulakh made regular appeals at the yearly meetings of the UN sub-commission on Human Rights and before global human rights NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The Council of Khalistan continues to lobby in the US and international governments and has managed to garner the support of several members of the Congress, and of former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush. Figures like Chauhan and Aulakh have played a crucial role in organizing the Sikh Diaspora and shaping international public opinion towards Khalistan.

Conclusion

When analyzing the Diaspora's role, it becomes clear that its mobilization was only possible because some organizations and individuals initially ignited the fire and kept it going. A striking fact is that leaders such as Chauhan were created in Punjab but strengthened in foreign countries and designed their movements in the UK, US and Canada without any substantial support from the local communities. The settled and permanent Diaspora community fanned the flames of separatism as long as they felt the emotional hurt of 1984 and came to know of the atrocities in Punjab thereafter. Once peace was restored in Punjab and arbitrary arrests, torture, and violence against the Sikh community abated, Sikhs abroad felt assured again of the safety of their co-religionists and identity in Punjab and lost interest in the movement.

The Diaspora community acted primarily out of compassion and sympathy for the victims of the violence in Punjab and mobilized themselves to help their fellow brethren and not for supporting separatism. Today, there are a few groups still fighting for the creation of Khalistan, but the movement has lost its popular support both in India and within the Diaspora community.

About the Author

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