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*Leveling Crowds*

*Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*

STANLEY J. TAMBIAH
short intervals in 1977, 1981, and 1983. Since the last three upheavals took place on the watch of the United National Party, it has been asked to what extent the “liberalized open economy” and capitalist, market-oriented policies introduced by President Jayewardene created economic dislocations injurious to segments of the Sinhalese population, who might have sponsored, supported, and even participated in varying degrees in the spate of riots against the Tamils.

The Tamils were targeted for a combination of reasons: they were perceived as privileged and a suitable object of repressive action on behalf of the majority Sinhalese population, especially its poorer segments; because they were convenient victims, against whom aggression that could not be directed at the state could be displaced; and because Tamil business interests could be dispossessed or eliminated to the advantage of Sinhalese small-scale entrepreneurs and traders, who suffered most in the changeover from the state-regulated welfare and protectionist policy of the previously ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party to the capitalist, market-oriented, free-trade policy heralded by the UNP in 1977.

In sum, the 1983 riots were a kind of pogrom, which was motivated, purposive, systematic, and organized. Politically and economically, they were a punitive action against Tamils. Those who stood to gain most were, firstly, middle-level Sinhala entrepreneurs, businessmen, and white-collar workers, and, secondly, the urban poor, mainly through looting. Many of the latter were recent migrants from rural areas, whose living conditions had deteriorated as the open economy created and widened disparities of wealth and income distribution. Despite rising wages, their real incomes had declined as a result of inflation, urban housing scarcities, and the issuing of food stamps in place of the former subsidized rice program. Moreover, the measures taken to create an open-market economy caused short-term internal dislocations and imbalances, which were aggravated by pressure from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other international organizations.17

5 Sikh Identity, Separation, and Ethnic Conflict

This chapter is primarily concerned with documenting the Hindu-Sikh riots that engulfed Delhi in 1984 and highlighting aspects of them that illustrate and illuminate the phenomenon of collective violence generated in the course of ethnic conflict.

The history of the Sikhs, the conspicuous changes and transformations in their religion from their first guru, Nānak (1469–1539), to their tenth and last guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), and thereafter; their golden age under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), who constructed the Sikh empire in the Punjab, with its capital at Lahore, and who is alleged to have realized the cry “The Khalsa shall rule!” (attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, who created the Sikh warrior order called the Khalsa); their shifting fortunes under the British; all this and much else has been treated by many scholars. It will suffice here as a backdrop to the riots of 1984 if I point to a few landmark developments in the religious and political affairs of the Sikhs in India, especially in the Punjab, from the 1920s onwards.1

THE SUCCESSIVE PARTITIONS OF THE PUNJAB

One set of developments to bear in mind is the succession of “partitions” that the Punjab has undergone. A unitary Punjab under British rule was first partitioned in 1947 with the formation of Pakistan. It is well to remember that the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 was done at a huge human cost: about half a million people died and around fifteen million people changed residence through migration. The Punjab as a whole felt the worst effects of the turmoil of Partition. There were twelve million refugees from the Punjab alone, and possibly two hundred thousand of its people were slaughtered. The killings began in March 1947, when Muslim
In November 1920, an estimated 10,000 Sikhs met in Amritsar to establish a committee to draft new rules for the management of the Golden Temple there. It was this committee that became the SGPC. Soon afterwards, the Akali Dal was formed as a central organization to coordinate and direct local jathas, which were attempting to take control of the Sikh gurdwaras (temples) from the traditional mahants. The SGPC led by the Akali Dal activists forcibly took over shrine after shrine, and by 1925 the SGPC had gained formal ownership of some of the gurdwaras. The British colonial authorities recognized and legitimized the SGPC and made it “the Religious Parliament of Sikhs,” a position and a role that it claims to this day. The Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Act of 1925 placed more than 200 temples under the control of the SGPC, which was to be elected by all adult Sikhs living in Punjab. Controlling large funds—in the 1980s about Rs 70 million—the SGPC became a magnet for Sikh politicians. “In the Sikh-majority Punjab formed in 1966 the SGPC became an organization which could create and destroy governments.”

Although the Akali Dal decided to support the Raj in World War II, and succeeded in persuading Sikhs to join the British Indian Army, it had not yet forged a clear policy regarding the future of the Sikhs in the postwar world in 1947. Although there had been talk by Tara Singh of an independent Sikh state if the country were to be divided, there was no effective hooking up with the rounds of deliberations between the British, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League. And in the face of the violence of Partition and vast displacements of people as refugees, the Akali Dal consented to the partition of Punjab as inevitable.

**Political contests, 1947–1984**

In many ways, the most critical factors cumulatively leading to a politics of escalation, as well as of factionalism, were those that issued from a complicated but calculated contest between the political parties that controlled the federal government in Delhi and those that wielded power in Punjab State.

In Delhi, the parties that would crucially compete for power, especially in the 1970s, were Congress (I), which ruled most of the time, and the Janata Party, which briefly came to power in 1977. In Punjab State, the political stakes were contested by Congress (I) on the one side and the Akali Dal and Janata in coalition on the other.

The most critical feature of the dialectics of contest, which led to a fraught and spiraling trajectory of divisive violence, culminating in the extreme acts of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his fundamentalist militants, was the intersection and interference of federal politics with the politics of the Punjab State.
Punjab State. For instance, it is said that it was Indira Gandhi and Congress (I) that originally set up and sponsored Bhindranwale as a rival to the Akali Dal, the political grouping that the local Congress (I) feared in Punjab, and that was led by a triumvirate of Sikh leaders, namely, Parkash Singh Badal, a former Punjab chief minister; Harishand Singh Longowal, a respected religious leader; and Gurbachar Singh Tohra, who headed the SGPC. This tangle was further aggravated by the personal differences between Zail Singh, then union home minister, and Punjab’s Congress (I) chief minister, Darbara Singh. In the end, the politics of divide and rule turned out to be a nightmare for the government of Indira Gandhi, whose death they brought about.

The wrestling between Congress and the Akali Dal goes back to the early days of independence. Then, too, there was an antagonistic pairing between Partap Singh Kairon, a Jat, who was Congress chief minister of Punjab and an ally of Nehru’s, and Master Tara Singh, a Khatri, a leading figure in the Akali Dal, and several times president of the SGPC. Both leaders had been part of the Gandhian nationalist movement, but Tara Singh had already in the early 1950s accused the Hindu majority of trying to absorb the Sikhs, and advocated Punjabi Suba, a new state that would safeguard the Punjabi language and the interests of the Sikh. After 1960, Tara Singh and the Akali Dal had decisively terminated friendly dealings with Congress, and Tara Singh led a campaign of civil disobedience for the creation of Punjabi Suba. Since the time of Tara Singh and since the creation of Punjabi Suba, there have been three significant interrelated developments in the politics of the Punjab.

First, there was the rise of the Jat Sikhs, with their power base located among the Sikh peasantry in rural areas, and their domination in time of the Akali Dal. It is generally recognized that the Sikhs in Punjab are divided into three categories: (a) the Khatri, who are urban in origin and have traditionally practiced commercial, trading, and clerical occupations, and who produced not only all ten gurus but also Master Tara Singh, the most forceful of the modern Sikh leaders; (b) the Jats, rural agriculturalists who constitute up to 60 percent of the Sikhs, and from whose ranks came Sant Fateh Singh, Master Tara Singh’s successor; and (c) the minority of “low castes,” namely, the Mazhabis (untouchables), and the Ramgarhias (artisans).

Second, especially in the 1960s, many Jat Sikhs changed their political affiliation from Congress to the Akali Dal, a change facilitated by the fall of P.S. Kairon in 1964. In the elections of 1967, the majority of MLA's of Akali designation, about twenty-four in number, were Jat Sikhs.

Third, there was the intensification of the already ingrained factionalism of Punjab politics, which was laced with violence, the latter being in some commentators’ eyes a mode of enacting politics brought with them by the Jat Sikhs.

Congress’s loss of control of Punjab politics and the increasing factionalism and violence of Indian politics in general went hand in hand. In February 1967, the United Front, made up of non-Congress parties and led by the Akali Dal, took office. And the next five years were turbulent, with shifts of control and two dramatic interventions by the federal center. The United Front gave way after a few months to a Congress-supported minority “Janta Party” in November 1967, whose rule was superseded, again after only a few months, by president’s rule (August 1960–February 1969). President’s rule gave way to Akali Dal-Jana Sangh coalitions, which lasted till about June 1971, to be replaced again by president’s rule with the collapse of the Akali Dal government and the beginning of the third Indo-Pakistan War.

During the next five years (1972–77), there was Congress rule in Punjab, with Giani Zail Singh as chief minister: but while a state of emergency imposed on the whole country helped Zail Singh continue in office, a sustained and powerful opposition to Congress rule was mounted by the Akali Dal, staged from the gurdwaras. The elections of March 1977 saw the triumphant return of the Akali Dal, which formed a coalition government with the Janata Party. The humiliated Congress did not win a single seat. Parkash Singh Badal was now enshrined as chief minister, but his coalition collapsed two years later, amidst a mounting tide of violence that would progressively engulf Punjab.

The Congress Party, led by Indira Gandhi, lost the national elections of 1977 as well, and gave way to a Janata Party government, which, however, torn by internal dissension and factional politics, was dissolved in January 1980. Although the Congress Party lost the election in Punjab in 1977 and was out of power in Delhi, it had set in motion the old strategy of splitting the Akali Dal and promoting factionalism, this time with diabolical results.

As Robin Jeffrey explains, “the technique developed was to encourage dissatisfied Akali factions to start a campaign ‘for complete autonomy of Punjab’ and to accuse their own government of failure to look after Sikh interests. This would anger Hindus in the Janata Party, put Akali ministers in the position of having to qualify their devotion to their religion and thus divide Parkash Singh Badal’s government. In the ensuing disarray it might be possible to ‘bring in a Congress (I) government.’”

It is these political strategies and tactics that help explain the temporary
the end of May. The escalation of violent acts and the slide toward "terrorism" can be gauged from this enumeration of murders and vendettas.

On April 24, 1980, Gurbachan Singh, the leader of the Nirankari Mission, was assassinated in Delhi. Bhindranwale’s involvement was suspected.

On September 9, 1981, Lala Jagat Narain, head of the Punjab Kesari chain of newspapers, an ally of Partap Singh Kairon’s, was submachine-gunned by three Sikh motorcycle riders. Two days earlier, the Akali Dal had organized a peaceful and orderly procession of some 100,000 Sikh marchers. The Akali’s new president, Harchand Singh Longowal, played a prominent part in advancing Sikh claims—for example, that Amritsar be declared a holy city—and in affirming the nationhood of Sikhs within the Union of India. The murder of Narain was attributed to Bhindranwale, and a warrant was issued for his arrest; a gun battle ensued, but Bhindranwale managed to elude the chase and take refuge at his headquarters at Chowk Mehta in Punjab, before giving himself up in the presence of a crowd of 50,000 people. “Then the rioting began; before it was over the police had opened fire and eight people were dead.”14 The police in fact had no hard evidence against Bhindranwale, and he was released. This episode confirmed his ascendancy as the charismatic leader of the extremists in Punjab and made him a sworn enemy of the government, dedicated to winning Khalistan, if necessary by violent means.

The arrest and release of Bhindranwale triggered a barrage of violent incidents in the following months, the like of which had never happened before. On September 22, a submachine gun sprayed bullets in Jullundur Market; an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked a week later; two policemen were killed and their weapons stolen; a bomb exploded in Bhindranwale’s own headquarters, killing three; and a number of other assassinations took place, the most conspicuous being that of Santokh Singh, “the most powerful Sikh in New Delhi, closely connected to the Congress (I) and a regular associate of Bhindranwale” on December 21.15 In short, shootings and killings were being directed by multiple actors, including agents of the state, at one another. It was difficult to discern who was doing what to whom and why. As public order deteriorated, the menace of violence hung in the air. Violence rather than being an aberration was becoming the routine form of enacting politics. Finally, on October 5, 1983, a massacre of bus passengers, all Hindu, prompted the declaration of president’s rule in Punjab.

On February 27, 1984, Parkash Singh Badal, twice chief minister of Punjab, publicly burned the Indian Constitution and proclaimed his support for the aims of Bhindranwale’s crusade, showing that highly placed...
Sikhs disenchanted with government policy were being drawn toward an extremist position.

At the last stages of his marked career, Bhindranwale, fearing arrest by the government, occupied the Akal Takt in the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar with a number of his followers and fortified it. Trained and equipped with modern weapons, they prepared for what they must have suspected was to be their last siege. The Punjab police were as deeply divided as civil society. The fateful storming of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army, code-named “Operation Blue Star,” occurred on June 6, 1984. A thousand people were killed, pilgrims among them, along with Bhindranwale and his followers, and the buildings were extensively damaged (see figure 1). This show of force by the Indian government was viewed as an outrage by the majority of the Sikh community—even among those far removed from the politics of both the Akali and Bhindranwale—and provided the impetus for a further escalation of violence and terror.

On October 31, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was herself assassinated by her Sikh security guards, and a tornado of violence devastated Delhi (and other places, such as Kanpur, Bokaro, and Indore). Delhi’s intellectuals plunged into an anguished search for understanding. “Why did this kind of horror—and it’s a qualitatively new type of horror in our body-politic—erupt at all, tearing apart a 500 year history of spiritual and symbiotic relationships?” Darshan Singh Maini asked. 16

Rajni Kothari has sketched the prevailing mood among the Hindus, especially in North India, who felt “that the Sikhs were more like enemies than friends, that they were the cause of national disintegration, that they were responsible for large scale murders of Hindus in Punjab (actually more Sikhs were killed by the extremists than Hindus), that they were an aggressive and violent people, loyal to Bhindranwale and other extremists, on the whole out to undermine Indian unity. All this got reinforced by wild rumours and press censorship.” 17 Mounting resentment of the Sikhs was compounded by the perception that they were disproportionately prosperous and economically successful.

Following Indira Gandhi’s assassination, the predominantly Hindu population of Delhi unleashed a massive orgy of violence against the minority Sikhs. The vast majority of the victims were Sikh inhabitants of “the settlement colonies” on the fringes of the city, who were by origin not drawn from the ranks of the Punjabi Jats or Khatri, but were either Sindhi Sikhs, a residue of the refugee exodus at the time of Partition, or “low-caste” Mazhabi Sikhs living on the edge of poverty. Neither of these slum populations had anything to do with the involuted and explosive politics that
counterposed the Akali Dal activists, Bhindranwale’s militants, and Congress (I) politicians. What features of the urban landscape of Delhi itself, its distribution of power, disposition of space, congested contiguity of peoples, electoral strategies, slum landlordism, and municipal politics contributed to the rampage of the crowds? How do we differentiate the issues and strains of the wider political scene from the particular demographic and spatial ecology of the metropolis of Delhi, and then relate the two?

THE ANTI-SIKH RIOTS OF 1984 IN DELHI

In 1984, Hindus comprised 83 percent of Delhi’s total population of about 6.2 million people. Estimates of the Sikh population ranged from 6.3 percent to 7.5 percent (an estimated 300,000–500,000 people). A majority of them had settled in Delhi after Partition (1947), before which the Sikhs were only 1.2 percent of the city’s population.18

The riots occurred in many different parts of the city but were at their worst in localities such as Munirka in the south, Mandoli and Sultanpur in the west, Trilokpuri and Kalyanpuri in the east, and Jahangirpuri in the north. The literature refers to these poorer sections of Delhi as the trans-Jamuna colonies and resettlement colonies.

Whatever the previous history of Hindu-Sikh relations, and their exchanges of violence, one thing is clear about the riots that occurred in Delhi between October 31 and November 4, 1984: “This violence was essentially one sided, namely, the non-Sikhs attacked the Sikhs and damaged, looted, and burnt their properties, . . . [and] Gurudwaras, and killed a few thousand of them.”19

The authors of Who Are the Guilty? observe that their own individual experiences as well as extensive interviews with varied persons (victims, their neighbors, police officers, political leaders, army officers) “suggest that the attack on the Sikhs followed a common pattern, whether they took place in Munirka in the South, or Mandoli in the West, or Trilokpuri in the East. The uniformity in the sequence of events at every spot were masterminded by some powerful organized groups. . . . Newspaper reports suggest that this pattern [was] similar in all Congress (I) ruled states.”20

The authors of a second report, Report of the Citizens’ Commission, affirmed a collective purposefulness behind the carnage: “The remarkable uniformity in the pattern of the crimes committed, with some local variations, strongly suggests that at some stage the objective became to ‘teach the Sikhs a lesson.’”21 It is certainly noteworthy that the announcement of the Indian Parliament on April 26, 1985, concerning the formation of an official commission—which came to be called the Misra Commission, taking the name of its chairman, Justice Ranganath Misra—to inquire into the riots stated that the commissioners’ task was “to inquire into the allegations in regard to the incidents of organized violence which took place in Delhi following the assassination of the late Prime Minister” (emphasis added).

Although the Delhi administration itself denied “the allegation of organized violence and stated that all possible steps were taken to quell the riots at [the] shortest time possible,” and although advocates on the Sikh and Hindu sides exaggerated or underestimated the degree of directed violence, it seems a fair judgment to say that the riots in some of their phases showed patterns of organization.22

Naturally, the parties making representations to the Misra Commission differed in their accounts of what took place. Thus, for instance, the Citizens’ Justice Commission (CJC), representing Sikh interests and containing retired justices, judges, military officers, and advocates made the forceful and extreme charge that “the violence in Delhi was premeditated, organized and was perpetrated methodically . . . so as to lead to the irresistible conclusion of central direction, guidance and control. The task was without doubt performed with the complicity, connivance and active involvement of the administration as well as the members of the ruling party.” The CJC later withdrew from the hearings, alleging partiality on the part of the Misra Commission.

A radically opposite submission was made by the Nagrik Suraksha Samiti, representing the Arya Samaj point of view. It denied that the riots were “the handiwork of any organized group of people,” asserting that they “were all sporadic and spontaneous and . . . erupted because of grave provocation and anger on account of the tragic assassination of the late Prime Minister . . . which aroused a sudden and tremendous feeling of shock, distress, and uncontrollable anger amongst the people.” The Samiti also reminded the Misra Commission that the assailants “had in their mind the events that had taken place in Punjab earlier and had known the atrocities committed by some members of the Sikh community as extremists.”

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE RIOTS

The rioting began in the evening of October 31, 1984, and had more or less abated by the end of November 4. It may thus be said to have lasted from three to four days.
First Day: October 31

Indira Gandhi was shot on October 31, 1984, at 9:15 A.M. by two of her Sikh security guards. She was rushed to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for treatment. By 11:00 A.M., All Indian Radio (AIR) reported that she had been attacked; by 2:30 P.M., the evening editions of several papers in the capital carried the news of her death, identifying Sikhs as the assailants.

Crowds had been gathering at the AIIMS, and there were stray incidents of assaults on Sikh passers-by. Soon after All Indian Radio announced Indira Gandhi's death, gathering crowds "went on a rampage in several parts of Delhi adjacent to the AIIMS, namely Safdarjung Enclave, Laxmi Bai Nagar, INA Market and South Extension." 23

The Misra Commission’s version is that the rioters, forming different groups in the vicinity of the AIIMS, proceeded toward the Defence Colony, RK Puram, Prithviraj Road, and Hauz Khas, indulging in violence and arson on the way. 24 Word spread quickly, inciting attacks in various places in the city, although the main incidents were reported from the places in South Delhi where the riots had begun (see map 2).

"By the late evening of October 31," outbreaks occurred in areas as far afield as New Friends Colony, Lajpat Nagar, Karon Bagh and New Delhi. Gurdwaras, houses, shops, factories, workshops and other property belonging to Sikhs were looted and damaged or destroyed. Sikh pedestrians and passengers, dragged out of cars or buses, were assaulted. 25 Another account reports "the arrival of young people in tempo vans, scooters, motorcycles or trucks from the night of October 31" at places such as Munirka, Saket, South Extension, Lajpat Nagar, Bhopal, Jangpura, and Ashram in the south and southeast; at the Connaught Circus shopping area in the center, and later, at the Sain-Jamuna colonies and resettlement colonies in other areas in the north. 26 Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv Gandhi, who was sworn in as prime minister at 6:50 P.M., made a broadcast to the nation appealing for calm, but it was ineffectual, as were AIR and television (Doordarshan) broadcasts of an order prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons and the carrying of arms in the Union Territory of Delhi.

The rumors were three. First, Sikhs were distributing sweets and lighting lamps to celebrate Mrs. Gandhi's death. 27 The second rumor was that trainloads of hundreds of Hindu dead bodies had arrived at Old Delhi Station from Punjab. Third, water was poisoned by the Sikhs. As for the latter two rumors, we came across evidence of policemen in vans touring certain localities and announcing through loudspeakers the arrival of the train and the poisoning of water. In certain areas, we heard that police officials had roused residents advising them not to drink the water. These rumors (the last two were officially repudiated later) contributed to the shaping of a public mind that acquiesced in the attacks and murders that took place soon after. 28

Second Day: November 1

This day was critical in that the wave of rioting that had begun around the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, where the stricken Mrs. Gandhi was taken, spread in widening ripples through various parts of the city proper already named, reaching its maximal virulence and destructive fury in the resettlement colonies, such as Sultanpur and Mangalpur in West Delhi, Trilokpuri and Kalyanpur, trans-Jamuna colonies in the east of Delhi, and other places such as Gandhi Nagar, Janakpuri, and Palam Colony.

I shall in a later section deal with the collective violence directed against the Sikhs in these settlements on Delhi’s periphery, whose inhabitants were mostly of the “lower social orders,” the urban working class, artisans, small businessmen, and lower ranges of the Congress (I) Party hierarchy, and their clients, thugs, and retainers (“the criminal elements”). All the sources available to me amply document the experiences and views of victims and neighbors of these settlements, and most of them unambiguously establish that certain identified Congress (I) leaders, workers, and activists mobilized and directed the arsonists, and that local block leaders (pradhans) and activists actually identified Sikh houses, shops, businesses, gurdwaras, and schools for the mobs.

The chief administrators of Delhi, the lieutenant governor and the home minister, responded tardily to requests that the police force be more effectively deployed and dragged their feet about the need to call in the army when the evidence of police indifference to the pleas of victims for protection and collusion with the arsonists in the destruction of property and even the killing of Sikhs was submitted by several members of Parliament, distinguished citizens, social workers, journalists, and the like. The same administrators did not think it necessary at that time to set up camps for refugees. An indefinite curfew was imposed at 6:00 P.M. that day.

Third Day: November 2

Violence and terror continued unabated. Reports appeared of an increase in the orgy of arson, rape, and murder; of Sikh passengers on trains being murdered; and of trains approaching Delhi being forcibly stopped by crowds in outlying areas in order to enable them to attack Sikh passengers.

“As a large number of victims who had been rendered homeless fled in terror, no less than eighteen unofficial camps came into being.” 29 In other
words, it was only on the third day that voluntary agencies and concerned citizens, faced with governmental sloth, endeavored to provide as best they could for the displaced, both in terms of material care and emotional solace. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi made a second broadcast in the evening, reiterating his government's commitment to restoring and preserving communal peace.

Reports mounted of trains approaching Delhi being invaded by mobs assembled at railway stations. Sikh passengers were attacked and frequently beaten to death and set afire on the spot, sometimes while alive. The logic of this was that immediate burning of the bodies prevents the identity of the dead from being known. Cutting of hair and shaving off the beard, thereby removing the most obvious marks of Sikh identity, preceded the burning.

As Kulbir Singh, an eloquent victim, remarked: "All the attacks took place in the Hindu belt, and [they] certainly occurred in those states where the Congress (I) was in power. . . . In those places where there were non-Congress parties but which I'd call communal [they] didn't happen." For example, the attacks did not occur "in the trains going towards Bombay or in the Bombay region." They happened on trains coming toward Delhi, which was clearly within the Hindu belt. "And the fact that they took place on the 1st [of November] suggests that they had enough time to think and plan." This informant, Kulbir Singh, a twenty-eight-year-old businessman, was on his way home to Bihar after a business trip to Delhi. He was pulled out of the train on November 1 at Gawa Road Station, beaten up, and left for dead. He found his way to the local hospital, where he was given little care ("It's Sardars [Sikhs] so let them just die. . . ."), until he was rescued by a Hindu friend.

A middle-class Hindu woman named Ramabehn, who was traveling toward Delhi from Baroda, reported that when the train—the Janata—arrived at Tughlakabad Station at about 10:30 or 11:00 A.M. on November 1, gangs armed with iron rods and cycle chains and carrying kerosene attacked and killed some Sikh passengers, all male. Before this train, two other trains, the Rajdhani and Deluxe, had also been stopped and attacked, so that the mobs had been at work all morning. It was estimated that about twenty-four to twenty-five Sikhs had been killed. Ramabehn recalled:

We gathered from the other passengers that the crowd was attacking Sikhs and so the people in the compartment quickly locked the doors and pulled down the shutters. . . . When the doors remained closed [the crowd] threatened to burn the bogey so the passengers had to open the doors. A group of about eight or ten young men, between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, armed with iron rods came into the compartment to make a search for Sikhs. Some of the non-Sikh passengers tried to hide the four or five Sikhs in the compartment but the mob managed to search them out and then they began to drag them away.

Among the passengers was a sanyasini (an ascetic holy woman), who in particular, along with other passengers, "pleaded with folded hands and requested them not to attack the Sikhs. They even argued that killing or attacking the Sikhs was no way to react to Mrs. Gandhi's assassination . . . [saying,] 'Is this how we are showing Indiraji that we respect her?'

"For a while the attacking group was temporarily halted . . . and the attackers began to leave the compartment. But immediately afterwards the first attacking group was replaced by a more militant group which did not show any feelings for the pleas of the passengers. They just ruthlessly hunted down the Sikhs without any mercy." An old man was dragged out, his hair was first burnt, then he was doused with kerosene and set on fire. Two younger men tried to run away but they were caught. "The old man who had been set on fire . . . continued to burn screaming with agony and remained alive right through the time the train remained halted at the station."30

On November 1, too, Doordarshan television coverage of mourners filing past Mrs. Gandhi's body laying in state at Teemurti Bhavan, broadcast shouts of "Khoon ka badla khoon!" ("Blood for blood!"). Although at the time many blamed the television authorities for irresponsible conduct, the Misra Commission, after its inquiry a year later, reported the director general of Doordarshan's explanation that the shouts were transmitted because the telecast was live, and that the coverage was terminated when the incident took place. The Misra Commission stated without comment: "When the cassette [of the relevant portion of the televised program] was played, the Commission found that the shout had been repeated eighteen times spread over 37 seconds."31

Fourth Day: November 3

This was the day of Indira Gandhi's cremation. The national media, Akashvani and Doordarshan, covered the event in detail. Aside from the thousands lined up to watch the cortege, many more viewed it on television. It is very likely that the cremation was a cathartic climax to the national tragedy, and that it probably also foreshadowed the inevitable subsidence of the rioting.

Large contingents of the armed forces, in addition to performing their ceremonial duties in connection with the funeral, were also by then a visi-
ble presence in many parts of the city, doing a much better job of surveillance and riot control than the police force had done hitherto. The curfew was also being more effectively enforced than before.

**Fifth Day: November 4**

As observed earlier, communal riots mercifully do not last at any given location for more than a few days. As the cathartic violence of the crowds is spent, the agencies of the state and the security forces, which shock or collusion had initially made inert, increasingly begin to assert their regulatory and preventive authority. Soldiers on the streets and strict imposition of curfew are the signs of a return to (uneasy) normalcy. Thus, while sporadic incidents of violence continued to occur here and there in Delhi, it had by and large dawned on the administration and civilian leaders that the visible problems of the displaced, the refugees, the injured, and the bereaved demanded relief.

Time and again, these tasks constitute the aftermath of communal violence and ethnic riots. Figures of the numbers killed, maimed, and arrested, and estimates of the havoc done, the houses, vehicles and other property destroyed, damaged, and looted, are publicized, confirmed, and contested. Overviews of the disaster, postmortems by official and unofficial commissions of inquiry, are begun, and reports are composed with an eye to their timeliness and relevance to a public that must retrospectively digest and come to terms with the outburst.

**THE SCALE OF THE DESTRUCTION**

The *Report of the Citizens’ Commission* describes the havoc wrought by the riots thus:

- During the four days of mob rule over large areas of Delhi, the loss of life and property was staggering. According to responsible estimates, well over two thousand were murdered, leaving behind over a thousand widows and numerous orphans (emphasis added). Sikh educational institutions, several large gurdwaras and many Sikh houses were burnt. Trucks, taxis, three-wheeler scooters, cars, motorcycles and scooters were burnt in their hundreds. Movable property, cash and jewelry were stolen and destroyed. Factories and business premises, together with machinery and stock-in-trade were looted, damaged or destroyed.

The home minister announced in Parliament that the number of Sikhs killed in Delhi during the 1984 riots was 2,147, and that another 586 persons were said to have been killed in other parts of the country during that period. The Misra Commission reports that the Delhi administration filed with it a list of 2,212 persons “upon whose death payment of compensation had been admitted and given to the next of kin.” The Delhi administration subsequently filed a statement that the number of deaths caused by the riots was 2,307. The Citizens’ Justice Commission, however, representing Sikh interests, submitted a list of 3,879 deaths to the Misra Commission, which concluded that the correct figure had to be somewhere between the higher figure of the committee and the lower figure conceded by the Delhi administration.

The killings were carried out with a pitiless frenzy that strains interpretation. “It is in evidence that hundreds of people so killed were burnt while they were half dead or while they were in an unconscious state or had already died. The DSGMC [Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee] has specified in written arguments the names of 73 people who were burnt alive after they became unconscious and thirteen persons who were burnt after they died. There is evidence that hundreds of charred bodies were recovered.”

The damage and looting to property was extensive and thorough. The Delhi administration reported to the Misra Commission that a total of 180 gurdwaras spread over different parts of the city had been subject to arson, looting, and burning, and that about eleven educational institutions, all founded and run by Sikh groups, had been damaged in a similar manner. The purposefulness of these acts of destruction and appropriation did not escape the guarded and oblique prose of the Misra Commission: “From the fact that so many gurdwaras and educational institutions had been damaged, it is reasonable to hold that the rioters not only had the Sikh populations as their targets but also kept an eye on their religious institutions.”

There was a definite pattern in the choice of victims. Both the Sikhs who were killed and their assailants were predominantly males aged 20–50. However, in those areas where there was most arson and lynching, such as the resettlement colonies, women and children as well as old persons were also victimized or burnt alive. Some women were raped. The documentation by Uma Chakravarti and Vandita Haksar in *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation*, based on detailed interviews with victims, leaves us in no doubt that although Sikh males were the first target in these areas, the brutalities and arson frequently became indiscriminate and knew no restraints (see figure 2).

A chartered accountant, a non-Sikh and a resident of New Friends’ Colony, gave an eyewitness account, which the Citizens’ Commission reports as follows: “The crowd was armed with lathis, crow-bars and iron rods.
They did not see any firearms, either with the crowd or with the beleaguered Sikhs.... In New Friends' Colony, they saw several Sikh-owned shops which had been set on fire. Intervening shops belonging to Hindus had not been touched.... Two trucks parked nearby were set on fire. The crowd then invaded the gurdwara opposite the shops. They ransacked the rooms in the gurdwara compound and set fire to the buildings" (see figure 3).29

Here is how another witness described the burning of the Sikh-owned Khalsa Middle School, situated in Sarojini Nagar (in this case the destruction worked against the interests of the Hindus themselves, since the majority of the students belonged to their own community):

On the afternoon of 1 November, at about 3:30 or 4 P.M., a mob of about 250-300 men came to the school which has 245 pupils of whom 65% are non-Sikhs. The mob first set fire to the tents and the school desks. Thereafter, they demolished the boundary wall of the school. They then entered the building and broke open the steel cupboards and looted them. They stole the school typewriter, instruments belonging to the school band, utensils, etc. Two desks and seven steel cupboards were seen being taken away. They destroyed the library and scientific equipment in the laboratory. The school building was burnt as also the Headmaster's scooter.29

It may be suggested that, leaving aside the massive destruction of human life, the burning of homes, property, goods, and vehicles of all kinds...
is a double action that expresses as much the attacking mob's own sense of relative “deprivation” and inaccessibility to worldly goods as it does the mob's purposive reduction of the enemy's influence and its demotion to a lower level. The bonfires, the public destruction of property by fire, are a reversal of the paradigmatic potlatch of the Kwakiutl. In the potlatch, the possessors destroyed their accumulated surplus wealth in a public display of conspicuous waste in order to shame their competitors and enhance their status. In the communal riots, it is possessors who are despised by a mob that burns their possessions—and loots them as well—in order to level down and equalize poverty.

**ORGANIZED VIOLENCE IN THE SETTLEMENT COLONIES**

“The killings which were widespread, especially in the outlying colonies, were the result of the instigation of local political cadres who mobilized some political workers and criminal elements and hoodlums from neighboring villages as well as from the neighborhood itself. In some areas, especially the congested and poor, women were raped and molested” (emphasis added). These observations have been confirmed by all the sources consulted, and direct our attention to the distinctive circumstances prevailing on Delhi's periphery, which may shed light on this extreme manifestation of violence.

The outlying settlements such as Trilokpuri, Mangolpuri, and Sultanpuri had a special relation to Congress (I). These settlements were initiated by the Congress (I) as part of its urban resettlement program. The resettlement program, begun in 1950, has progressively spawned more and more colonies, which dramatically proliferated in the Emergency period (June 1975-February 1977) in particular. By 1984, there were some forty colonies, with densely packed populations ranging from 30,000 to 300,000 in each. The inhabitants of these colonies were thus beholden to Congress (I) and were considered its strong support base and constituency, providing not only votes but also participants in political rallies. "There exists in such areas an established organizational network through which masses are mobilized for demonstration of Congress (I)'s ostensible support." A veteran Delhi politician is reported as describing them as “the best kept women” (raakhel) of Congress (I). It is therefore in line with this setup that these settlers should willingly have lent their muscle (and at the same time indulged their greed for loot) when they were beckoned by the local political bosses to take punitive action against the Sikhs.

But there is also a tragic irony to this story of political patronage. Many of the Sikhs who had been given allotments in these settlement colonies had also been thankful to Congress (I), had been its supporters, and had voted for it. Hence the chagrin of these Sikhs that their local Congress (I) activists, block leaders (pradhan), and elected Congress officials should have directed the attacks on them. "Sufferers from Trilokpuri and Mangolpuri ... whom we met looked dazed and incomprehending when they said to us: 'We were allotted their houses here by Indira. We have always voted for her party. Why were we attacked?" The authors of *The Delhi Riots* record the pathos of the feelings of abandonment by the Congress (I) and its agencies of state expressed by the Sikhs of Trilokpuri and Sultanpuri, who had served as traditional vote banks of the ruling party.

The story of Nanki Bai, who lost both her husband and fourteen members of her extended family, tells it all. Her husband ran a mat-making business in Kalyanapuri, which employed some workers. He was a good provider. Nanki Bai had led a sheltered life, and the family had saved money and jewelry as dowry for their daughter. Nanki Bai spoke obsessively of her husband, who was burnt alive. She felt guilty that he had died on an empty stomach. "He had not eaten anything because he was mourning Mrs. Gandhi's death."

The family had shut themselves in a house. The crowd broke open the door, and struck down Nanki Bai's husband with a lathi (staff). Then "the rioters tore open a part of the ceiling and set the room on fire. When the people tried to escape they were stoned and pushed back into the burning room." As another victim said of people who were killed in similar fashion, they died "like goats in a slaughter house." Nanki Bai reported that on November 2, she counted thirty-two bodies, which were removed in her presence by the police. The bodies were piled in a truck and taken away.

The politics and dynamics of riot behavior in the resettlement colonies cannot be fully comprehended without taking into account the populations of the villages at the periphery of the colonies. The participation of Jats and Gujjars from the so-called urban villages of Delhi substantially added to the numbers of rioters and contributed to the riots, murders, and looting. They were particularly dominant in West and South Delhi. Most of these villagers had once owned land in Ber Sarai, Munirka, and Mohammadpur, which had been taken away for the urban expansion of New Delhi. Their remaining land was generally unirrigated and of very poor quality. For this reason the villagers in these areas had to augment their resources through nonagricultural means, not the least of these being brigandage. Many invested in transport companies and brick-kilns, while others constructed houses on their remaining lands for the purpose of renting them. They thus controlled some economic resources and acquired political clout. It is
a known fact that if one is to make any headway in an election in Delhi, the Gujjars and Jats of these areas have to be on one's side. Unfortunately, much of the police force stationed in this area and round about was drawn from these communities. For this reason, there had on various occasions been noticeable complicity in these areas between the criminals and the police. This truth was brought home starkly during the riots. The authors of Who Are the Guilty note:

As for the Scheduled Caste communities who were displaced due to the acquisition of land for urban expansion those from the Valmiki community utilized the benefits of the reservation policy and came into the city where they found jobs in the police, UPSC, etc. The Bhangis, considered the lowest caste, are engaged in a variety of odd jobs. Among the Scheduled Caste communities living in the resettlement colonies, the Valmikis are predominately supporters of Jagivan Ram, while the Bhangis are solid supporters of Congress (I). Information gathered by us from the trouble spots in these areas suggests that the Bhangis—many of them working as sweepers in the corporation—comprised the bulk of the local miscreants who attacked the Sikhs.

It is this background and context that makes comprehensible this observation: "In some areas, like Trilokpuri, Mangolpuri and the trans-Janmuna colonies, the arsonists consisted of Gujar or Jat farmers from neighboring villages, and were accompanied by local residents, some of whom, were Congress (I) activists. In these areas, we were told Congress (I) followers of the Bhangi caste (belonging to the scheduled caste community) took part in the looting."46

Events that took place in one settlement colony, Trilokpuri, reveal much about the perpetrators of the communal violence. This is a story of how certain influential politicians, with the police acting as their accessories, were able to mobilize mobs and enact a reign of terror for more than forty-eight hours, while immobilizing the forces of law and order. In this settlement, between October 31 and November 2, at least 400 Sikhs, mainly young men, were burnt alive, with the connivance of the local police and active participation of an organized group of miscreants led by a Congress (I) councillor (see figure 4). These brutalities were preceded by circulation of the kind of rumors described earlier about the diabolical doings of the Sikhs to celebrate Indira Gandhi's death.

The beginning of the tragedy could be traced to the night of October 31 when reportedly the Congress (I) Councillor Ashok Kumar, a doctor who runs a clinic in Kalyanpuri, one kilometer from Trilokpuri, held a meeting at the latter place. The violence that broke out immediately following the meeting...
reached its climax next morning, when Gujar farmers from the neighboring village of Chilka landed at Trilokpuri, and accompanied by a group of local inhabitants (described by the residents as Scheduled Caste people) raided blocks 32, 33, 34 and 35 and systematically attacked Sikh houses, dragged out the young men, killed and burnt them and set the houses on fire. In some cases, the assailants hit the victims with iron rods on their heads before pouring kerosene on them.44

The authors of Who Are the Guilty? report that when they visited Trilokpuri on the morning of November 3, many of the survivors informed them that the local Congress (I) councilor, Dr. Ashok Kumar, had instigated the mob, which had a free run for two full days until the arrival of the troops. The police too were alleged to have behaved in line with the objectives of Dr. Kumar’s onslaught. This same Congress politician and local bigwig was also the subject of bitter complaints by survivors interviewed by the authors of The Delhi Riots.

Nanki Bai described how Ashok Kumar directed his thugs, while keeping at a distance himself. He got the sweepers to do the dirty work. “He gave them daru [libation]. He had the killings done by the kanjars [a group of sweepers] and the bhungs [another group of sweepers]. The educated can’t do this kind of thing—only the neech-log [low-caste people] do things like this. And all around us we’ve got them... He [Ashok Kumar] stood on the kattha [roof of his house] and was watching from up there.” When the Sikh women went to complain to him, he shouted, “Go! Go!” and ordered a kanjar called Tara, a mob leader, to bring sheets (chadars) and give them to them to use as shrouds. “Tara is with Ashok, they’re all his chameleers [flunkies].” Some of the participants were shopkeepers who supplied kerosene to the arsonists. Some others among the neighbors of the victims were petty traders like milkmen, mechanics, or dealers in cement. The majority of the victims were poor Sikh merchants, artisans, and daily wage laborers.45

The behavior of the police was remarkably lax and partial.

The sanctioned strength of the police on the Kalyanpuri police station, under which Trilokpuri falls[,] is 113, including one Inspector (who is the Station House Officer) and around 90 constables among others. The SHO reached Trilokpuri at about 1230 p.m., on November 1 when the plunder and killings were taking place. The first thing he did was to remove the head constable and another constable from the spot, allowing the criminals to escape whatever little detection there was possible. It was a continuous spree of arson, rape, and murders after that. Later inquiries conducted by a senior police officer revealed that at least four women, their ages ranging from 14 to 50 were gang raped. Later seven cases of rape from Trilokpuri were officially reported by the J. P. Narayan Hospital, Delhi.46

In spite of the mounting reports of carnage and burning of entire blocks of houses, the headquarters police grossly underrepresented the number of deaths and declared that Trilokpuri was peaceful, while it was being reduced to cinders and practically all its menfolk had been killed and the women and children were fleeing for their lives.

**FACES IN THE CROWD**

Although many neighbors and friends, both Hindu and Muslim, gave shelter, refuge, and protection to the beleaguered Sikhs to the extent that it was possible and safe for them to do so, there is ample evidence that colony residents in the shape of Congress (I) activists, block leaders (pradhan), and higher officials of the Congress (I) Party were involved. Local Congress offices were frequently the sites for mobs assembling, for burning bodies, and for launching raids. Representatives of Congress (I) mobilized their local clients and thugs, provided them with liquor, and directed vendors of kerosene, the sale of which is restricted to permit holders, to distribute it. They also provided information about the targets—Sikh houses, business establishment permit holders, schools, and gurudwaras. Along with Gujar and Jats from the villages bordering the settlement colonies, who had their own scores to settle, local “low-caste” supporters of Congress (I), such as Bhangis and Chamaris, appear to have been readily available to form such organized mobs.

Another set of participants, willing or forced, were bus drivers, such as those who worked for the Delhi Transportation Corporation (based in South Delhi). The evidence is solid that public vehicles were used to transport rioters from place to place. These mobile gangs, spreaders of rumors, shouters of slogans, instigators of violence among the public, acting as strike forces, were a critical element in the rapid spreading and spread of violence at key junctions of the city.

The evidence is firm, too, that in the settlement colonies some police officers, especially station house officers, and police constables, were implicated in the riots, their collusion extending from inaction to absence.

In the resettlement colonies, the police... directly participated in the violence against the Sikhs. We were told by survivors that at the first signs of tension those who felt threatened personally went to the nearby police stations to seek their intervention. But the police did not respond. In Trilokpuri, the police reportedly accompanied the arsonists and provided them with diesel from their
jeeps. The Station House Officer (SHO) of Kalyanpuri police station under which Trilokpuri falls, withdrew the constables who were on duty there when Sikh girls were being raped. Much later, the higher authorities took action against the SHO and his two colleagues by suspending and arresting them for a criminal negligence of duties. In Sultana, the SHO, one Bharti, is alleged to have killed two Sikhs and helped the mob in disarming those Sikhs who tried to resist the mob.69

Who Are the Guilty? lists the occupations of some of those identified by informants as participants in the rioting, arson, and murder in the settlement colonies. Most were ordinary gainfully employed citizens, who constituted the majority of the local populace: a shopkeeper; a railway worker; a tailor; a mason; a dealer in cement; a TV shop owner; a video shop owner; a.teashop owner; a furniture dealer; a Congress (I) pradhan; a Congress (I) worker; a meat shop owner; a dairy owner; a shoemaker; a grocery shop owner; a cloth and chappal (footwear) seller; a liquor seller; a sweeper; a rickshaw repairer; a milkman; a teacher; a cloth and tailoring shop owner; a landowner and goala (milkman); an auto-rickshaw driver; a kerosene seller; a property dealer; a carpenter; a mechanic; a vegetable seller; the owner of godown; a flour mill owner; a paper seller; a barber; the owner of three-star hotel; a dhobi (washerman); an opium dealer; a local goonda (thug).

Lower-echelon Congress (I) workers, kerosene sellers, sweepers (low caste), and shopkeepers are the types that occur several times. All told, the riot participants, the vast majority of them Hindus, were a cross-section of the inhabitants one might expect to find in a settlement on the periphery of one of India’s large cities.

THE ROLE OF CONGRESS

The parts played in the 1984 Delhi pogrom against the Sikhs by lower-echelon Congress Party (I) activists, pradhans, and supporters, and in one case by a high-level politician, Dr. Ashok Kumar, who orchestrated the Trilokpuri horrors, have already been described. Kumar was by no means a maverick or an exception. There is evidence of the involvement of some members of the upper echelons of the Congress Party, including members of Parliament, members of the Delhi Metropolitan Council, and members of the Metropolitan Corporation. The Report on the Citizens’ Commission asserts:

Many who came forward to relate their experiences and provide eye-witness accounts to the Commission, have specifically and repeatedly named certain political leaders belonging to the ruling party. These included several MPs in the outgoing Parliament, members of the Delhi Metropolitan Council and members of the Municipal Corporation. Scores of political functionaries in local areas or blocks and area pradhans were also named. They have been accused of having instigated the violence, making arrangements for the supply of kerosene and other inflammatory material and of identifying the houses of Sikhs. Some of them have also been accused of interfering with the authorities to obtain the release of their followers who had been arrested for various crimes.60

The authors of Who Are the Guilty? report the following evidence given by the residents of the settlement colonies whom they interviewed:

We were told both by Hindus and Sikhs—many among the latter were Congress (I) supporters—that certain Congress (I) leaders played a decisive role in organizing the riots. Residents of Mangolpuri told us they saw Mr. Ishwar Singh, a Congress (I) Corporator among many others whom the text mentions in an annex actively participating in the orgy of violence. All these people were described by the local residents as lieutenants of the Congress (I) MP from the area—Sajjan Kumar. Similarly in Anand Parbat, Congress (I) councillors like Dhairya, Mahendra and Manget Ram, considered to be local followers of the Congress (I) MP, Mr. Dharamdas Shastri, were named as the main culprits. In Prakash Nagar, Congress (I) people were found carrying voters lists to identify Sikh household. In the Ghandinagar area again, a local Congress (I) councilor, Suhailal, was identified by the victims as the main leader of the assailants. Except for the area who met at the Shaktipuri relief camp on November 6 binned their Congress (I) MP Mr. H. K. L. Bhagat for having masterminded the riots.61 On November 5, Satbir Singh (Jat), a Youth Congress (I) leader, brought buses filled with people from Ber Sarai to Sri Guru Harisharjan Public School at Munirka and burnt the school building and buses, and continued looting and assaults on Sikhs the whole night. Another group of miscreants led by Jagdish Tikas, a Congress (I) corporator, joined the above group in looting and assaults. In the Salaujung-Kidwai Nagar area of South Delhi, eye witness accounts by those who stood in front of All India Medical Institute from where Mrs. Gandhi’s body was taken out in procession on the evening of October 31, confirmed the presence of the Congress (I) Councilor of the area, Arjan Dass, at the time when the attacks on Sikh pedestrians, bus drivers, and conductors began.

The allegations against these individuals repeatedly voiced by the residents of the respective localities which we visited, cannot be dismissed as politically motivated propaganda, since many among the Sikhs who accused them of complicity in the riots, had been traditionally Congress (I) voters.62

The official Misra Commission’s indictment of “anti-social” and “criminal” elements as the main perpetrators of the riots and assessment of the role of the ruling Congress Party (I) have to be evaluated in the light of this kind of evidence. The Misra Commission report is a rich document to de-
construct on this issue of culpability because at different points, it implicates different agents, while inadvertently disclosing its own preferences. Perhaps out of a sense of loyalty, it seeks not only to absolve higher-level members of the Congress Party but also to attribute an unconvincing “split personality” to those lower echelons of the party who joined ranks with the “anti-socials.” The report takes care to absolve the party as an institution and distinguish it from its low-level members.

On the question of whether the riots showed “organized violence,” the Misra Commission report is unambiguous: “It would not be wrong to say that there was organized violence at Delhi, and that it was done by the anti-social elements, and [that] in the riots, thousands of people who do not really belong to the classification of anti-socials did participate. Many of these participants were people from the lower ranks of the Congress (I) party and sympathizers.” The commission was careful to specify that it could not “draw a conclusion inferentially from the fact of participation of party workers and sympathizers or some leaders at local levels that the Party was involved in organizing what has been rightly called a carnage.”

Having examined the relevant affidavits and cross-examined the accusing deponents, the commission concluded: “All the material on the record in the ultimate analysis is not evidence of that type relying on which the Commission can record a finding that the Congress (I) Party or some leaders in that party had organized the violence which manifests in the shape of the riot.” The report points out that the “Congress (I) Party denounced the riots by regular resolutions adopted at official meetings of the party, and that it had urged that “the unity of India must not only be preserved and strengthened through tolerance and communal harmony but also through good neighborly relations.”

The report then advances this extenuating argument: “If the Congress (I) Party or some of its highly placed leaders had set the rioters to operate, one would expect the Sikhs with Congress base and affinity to have escaped the depredation.” (This plea seems to be of dubious value, because in the Sri Lanka riots of 1983, the mobs destroyed the businesses and industrial properties and homes of Tamils in Colombo who were clearly well-known patrons of the UNP and had access to high-level UNP politicians. In fact, under the stress of the riots, the whole community of Tamils was the undifferentiated target, although some possible victims were saved by the protection money they had paid.)

The Misra Commission’s report resorts to tendentious sophistry when it comes to explain the motivations of the lower-level politicians and agents of the Congress Party. Admitting that it received plentiful written evidence alleging that persons associated with the Congress (I)—such as workers, local leaders, and numbers of the youth wing—had been named as organizers of riot violence, the report is not only concerned once again to exonerate the party, but also resorts to the maneuver of splitting the party from the individuals belonging to it, and of differentiating between the “public” and “personal” involvements of the accused: “These details supplied by DS GMC [the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee] fortify the conclusion that some of the Congress (I) party on their own had indulged and participated in the turmoil for considerations entirely their own.” Not everyone who takes a dip in the Ganges is purified. Similarly, not everyone in Congress (I) is a Mahatma Gandhi. “The party label . . . [does not] take away the individual element.”

The report, in this respect following conventional stereotyped allegations, repeatedly resorts to condemnation of so-called anti-socials, out for loot and impervious to the national tragedy, as the main culprits. “The mob was jubilating and dancing,” it observes. “There was no sign of sorrow and grief on their faces. There were no mourners of the Prime Minister.” It then gives this explanation for the crowd’s euphoric and boisterous behavior: “Anti-social gangsters obviously had no mourning to observe. The troubled atmosphere provided them with the opportunity to plunder and otherwise satisfy their animal desires and, therefore, the conduct exhibited . . . shows that the constituents of the mobs were the anti-social ruffians and usually not the people of Smt. Gandhi’s camp or party who ordinarily were likely to exhibit mournful conduct.”

At one point, the report forgets the evidence the Misra Commission had collected, charging that: “The change in the pattern from the spontaneous reaction to organized riots was the outcome of the take-over of the situation by the anti-social elements.” Such blanket denunciations miss the significance of the fact that a good cross-section of the ordinary population of Delhi participated; the report also does not know how to interpret the crowd euphoria, a problem that will be tackled later.

THE CONDUCT OF THE POLICE

The Misra Commission did not flinch from taking to task the Delhi Police Force for its poor communication, tardiness in acting, and at times active connivance. “There is abundant evidence before the Commission that the police on the whole did not behave properly and failed to act as a professional force,” the report notes.

The metropolitan city of Delhi is administered by the Home Ministry of the central government. The lieutenant governor is the chief adminis-
trator and the police commissioner and police force are under his control.
(There seems to be a sort of dyarchy, in that the home secretary of the Delhi
administration appointed by the Home Ministry also shares in the admin-
istration of the city.) The strength of the police force in Delhi at the time of
the riots was 22,000 constables, 3,000 head constables, 2,400 inspectors and
sub-inspectors, and some 242 higher officers, culminating in the police
commissioner.

While it is widely recognized that the police force as a whole was inade-
quately in size to service the needs of a densely populated and growing city,
it was not so thinly distributed that it could not have acted more positively
than it did. The city was divided into five police districts, and it had sixty-
three police stations and twenty-five police posts. The population of Delhi
was roughly 6.5 million, and there was one policeman to roughly two hun-
dred people.

The Misra Commission records that the lieutenant governor of Delhi,
the chief administrator of the city, testified: "I am inclined to agree that
there was a failure in the channel of communication between the local of-
ficers and the police and the district administration as also [at the] Com-
missioner’s level." It is noteworthy that the lieutenant governor during
the riots, Shri Gavai, was chided by Rajiv Gandhi for not acting "more
swiftly in calling the army," and was thereafter removed from that posi-
tion. Shri Gavai’s answer was that a large number of members of the pub-
lic who were bystanders would have been shot by the army as curfew
breakers, and that this was politically unwise.19

Although apparently clear instructions had been given by the higher
police authorities to those below, who were manning the police posts, with
regard to the necessity of patrolling, inactivity and stonewalling were
widespread among those so instructed. When contacted by telephone by
the besieged Sikhs, police stations did not respond. "The behavior of most
policemen was [so] shabby that they allowed people to be killed, houses to
be burnt, property to be looted, ladies to be dragged and misbehaved [with]
within their very presence. Their plea was that they were few and could not
meet the unruly armed mob [consisting] usually of hundreds or thou-
sands."20

Two major charges against the police were substantiated, despite the
Delhi administration’s stubborn attempt to defend police conduct and
paper over its shortcomings. The first was the poor communication from
the lower levels of the force on the ground to their superior officers, situ-
ated in allegedly nodal information-receiving and order-transmitting of-
fices. The police commissioner, Tandon, told the Misra Commission that
there had been a failure on the part of the lower echelons of the force at
local police stations to report the mob destruction and killing to their five
district police control rooms, let alone to higher levels. Other superior offi-
cers made the same charge. One of the worst areas of arson, looting, and
slaughter was Kalyanpuri (of which Trilokpuri is a section), twelve kilome-
ters from police headquarters. On the night of November 1, more than two
hundred people died there. But the additional commissioner of police for
the area (there are six such officers immediately below the police commis-
ioner) claimed that he did not hear about this massacre until sixteen to
eighteen hours afterwards (that is, 7:00 P.M. on November 2).

Such poor information, usually underestimating and underreporting
the extent of the disorder and destruction, was only reluctantly passed up
to the highest levels, with grievous consequences. In due course, the com-
missoner of police reported to the lieutenant governor of Delhi that only
20 to 30 deaths had taken place in Trilokpuri, and only 30 to 40 in Palam
Colony, when the actual numbers were more like 260 and 300, respectively.

Behind this story of tardy misreporting lurk these structuring forces: the
hierarchy of social distance and power that separates constables from offi-
cers; the fear of underlings reporting bad news that might reflect their in-
efficiency; and the bonds of sympathy that must have existed between the
lower ranks of the police and their civilian public.

The second major substantiated charge against the Delhi police involved
instances of police collusion with the rioters, by acts both of omission and
commission. In addition to the condemnations in the Misra Commission
Report already cited, one further charge was that the police systematically
attempted to take away licensed firearms from Sikhs, while not similarly
disarming Hindus. The weaker minority group was thus exposed to the full
armed strength of the rioters (see figure 5).21

The report also lists these allegations, which it did not attempt to con-
trast: that police stood by and did not clear the way when mobs blocked
fire engines; that police in uniform marched behind or mingled with the
hostile crowds; and, worse still, that the police method of recovering looted
materials was to invite the culprits to pile up their loot and leave, a proce-
dure that not only exonerated looters who voluntarily surrendered goods
but also caused a great mix-up of property, as well as further stealing from
the standing piles. The few of allowing recovered stolen property to be
stolen again was only bettered by one last charge—that in some instances
uniformed policemen participated in the looting.

The police at higher levels did not participate in the riots, the report con-
cluded, and cited instances of heroic and courageous actions by officers in
Figure 5. Police chasing a Sikh truck driver accused of driving his vehicle into a crowd and killing some people at the Bangla Sahib Gurudwara in Delhi during the 1984 riots. Bhavan Singh (India Today).

rescuing Sikhs or helping them to escape. But it summarily dismissed the defensive pleas of the police authorities and the Delhi administration that the extant legislation (such as the Delhi Police Act of 1978, which incorporated older and outdated provisions contained in the Punjab Police Rules of 1934) was inadequate to deal with major disorders. It remarked that the so-called “spontaneous national outburst” after Indira Gandhi’s death had not manifested itself in most parts of India, and that the Delhi police force of some 30,000, although insufficient, was not totally inadequate to deal with the riots. Furthermore, since such riots had taken place before, the pleas of surprise and unpreparedness could not be invoked: “By October 1984 riots had become too frequent in India, and under the excuse or cover of every possible plea based upon economic, religious, political, and social issues, society was being victimized by riots. . . . Delhi and neighboring places had seen riots on more than one occasion.”

The higher levels and superior officers of the Delhi police force were not taken off the hook altogether. The Misra Commission recommended that the conduct of delinquent police officers should be officially investigated by the Delhi administration and the police force. It also wryly recalled that the Marwah inquiry, launched by the Delhi administration to identify instances of severe failure to act and negligence by police officers, had been deterred by officers of the highest rank (a couple of deputy and additional commissioners of police) who were in charge of South and East Delhi.

** Allegations Against the Delhi Transportation Corporation **

Allegations had been made by various parties that buses belonging to the Delhi Transportation Corporation were seen transporting armed mobs, especially during the first two days of the riots.

The DTC is a large organization. In 1984, it had about thirty depots for buses, distributed all over the city; its Central Communication Centre was located close to Pragati Maidan. In addition to the thousands of buses it owns, the DTC also uses private buses whenever the need arises.

On November 1, when the greatest amount of destruction and violence took place, most DTC buses were plying the usual routes. By November 2, it seems, once the news of bus takeovers and diversions had become known, the DTC’s buses were taken out of service. The verdict of the Misra Commission speaks for itself:

Though the Corporation does not admit use of its buses for movement of rioters, the Commission is prepared to accept the material collected by the Investigating Agency and its conclusion that the route buses were forthwith diverted by the mobs to facilitate their movements and when the drivers found any opportunity to escape, they returned to the depot. There is no material to hold that the Corporation had extended any assistance to the rioters by allowing its buses to transport the rioters.

** The Tale of the Affidavits **

Appendix 3 of the Report of the Misra Commission is labeled “Classification of Affidavits Received in Delhi.” Printed without comment, it invites commentary and some speculation. Table 2 shows the number of affidavits filed by Sikhs on behalf of Sikh victims and by non-Sikhs against Sikhs for selected areas, according to the police station/area of the city in which these affidavits originated, as well as the number of people alleged to have been killed. Some fascinating features emerge when these affidavits are scrutinized.

We should remember that the Sikh population of Delhi (as estimated by the Misra Commission) was only 393,921, or 6.33 percent of a total population in the Union Territory of Delhi of some 6,215,406 (with 5,763,200 classified as urban and 452,206 as rural). The question arises of what relation we might expect between this demographic distribution and the number of affidavits presented by both sides to defend and rebut each other’s charges.
Table 2  Affidavits Filed in Connection with the 1984 Riots: Selected Areas of Delhi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police Station/Area</th>
<th>By Sikhs</th>
<th>By non-Sikhs against Sikhs</th>
<th>Total Affidavits</th>
<th>Number of people killed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashok Vihar Nimli Colony</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangolpuri (Rohini Complex)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultanpuri</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jahangirpuri</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganethinagar</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nand Nagri</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalyanpuri</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakarpur</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishna Nagar</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karol Bagh</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pahar Ganj</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi Cantonment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagar Puru Palam</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Sixty-nine police station/areas are enumerated by the report, from which the above areas were selected. A total of 2,894 affidavits were received, of which 857 were submitted by Sikhs on behalf of victims and 2,036 by non-Sikhs against the riot victims. The total number of people killed was 2,894.

*On behalf of Sikh riot victims, alleging killing, arson, shooting, etc.

Another fact to bear in mind is that the Misra Commission was authorized to be constituted in late April 1985, some five months after the riots had occurred. Its hearings, which actually began later, were not concluded with regard to Delhi for another year. The affidavits show that even after a time lag of this length, both Sikhs and non-Sikhs, victims and aggressors, were still disputing as to what had happened in the 1984 riots. The antagonisms had obviously not withered away.

In those areas of Delhi where the Sikhs had suffered most in terms of killing, arson, and looting—areas such as Mangolpuri, Sultanpuri, Kalyanpuri, and Shakarpur—the number of affidavits filed by non-Sikhs against Sikhs, contesting their charges and making countercharges, was larger by a proportion of three or four to one than the number of affidavits filed by the Sikhs against the aggressors. Delhi Cantonment, a disaster area, where the numbers of affidavits filed by both sides were roughly equal, is an exception.

In some areas, such as Ganethinagar and Pahar Ganj, which I take to be overwhelmingly non-Sikh, a great number of affidavits were filed against Sikhs, while only a very few were filed by Sikhs. Moreover, there were hardly any instances of killings and arson in these areas. This suggests a determination on the part of non-Sikhs, through organizational representations, to resist being cast as culpable aggressors, to reduce the blame attachable to them, and, indeed, to turn the tables and even represent the victims as the aggressors. It is disturbing to think that dominant majorities can carry on such campaigns of vilification against vulnerable minorities and seek to erase the record and deny the nature of their collective violence.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Even when the suddenness and the emotional trauma of Indira Gandhi's assassination are taken into account, the evidence is clear that at least from November 1 on, the destructive actions of the mobs at various points in the metropolis of Delhi, and especially in its settlement colonies on the periphery, were encouraged, directed, and even provisioned by Congress (I) politicians, activists, and supporters, and indirectly aided by an inactive, cooperative police force.

The distinguished political scientist Rajni Kothari, who was on the spot during the riots, maintains that there was a "large measure of advance planning and rehearsing," and that "soon after Operation Blue Star and the extremist response thereto in parts of Punjab, a plan of identifying Sikh targets ranging from households to commercial establishments to Gurudwaras had been undertaken, including the planning of logistics and the techniques to be employed. Both a psychology and a technology of 'revenge' had thus been blue-printed before the assassination provided the moment to carry it out." To substantiate this charge, Kothari points to evidence of an organized system for distributing kerosene, gasoline, and combustible chemical powders to all parts of the city with which to burn bodies and set ablaze trucks and buildings. "There was evidence of men on scooters locating the places followed by mobs who carried out the killings and the arson, in many areas supervised by higher-ups moving in Ambassador cars from one place to another. . . . The synchronization of logistics and the striking similarity of technique" points to a large measure of advance planning and rehearsing."
Kothari was admittedly an outspoken critic of the Indira Gandhi regime. Much in what he says is reminiscent, however, of the 1983 riots in Colombo, about which evidence has been steadily mounting of prior collection of vital information, organizing of gangs, and so on, pointing to governmental involvement. In Delhi, the police either absent themselves from scenes of violence, passively looked on, or even directly participated; moreover, they handled the rioters whom they arrested leniently and connived in their early release. One writer has alleged that most of the lower cadres of the Delhi police were “drawn from Haryana Jats who have all along been anti-Sikh.”

In South Delhi, DTC buses were used by mobs to move from place to place ignoring acts of violence; the participation of bus drivers and the use of government vehicles are prima facie evidence of either administrative assent or inability to take preventative action.

Finally, the official media transmitted inflammatory information and news, thereby adding to the heightening of collective passions that demanded “blood for blood.”

Who Are the Guilty? points an accusatory finger at the highest officers responsible for the administration of Delhi, such as the home minister and the lieutenant governor, for foot-dragging in regard to calling in the army, for propagating inaccurate information concerning casualties, for claiming the situation to be under control prematurely, and for delayed action in regard to relief measures. “The Congress (I) High Command’s reluctance to probe into the allegations against their own councilors and other leaders further lends credence to the suspicions voiced above. Even Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi seems to dismiss the serious charges being levelled against his party men.”

In any case, there seems to have been little coordination between the Delhi administration, the police, and the army. “Surprisingly, there was no central control point. The Administration functioned from Old Delhi, the police from Indraprastha Estate, and the army from the Cantonnement.”

Since Indira Gandhi’s death raised the problem of succession and the necessity of going to the polls soon afterwards, the “managers” of the state, the technocrats, and the ruling party’s politicians seem to have exploited the assassination and the ensuing conditions by directing and staging organized violence against the Sikhs, thereby ensuring a Hindu vote in their favor. “Hindu ekta Zindabad” (Long Live Hindu Unity), “Khoon ka badla khoon” (Blood for blood) and “Hindu-Hindu bhai bhai” (the brotherhood of Hindus) were potent slogans.

In the ensuing elections, Rajiv Gandhi was elected in a landslide vote to succeed his slain mother. In July 1985, he signed an accord with one of the Akali Dal leaders, Harishand Singh Longowal. But by August, Longowal had fallen to the bullets aimed by Sikh “extremists” at Sherpur gurdwara, near Sangan in Punjab. The accord promised the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, with a corresponding transfer of certain areas—Fasila and Anandpur—to Haryana.

In the Punjab assembly elections in September 1985, the Akali Dal-L, headed by Surjit Singh Barnala, was handsomely elected to power, but there was no progress toward implementation of the terms of the accord. The Akali Dal itself was riven by factionalism, and groups opposed to the ruling section formed their own Unifiied Akali Dal. The continuing strife and violence gave reason for president’s rule to be imposed on Punjab once more in May 1987.

**Bhindranwale’s Fundamentalism and Militancy: Religion, Politics, and Violence**

To what extent is the Sikh religion as such integral to the Sikh politics reviewed above, and a contributor to the “ethnic conflict” between Sikhs and others, whether these be Hindus, non-Sikh Punjabis, Congress politicians, or the Indian government?

Before going any further, it is important to specify that there have been and are Sikhs who do not think religion and politics should mix (the “secularists,” by one Indian definition associated with Nehru), or who have not participated in separatist politics. What I have to say therefore can apply only to those who have been close adherents of the Akali Dal movement, and of fundamentalist movements such as the one led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

It should be evident that the makeup and course of Sikh history enacted by those identified earlier as the primary actors in recent times demonstrates (in the same way my writings on Sri Lankan Buddhism have maintained) that it is not possible or meaningful to disentangle or differentiate a domain of exclusively “religious” concerns from the political, social, and economic concerns of the Sikh community and the preoccupations of individual Sikhs with issues of identity and self-respect.

Bhindranwale’s movement, informed by his distinctive brand of religious fundamentalism and militant politics, might be an instructive phenomenon to scrutinize as an example of the entwining of religion and politics to form a total complex. Such scrutiny also sheds light on the efficacy and moral accountability of collective violence inspired by radical concerns as a mode of political action and political discourse.
Bhиндranwale’s fundamentalism fused religious and political concerns and aspirations on behalf of the Sikh community, whose identity and destiny were taken to be inseparably linked with its commitment to the Sikh faith and its practices. Harjot Oberoi has recently made the significant observation that the Punjabi word mulhad is a linguistic equivalent of “fundamentalism,” and that “Sikh journalists, essayists, and politicians, in discussing contemporary religious and political movements, now constantly use the term mulhad, connoting a polity and society organized on the basis of religious (particularly scriptural) authority.”

Before describing Bhindicranwale’s movement, let me specify what I see as some of the main ingredients of “religious fundamentalism” in the modern context. They are (1) a selective emphasis on and a univocal exegesis of certain precepts tendentiously taken from a canonical corpus that is usually more complex, more multivalent, less bounded, and less narrow than the fundamentalists’ reading of it; (2) an exclusionary, separatist, and antagonistic attitude, rather than a coalescing and tolerant stance, toward other sects and traditions within the same religion, let alone other religions; and (3) the advocacy of a set of practices and a program of objectives that fuse the congregation’s religious concerns of faith and salvation with its sociopolitical existence and interests as a “nationality” or “ethnic group.” These concerns and objectives also imperatively demand separation from and vigilance against other such religiopolitical communities, which are seen as threatening the purity of customs and endangering the well-being of the community in question. In the contemporary context, there is also a strong rejection of, and antagonism toward, the corrosive and demagogic influences of “modernization” and “modernity,” which are seen as accompaniments of Western industrialism and imperialism and global capitalism. Consumerist values, changes in clothing and hair styles, and in forms of recreation, ranging from the cinema to dance halls, smoking, and drinking to easy interaction between the sexes—these are taken to be the visible behavioral indices and traces of a deeper malaise. This rejection of modern consumerism is usually coupled with an attack on the urbanized middle classes, who have been most influenced by Western ideas, technology and “secularist” attitudes, and, simultaneously, with an espousal of the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Fundamentalist movements that envision a new society on earth become focused on charismatic leaders who embody and preach the message of revival and reform, and who advocate commitment to struggle and martyrdom in order to strive for the ideal order. A rhetoric of uncompromising struggle for this pristine order is deployed.

Mark Juergensmeyer has culled extracts from Bhhindranwale’s speeches and sermons that eloquently convey his orientation to the world as inspired by his distinctive commitment to the Sikh religion. When the press and other critics accused him of being an extremist, Bhhindranwale explained what sort of extremist he was: “One who takes the vows of faith and helps others take it; who reads the scripture and helps others do the same; who avoids liquor and drugs and helps others do likewise . . . ; who says, ‘respect your scriptures, unite under the flag, stoutly support the community, and be attached to your Lord’s throne and home.’” External enemies posed an ever-present danger: “In order to destroy religion, on all sides and in many forms mean tactics have been initiated.” Sikhs must defend the faith: “Young men; with folded hands, I beseech you. . . . Until we enter our home, until we have swords on us, [the kachha—warrior’s kneelength drawers] on our bodies, Guru’s word on our tongues, and the double-edged sword in our hands, we shall get beatings.” Fully conscious of the fact that the Sikh religious tradition applauds nonviolence and forbids the taking of human life, except in certain extreme circumstances, when social or spiritual justice is at stake, Bhhindranwale asserted: “For a Sikh it is a great sin to keep weapons and kill anyone . . . [but] it is an even greater sin to have weapons and not seek justice.” There could be “no deliverance without weapons” being used, he said: “It is a sin for a Sikh to keep weapons to hurt an innocent person, to rob anyone’s home, to dishonour anyone or to oppress anyone. But there is no greater sin for a Sikh than keeping weapons and not using them to protect the faith.”

Bhindranwale’s sermons powerfully moved his followers because he simultaneously inspired and aroused guilt and tension and the urge to act at two levels—at the level of the interior lives of individuals who betrayed norms or became lax about religious practices, and at the level of the Sikh collectivity, which had let itself be “enslaved” by the Hindu majority, by the Delhi politicians (although he did not spell out in detail the nature of this slavery). The renovation of the self was indissolubly linked to the redemption of the community. Reminding his audience that a great Sikh martyr had said, “Even if I have to give my head may I never lose my love for the Sikh faith,” Bhhindranwale railed against Sikh officials and modernized youth: “I am sorry to note that many people who hang after a government position say instead, ‘even if I lose my faith, may I never lose my position.' And our younger generation has started saying this: ‘even if I lose my faith, may a beard never grow on my face’ . . . If you find the beard too heavy, pray to God saying . . . ‘we do not like this Sikhism and manhood. Have mercy on us. Make us into women.”
In underscoring the special and separate identity of the Sikhs, proclaiming the inseparability of politics from religion, and envisaging a separate state for the Sikhs alone, Bhindranwale espoused causes that had also been voiced by many Akali Dal leaders, and before them by the Tit Khalsa and Singh Sabha advocates of the late nineteenth century. His distinctiveness and the powerful impact he had on his followers, especially the insecurely placed youth, who saw the doors of establishment closed against them, had to do with the manner in which he revived certain militant traditions associated with the sixth guru, Hargobind (1595–1644), and the tenth guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), and made them the vehicle of internal religiosity, personal identity, and collective Sikh destiny. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh had instituted the Khalsa (the purified or the chosen) as the order of baptized Sikhs; they were to call themselves Singh (lion) and wear the five “k’s” — kesh (unshorn hair), kangha (wooden comb), kara (steel bracelet), kaccha (knee-length drawers worn by warriors), and kirpan (sword). These physical markers of separation from Hindu and Muslim and the badges of a brotherhood of right practices would have a remarkable imprinting role in Bhindranwale’s campaign to purify the Sikhs and to enable them to regain faith.

As T. N. Madan puts it: “The religious beliefs that were singled out by Bhindranwale above all others were, first, the inseparability of religion and the state on politics, tracing this teaching to the sixth guru, Hargobind, and second, the indivisible or corporate character of the Sikh, deriving it from the praxis of the tenth guru, Gobind.” They emphasized militancy as a defensive action, and comprised a narrow part of the Sikh religious doctrine, whose first five guru propounders never handled arms. But the elements chosen were reminders of a time in the past when Sikhs had been besieged, and they were seen now as necessary instruments for them to preserve and protect their boundaries in the present time of similar danger.

Bhindranwale seems to have both enlivened and energized the charged imagery of the two swords and more deeply inscribed it on the very bodies of his followers. Tradition has it that the sixth preceptor, Guru Hargobind, who challenged the hegemony of the Mughal state, “broke with the convention that the guru should concern himself solely with spiritual pursuits. He tied round his waist two swords, one to symbolize miri (politics) and the other piri (spirituality).”

The doctrine of miri-piri pronounces “the indivisibility of religious and political power, and of the spiritual and the temporal” and gives “legitimacy to the political organizer from within Darbar Sahib” (the Golden Temple). “Miri piri is indeed so fundamental that it receives material concretization in the nishan, or Sikh emblem, in which the double-edged sword representing the purity of faith is shielded by two protecting kirpans (swords).” This emblem has in time incorporated other additional values.

“Sikhs often interpret the two edges of the sword as symbolizing spiritual and worldly foes, and they say that the battle sword (kirpan) . . . that Sikhs are supposed to wear at all times symbolizes an awareness of these same enemies.” It is noteworthy that at the last stages of his career, Bhindranwale wore two swords in the manner of Guru Hargobind, thereby metonymically indexing the emblem to his body, and perhaps even iconically imaging it. The concept of miri-piri similarly justifies Sikh support for an independent political party, and ultimately also the goal of Khalistan as a separate religiopolitical sovereignty.

There are two additional components of the Bhindranwale message that so compellingly attracted his following from 1978 to 1984, which, although composed of a variety of persons of different economic, cultural, and political backgrounds, was predominantly drawn from those who were, as Oberoi puts it, “at the bottom of the social ladder.” One component was the exciting promise of a Khalistan that would eradicate social inequalities, disallow the exploitation of the weak, especially those living in “the backward village community,” erase “segregation of humanity, based upon caste, jati [subcaste], birth, locality and colour,” and forbid “crude and distasteful practices” prevailing between Sikh males and females. These were some of the objectives proclaimed by the Panthic Committee that announced the formation of the Sikh homeland of Khalistan on January 26, 1986. In the 1980s and early 1990s, other fundamentalist organizations, such as the Damdami Taksal, which was at this time led by Bhindranwale, made similar critiques of inequalities in the distribution of wealth and resources. At one public meeting in 1986, jointly sponsored by the Damdami Taksal and the All-India Students Federation, the collective resolution passed by the assembly enthusiastically asserted the need to break “the chains of slavery” that shackled the Sikhs, namely, internal social inequality, exploitation whereby the produce of the poor was sold at low prices, while the goods they bought were high-priced, and domination by the external Hindu majority, which inferiorized them.

The goal of an egalitarian brotherhood of Sikhs was coupled with a millenarian vision. Oberoi states that “for much of their history, at least since the rise of the Khalsa, Sikhs have opted to deal with major social crises — state oppression, economic upheavals, colonialism, collapse of semiotic cat-
Hargobind (1595-1644) built a second temple, the Akal Takht (the throne of the immortal God) facing the Golden Temple and standing outside the sacred tank and made it his political headquarters for challenging Mughal power. The Akal Takht houses the traditional weapons associated with the sixth and tenth gurus. Inside the Akal Takht, “instead of chanting hymns of peace, the congregation heard ballads extolling feats of heroism, and instead of listening to religious discourses, discussed plans of military conquests.” The rituals and recitations of the two temples thus enact the two strands of the Sikh heritage, which are continuously reenacted in worship and enduringly shaped in stone and space.

Bhindranwale and his followers, armed to the teeth, occupied the Akal Takht, the repository and reminder of Sikh martial deeds. They turned it into a fort of last resistance and were destroyed there by the Indian Army. Among the generals directing the attack were two Sikhs. But the attack on the temple horrified the vast majority of Sikhs, including those who did not condone or participate in Bhindranwale’s politics. Spurning the repairs to the Akal Takht made by the Indian government, Sikhs have demolished it in order to rebuild it with their own labor. The two temples of the complex will no doubt stand again to proclaim the duality and complementarity of the Sikh legacy and its orientation to the world. But what do we infer from the failure of Bhindranwale’s pursuit of Sikh spiritual and political deliverance through fundamentalist violence? And to what extent is the emergence of the juggernaut of so-called Hindu nationalism dialectically related to militant Sikh separation?

**Sikh Identity and the Boundary Problem**

The Sikh community or collectivity, popularly called the Panth in the Punjabi language, is by no means monolithic: they have been, and are even today, “divided by geography, ethnicity, social hierarchy, sects, ritual practices, and individual preferences. Consequently, when it comes to political participation, Sikhs have never been represented by a single political party.” The two major political parties that Sikhs have supported are the Congress Party and the Akali Dal (which is exclusively Sikh); the religious and political agendas of other organizations, such as the SGPC, the Dal Khalsa, and the Damdami Taksal, have, however, further crosscut and differentiated the Panth. Even as a religious collectivity, the Sikhs have had no “organized vertical hierarchy” to bind them, and several texts have functioned in the past as manuals of conduct (rahit-name). In manifesting different subtraditions, Sikhism participated in the religious milieu characteristic of other Indian religious collectivities. Moreover, Sikh transactions
have been regulated and adjudicated according to Punjabi customary law, and further supplemented and amplified by Anglo-Saxon law as it was applied and interpreted piecemeal during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

These are some of the features that point to a Sikh predicament articulated from time to time by various Sikh leaders—the lack of unambiguous markers of Sikh identity that would set them apart, especially vis-à-vis the Hindus, whom they see as “threatening” to incorporate or assimilate them. In the late nineteenth century, the Tt Khalsa movement coped with this issue and tried to stipulate the practices, rituals, and markers of an exclusive Sikh identity. An important thrust of Bhindranwale’s campaign was also to erase these ambiguities. Sikh fundamentalists would like to see a code of Sikh personal law enacted, although in practice this has proved to be difficult. Bhindranwale urged all Sikhs to undergo the Khalsa amrit ceremony and to uphold the five k’s. He toured the countryside extensively, urging the youth to be initiated and saying, “Only people without ambiguity in their heart have the right to call themselves Khalsa.” And his punitive action against the Sant Nirankaris can also be interpreted as an attempt to tamp out a sectarian tendency that diluted religious practice in the direction of Hindu worship.

While Bhindranwale was the most recent reifier of the Sikh identity issue, the issue itself is an entrenched one, and is likely to be a major ongoing concern to the Sikh collectivity. This concern is most likely exacerbated by the recent upsurge of Hindu nationalism and the campaign to demolish the Muslim Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and to build a temple to Ram in its place.

POLARIZED VIOLENCE AND THE PASSAGE TO CIVIL WAR

In 1989–90, in the southern, southwestern, and central parts of Sri Lanka, polarized violence—that is, violence committed by armed gangs or groups, paramilitary agents, official security forces, and insurgents battling one another in the midst of a bewildered, fear-ridden, helpless civilian population—had reached a climax. Happenings similar to those in Sri Lanka were a continuing nightmare in the Punjab in 1990–91. In Sri Lanka, both the security forces of the state and the insurgents, the JVP, employed death squads, as well as unidentified gangs, to conduct assassinations. They would leave the corpses burning on the street, floating down a river, or tied to lampposts. This signifies organized violence as the order of the day and as a principal mode of enacting politics, through which power is produced, acquired, and employed in a theatricalized and repetitive manner.

Violence took the form of revenge killings. Some killings were targeted in the sense that certain known opponents were singled out and ambushed; others were arbitrary, in that they were randomly carried out against innocent civilians, who by virtue of the contagion of being fellow villagers or relatives of the enemy were punished or killed just to spread intimidation. The killers justified these acts as “preventive” measures against anticipated collusions on the part of the victims.

Violence spread like an epidemic, infecting and killing without warning and seemingly at random. The population at large frequently did not know whether the kidnappings, disappearances, and killings were motivated by public political calculations or reasons of private vendetta. When a JVP suspect was killed, a net of guilt by association was cast, endangering the lives of his associates, his kinsmen, his fellow villagers. A report written on behalf of International Alert entitled Political Killings in Southern Sri Lanka documents instances of “the total helplessness created where there is an assumption that the threat comes from some section of the guardians of law and order themselves, at times under cover of curfew.”

On the other hand, this state of chronic public violence breached the bounds of civil order: there was no right of complaint or of litigation; no possibility of appeal to habeas corpus or judicial procedure. But on the other hand, in becoming routinized and normalized, this violence constituted a new arena of social action, a theater of violence, with its signals and its semiotic logic, its raids, shootings, hangings, shumings, warnings, and threats posted on walls and shop doors. The people at large surreptitiously recognized the messages but did not publicly discuss them; they responded to the call to strike by staying away from work and by shutting shops. The threats of violence and punishments thus produced nonviolent compliance among the civilian populace.


In the Punjab in 1990 civilians, both Hindu and Sikh, were victimized by the police, the army, and the Sikh militants. Some of these last were no different from criminal gangs, looting and killing in the name of holy war, but making of that war a parasitic mode of livelihood. V. S. Naipaul’s poignant and empathetic account of the grieving condition of Sikh families. In a state of shock, and caught up in the crossfire of intrigue, divided loyalties and shifting alliances is worth citing:

When terror became an expression of faith, the idea of service, one of the good and poetic concepts of Sikhism was altered.
Now five years after the assault on the temple, the terrorists lived only for murder: the idea of the enemy and the traitor, grudge and complaint, were like a complete expression of their faith. Violent deaths could be predicted for most of them: the police were not idle or unskilled. But while they were free they lived hecatombally, going out to kill again and again. Every day there were seven or eight killings, most of them mere items in the official report printed two days later. Only exceptional events were reported in detail.

Such an event was the killing by a gang, in half an hour of six members of a family in a village about ten miles away from Mehta Chowk. The two elder sons of the family had been killed, the father and the mother, the grandmother and a cousin. All the people killed were devout, anamritdars, Sikhs, that is, Sikhs who were initiated into the Khalsa. [The taking of amrit (nectar) is supposed to make you a member of the brotherhood of pure Sikhs, who will henceforth reject food not cooked by amritdhars; the initiation is said to help control the five evils: lust, anger, greed, vengefulness, ego, family attachments]. The eldest son, the principal target of the gang, had been an associate of Bhindranwale. But a note left by the gang, in the room where four of the killings had taken place—the note bloodstained when it was found—said that the killers belonged to the "Bhindranwale Tiger Force."[64]

The intergang warfare among the Sikh militants is itself seemingly an "inevitable" phase among insurgents today. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil militant groups, divided into a number of competing factions, turned on another in the same way Sikh militants have done. But what Naipaul fails to record is the parallel violence of the security forces. Barbara Cross, writing in the New York Times, vividly reports the dilemma of "Punjabis, sandwiched between Sikh rebels and New Delhi":

Despite what Punjabi calls "police raj" or armed rule in this state, where about 60 percent of the population is Sikh, thousands of people have died this year. A militant campaign of intimidation of state government employees and the press is daily more audacious. Officials are assassinated, criminal gangs flourish and, most wrenching to the hard-working Sikh community, Sikhs have begun killing each other as divisions among them deepen.

Up to 95 percent of the dead are Sikhs: militants, policemen, suspected informers and ordinary men, women and children.

Cross reports that Jagjit Singh Aurora, a retired lieutenant general and critic of Government handling of Punjab... who heads the civil-rights group, the Sikh Forum, blames government officials and the militants symbolized if not led by an underground organization called the Panthic Committee. 'The village doesn't want to get robbed and killed by militants or criminals... But the village is also getting robbed and killed by the police.' Further militarization of the state, he said, will only create 'an actively hostile population.'

"Sikh leaders say many families have already been alienated by officially sanctioned death squads and extortion by policemen who abduct young people and threaten to book them as terrorists if ransoms are not paid. Reports of torture and death in police custody are common."[65]

The story of the widespread and endemic violence in Punjab did not stop here of course. The intercommunal and factional violence among the Sikhs, compounded by the police and army counteractions against the Sikh militants and civilians, was itself a smaller component of the larger scene in which Sikh militants were constantly attacking and killing Hindu civilians. The following excerpt from a New York Times report typified hundreds of similar incidents:

The authorities imposed an indefinite curfew today on a town in Punjab state after Sikh separatists shot 15 Hindus to death there in a new surge of political violence in India.

The police in Chandigarh, the Punjab state capital, said 15 bodies were found in Jullundur after militants rode through the town in a car on Sunday firing assault rifles at Hindus... In Jullundur, the curfew was ordered after Hindu crowds started gathering at a hospital to prepare for the cremation of the 15 bodies, the Chandigarh police said. They said that only a limited number of people would be allowed to attend the cremation rites.

Sikh men [more accurately, many Sikhs] are easily distinguished by their full beards and turbans from the Hindus, who make up three-quarters of India's population of 850 million but are a minority in Punjab.

The police said the accident may have been intended as a protest against the roundup of more than 300 Sikh politicians to prevent them from meeting on Sunday at Amritsar, near Chandigarh.

More than 3,500 people—policemen, militants, politicians and ordinary citizens caught up in violence—have been killed so far this year in the Punjab violence.

Chandra Shekhar, India's new Prime Minister, said today that he was willing to talk to any leader to try to ease India's political violence. He said the Sikh meeting in Punjab had to be banned because it would have increased religious polarization.

New Delhi dissolved Punjab's state assembly three years ago and put the state under direct rule by a governor and bureaucrats in a vain attempt to quell the separatist violence. [66]

THE INDIAN ELECTIONS OF 1991 AND GENERALIZED VIOLENCE

With rebellions convulsing Punjab, Assam, and Kashmir, and with political parties, the security forces, and militants all resorting to armed violence, the Hindu nationalism of the Bharata Janata Party (BJP) and the caste politics of V. P. Singh's National Front were explosive. The elections of 1991...
were unanimously rated by journalists as the most violent in India's postindependence history as a democracy. A spate of killings culminated in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination outside Madras, allegedly by Sri Lankan Tamil militants, as a result of which the elections were postponed, with the uncertain expectation of their being resumed a few weeks later. James Chad has sketched the violent context of the electoral campaign in India in late May 1991 as follows:

Another election promises only further paralysis in which no one party wins a majority.

Yet elections and parliamentary instability only hint at India's torn fabric. Topping the list are rebellions, convulsing the Punjab and Kashmir... In Kashmir, especially, the degree of alienation between the 4 million Kashmiris and the security forces positioned in the beautiful valley is profound.

I detected no shred of common ground between the populace and what has become an occupying force. Yet the retention of Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, remains an article of faith for all Indian parties and politicians. Nothing unites Indians more than the determination to "hold" Kashmir; nothing unites Kashmiris more than a desire to be rid of India, a tragic impasse that results mostly, but not entirely, from India's manipulation of Kashmiri politics during the last three decades.

In the Punjab, a different logic yields the same grim result: an original demand for a separate state for the majority Sikhs has now become a fratricidal rebellion in which Sikhs belong to a score or more groups bunched together. Predominantly Sikh policemen create new groups to fight the older groups...

The Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, India's Hindu revivalists, want to revive "Hindu-ness," a glorious time before the Muslim and Christian invaders, but the prospect frightens the country's 110 million Muslims (after Indonesia, India is the most populous Muslim nation)...

While the fracturing of national politics proceeds, so does the unraveling of civic peace. Riots between dominant Hindus and the big Muslim minority have ravaged communal harmony in recent months. Indian observers say the unrest is the worst since the 1947 Partition which split Britain into India...

Many longstanding social issues have resurfaced with new bitterness, such as ethnic quarreling over retention of the English language, and the vexed issue of caste, banned by controversial laws last year for an affirmative action program giving many government jobs to "backward castes," a category distinct from caste "untouchable."

India remains wedged to perhaps the best legacy of British rule—the ballot box. Although politics have become deeply criminalized in some Indian states, governments change in Delhi and in its states through elections, not (as in Pakistan) through overt or disguised military coups. When observing elections I have seen both a mixture of textbook civics and ballot-box hijacking reminiscent of the Philippines. Still, it beats periodic shows of bayonets in the capital city.

APPENDIX: CONSTRUCTING A SIKH IDENTITY

One has to go back at least to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to fully comprehend Bhindranwale's religious impulses and the cultural and religious capital he was drawing on and elaborating. Sikh history is characterized by a series of highly complex ruptures, rapprochements, and transitions. The concept of an exclusive Sikh identity, and of the Sikh collectivity as a separate one with definable boundaries, was not there from the outset. It was not fully dominant even in the latter part of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century, at the time of Ranjit Singh's empire. The territories in which Sikhs lived, the languages they spoke, the agrarian festivals in which they participated, the ritual officiants they patronized, and the universe of their rites of passage—all these were shared with the other communities amongst whom they lived in the Punjab. This is not, of course, to deny that under the guidance and teachings of the Sikh gurus, certain identity markers and distinct practices and places of worship did develop:

The initial Guru period, following the death of Nanak, provided significant axes of identity to the embryonic Sikh faith: allegiance to the person of Guru Nanak and his nine successors; identification with their teachings (Sangat); the foundation of congregations (Sangats); the setting up of elaborate pilgrim centres at places like Nainiwal and Amritsar; the convention of a communal meal (Langar); and the compilation by Guru Arjan of an anthology, commonly known as the Adi Granth, which ultimately acquired the status of a major sacred text of the Panth...

This text compiled by the fifth guru, Arjan, in one sense turned the Sikhs into a "textual community," and by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, pious Sikhs were characterized by "the centrality of belief and abiding faith in the person and utterances of the Sikh gurus; the need to visit the Dharamsala [a monastic establishment or place for reading and singing scriptures]; and the repeated emphasis on the sangat as a body of practitioners in faith."

But even so, at this time, the category "Sikh" was flexible and problematic, and the Sikhs were still in the process of growing and evolving. The collation of the Adi Granth did not create a firm separation of the Sikh Panth from other religious traditions. The voluminous hagiographical narratives (Janam-sakhis) of the life of Guru Nanak borrowed liberally from Puranic stories, Sufi hagiographies, and Buddhist Jatakas.

The initial Guru period came to a sudden end with the execution of Guru Arjan by the Moghuls in 1606. "A continuous Jat influx into the Sikh..."
movement throughout the seventeenth century alongside a protracted conflict with an increasingly hostile Mughal state gradually gave rise to new Sikh cultural patterns. One major development was the institution of the Khalsa by the last Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, in the last decade of the seventeenth century. “The Khalsa [order or brotherhood] was instituted to finally and the ambiguities of Sikh religiosity, and the distinctive identity of the Sikh was “inscribed through a complex cultural repertoire made up of inventive rituals, codes of conduct, mythical narratives and a whole new classificatory code regarding the body.” 96 Initiation into the Khalsa involved the famous khande ki pahul rite of drinking sanctified water into which a double-edged sword was dipped. However, not all Sikhs became Khalsa; many, including Sikhs who were drawn from the Brahmin and Khati castes, resisted Khalsa initiation and identity.

The Khalsa continued its work of securing religious boundedness, and forged its own dharma (moral code), which it called Rahit. Oberoi underscores the importance of texts called Rahit-namas, which developed the Khalsa conception of selfhood by codifying five areas: life-cycle rituals, tabooed behavior, the implications of transgressions, and the constitution of sacred space. Since they were produced in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, the Rahit-namas serve to refute the idea that Khalsa identity only became dominant in the late nineteenth century under British sponsorship.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, a distinctive Khalsa order had thus emerged. The Adi Granth assumed the status of the voice of an eternal guru, who was no different from God; and the Sikh gurus’ teachings were the “voice” of God—they brought God and man together. The doctrine of Guru Granth was conjoined to the notion of Guru Panth; the guru was present wherever the Sikh congregation assembled. When, in 1708, at the death of Gobind Singh, there was no guru to succeed him, the Panth turned into his collective successor.

During the course of the eighteenth century, tens of thousands of Sikhs, many of whom belonged to the “lower social orders,” embraced Khalsa identity, partly because of the Khalsa’s campaign to displace the Mughal state in Punjab. By the 1770s, Khalsa Sikhs, who had formed regional political units called miast, which controlled certain territories and distributed hereditary land rents to functionaries, controlled the Mughal suba of Punjab and large portions of the provinces of Multan and Shahjaheenabad. The solidarity infused through the rituals of gurмatta (resolutions passed by the faithful in the presence of the Adi Granth) and sarbat-khalsa (meetings of corporate bodies) was a crucial ingredient in the making of these Khalsa Sikhs. 97

But on the other hand, at the same time, the Khalsa was attaining greater control, there was acceptance in many circles that there were alternate ways of being a Sikh, and that “the Sikh Panth was not coterminous with the Khalsa and it was possible to be a Sikh without being a Khalsa.” 98 The Sikhs who did not turn into Khalsa Sikhs were by no means numerically insignificant, and in the mid-eighteenth century, they were often referred to as the Sahajdharias (this label included Nānak-panthis as well as Udasis).

In many ways, the Sahajdhari Sikhs inverted Khalsa categories of thought and practices and “transgressed” Khalsa religious boundaries. They cut their hair, did not undergo initiation, obeyed no norm to obligatorily carry arms, smoked tobacco, and had a radically different version of the line of succession from Guru Nānak. While “Khalsa Sikhs began to recognize the Adi Granth as guru, Sahajdhari Sikhs were not given to accept a text as guru and favoured living human gurus.” 99 But they recognized Nānak as their guru and read and recited from the Adi Granth.

The Udasis, perhaps the most conspicuous and numerous segment of the Sahajdharis, were organized in a number of major orders, managed shrines across north India, and set up their own establishments at major pilgrimage centers such as Amritsar, Hardwar, and Banaras. They did not consider the Khalsa Rahit-namas to be binding, and rather than the five k’s, their outfit included a cap, a rosary of flowers, a cotton bag, a vessel made of a dried pumpkin gourd, a deerskin upon which to perform Hatha Yoga, and so on. There was a distinct difference in worldly orientations and involvement between the Khalsa and Sahajdhari Sikhs: the former thought of salvation as attainable while they pursued their pragmatic worldly objectives within the encompassing framework of religious beliefs and practices; the latter declared that secular pursuits were not compatible with the goal of human liberation, which required world renunciation.

It is not surprising therefore that “the Khalsa principalitys, numbering more than two score in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, did not seek to dissolve preexisting social hierarchies... Their main aim was to absorb the local segmentary lineages and found an empire on them.” 94 The processes of state formation that culminated in the Lahore state of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) consisted of multiple accommodations: between the Khalsa Sikhs and the lineages and caste organizations; between the Khalsa and Sahajdhari Sikhs; and between Khalsa notions of exclusive Sikh identity and a more inclusive identity incorporating rituals associated with Hinduism and Hindu ritual specialists. “It is this extraordinary fusion of Khalsa and non-Khalsa identities which marks out Sikh tradition in the eighteenth century from what was to follow under colonial rule.” 95
By the early nineteenth century, there had crystallized what Oberoi calls the *Sanatan* Sikh tradition, which embodied a rapprochement between Khalsa and Sahajdhari identities. Although by the early twentieth century, this Sanatan tradition had lost its dominance, its complex intermingling of trends and rich hierarchized diversity make it noteworthy. The main text of the Sanatan tradition was the Dasam Granth, whose “inter-textuality” was linked to the Puranas and Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata. Under its umbrella, Hindu priests publicly worshipped images within the precincts of the Golden Temple, and it was considered legitimate to worship living gurus, whose descendants inherited their charisms. The lineages descended from these Sikh gurus became known as Bedis, Trehans, Bhalas, and Sadhis. Members of these guru lineages served as custodians of Sikh shrines, established monastic establishments, imparted religious instruction, dispensed charity, and took care of their family relics.

But side by side with the saintly lineages who inherited charisma, there was also a lively tradition of holy men—the Bhais, Sants, and Babas—who achieved and earned their holiness in their lifetime. These holy men, recognized for their piety, were credited with powers to perform miracles, heal the sick, and succor the distressed.

Sanatan Sikhism also included ascetic orders, such as the Udasis, Nirmalas, Gianis, Dhadis, and many others. In the mid nineteenth century, there were over 250 Udasi akharas (establishments). Although smaller in scale, the Nirmalas were an especially significant ascetic order, and many of their akharas engaged “in meditation, yoga and in the study of the Adi Granth, the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas and the Sastras.” The Udasi and Nirmala establishments were second only to the famous guru lineages among the recipients of religious grants from the Sikh state; they also undertook the task of propagating the faith and establishing branches and pilgrim centers on the periphery of the Sikh world. Their central establishments were famous for studying, creating, and diffusing both sacred and secular knowledge pertaining to the scriptures, literary classics, rhetoric, astrology, and medicine.

Oberoi regards Sanatan Sikhism as primarily a “priestly religion,” whose dominance derived from its being “the religious universe of Sikh elites”; but it was an “official religion” closely aligned with the Sikh kingdom of Lahore, and it progressively lost strength and validity once the British annexed Punjab.

The era of the loss of Sikh empire and the establishment of British Raj saw the spawning of the organizations called Singh Sabhas. The first of these was the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, formed in Amritsar in 1873. Although responsive to the changes injected into Punjabi society by British rule, it sought to preserve traditional cultural values and attempted to answer questions about Sikh identity, the differences between the Sahajdharis and Khalsa traditions, the place of low-caste Sikhs (e.g., Mazhabi and Chamar Sikhs) within the Sikh collectivity, and orthopraxy in the externals of physical appearance.

The affluent intellectuals who led most of the early Singh Sabhas (the one at Lahore was formed in 1879) were pluralistic and inclusive in their attitudes and inclined toward Sanatanist tolerance of a variety of traditions. There was a phenomenal expansion of Singh Sabhas in the late 1880s and 1900, the majority of them in Punjab, related to the increasing number of Sikhs responding to educational opportunities, the expansion in communications, commerce, and services, and the rise of new market towns and trading networks that also penetrated the rural economy. Physical and social mobility and expanding opportunities also brought new members into the ranks of the elite.

Oberoi underscores the enormous transformation involved in the tolerant pluralism of Sanatan Sikhism giving way to the three “core doctrines” of the Tat Khalsa, guru Granth, and gurdwara, which became “the litmus test of authentic Sikhism” and came to be widely accepted by the Sikh public in the early twentieth century. Arising in opposition to the prevailing Sanatan Sikh tradition and popular religion, the Tat Khalsa conducted persistent campaigns against the culture of saints (pirs), local festivals and agrarian fairs made merry with music, folk song, and dance, and the worship of gods, local shrines, and ancestral spirits. “Underwriting the Tat Khalsa’s authoritative discourse were a series of factors: the colonial state, the British army, the collapse of customary culture, and the new political configuration in the localities,” Oberoi observes. 

In the late nineteenth century a growing body of Sikhs took part in a systematic campaign to purge their faith of religious diversity, as well as what they saw as Hindu accretions and as a Brahmanical stranglehold over their rituals. The result was a fundamental change in the nature of the Sikh tradition. From an amorphous entity it rapidly turned into a homogeneous community. And of all the competing entities, symbols and norms that went into constituting the long history of the Sikh movement, it was the Khalsa sampradaya that succeeded in imprinting its image on the “new” community. . . . The Udasis, Nirmalas—a motley complex of traditions referred to here as Sahajdharis—came to be seen as deviants. With the active displacement of a subordination of many of the Sikh sub-traditions, a single Sikh identity began to crystallize in the first decade of this century.
The Tat Khalsa’s drive to impose and inscribe an exclusive Sikh identity and to achieve a separatist collective identity shorn of Hindu influences and practices merits detailed consideration, especially the moves by which many strands of Sanatan Sikhism were displaced and inferiorized, thereby making the Tat Khalsa the dominant center of Sikh tradition. “Between 1880 and 1909 the body was made a principal focus of symbolic concern and a central means of projecting ideological preoccupations.” Although Guru Gobind Singh may have been the first within Sikh tradition to recognize the semiotic potential of the body to manifest the power of a corporate imagination, it took an interval of almost three centuries and a decisive intervention by Singh Sabha activists before this sign-vehicle was fully harnessed. “Scriptural truth and corporate existence were made isomorphic and pointed to the same objective: Sikh corporate identity and the independence of the Sikh religious community. . . . The oft-repeated rhetorical statement “Ham Hindu Nahin” (We are not Hindus) now had a subjective basis; what it lacked was supplemented by further innovation.”

Oberoi shows how the Tat Khalsa combined its attempts to elevate the spiritual condition of its adherents with the strict regulation of their bodies. The Khalsa sought to impose a distinct physical appearance and identity on its followers by rigidly enforcing external symbols of identity, particularly the five K’s, and formalizing new life-cycle rituals, especially those pertaining to Khalsa initiation. In its rewritten hagiographies of martyrs, its popular tracts, and the new novels written by its literary members, the Khalsa emphasized how the heroic figures of the eighteenth century had been “punished, tortured and killed for desiring to retain their cultural markers,” and how “the ideal Sikh modes of bodily comportment” were exemplified by them. “Only those who stuck to the glorious heritage of the heroic epoch deserved to be called Sikhs. In other words those who were minus the Five K’s—for instance the Udasis, the Nirmanas and the Sahajadhari—all were not Sikhs. They had failed to live up to the high standards of the past and therefore should be stripped of their rights to community membership.”

The ways in which Sikhs belonged to the larger Hindu culture, especially their marriage practices, biraddari (clan) norms, and life-cycle rites, such as weddings and funerals, and whether these customs put them in danger of being assimilated and enmeshed, created a recurring problem for Sikh identity. In direct contrast to the Sanatan Sikh tradition of tolerance of diverse Sikh local family, kinship, and caste practices, the Khalsa Sikhs deliberately set out to declare “Hindu” (and “Muslim”) adherents unorthodox. They worked to forge and invent new rituals, at whose core was the Adi Granth, the sacred object to be circumambulated and to be recited as sacred formulae.

The great majority of Sikh households in the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth “performed their rites of passage according to the long-established conventions of customary culture or the respective customs of their biradaris and caste groups.” Moreover, as may be expected “there was an immense variation in ceremonial, not only among the different castes of Sikhs but also within caste groups and among Sikhs of different localities.” The village nai (barber) and the local Brahmbar purohit (priest) figured in Sikh life-cycle rites. “Much as with marriage ceremonial, Sikhs lacked any distinctive mortuary rite that could be described as a charter of corporate identity.” In the eyes of the Tat Khalsa, these practices were completely anti-Sikh in nature; they had brought about the degeneration of Sikhism and its increasing assimilation into Hinduism.

Between 1884 and 1915, many manuals were published on how Sikhs ought to arrange their life-cycle rituals. These new specifications, which played a fundamental role in etching Sikh cultural boundaries, while dispensing with earlier “Hindu” ritual functionaries, sought to standardize rituals for all Sikhs—Jats, Khatri, Mazahris—shorn of any caste or biradari associations; made the Adi Granth the central sacred object (for example, replacing the fire in marriage rites) and sole text for recitation; and focused on the wearing of the five K’s. These newly devised purified ritual injunctions were in due course inserted into the Rahit-namas, which sought to stipulate Khalsa conceptions of moral duties and proper ritual practices.

In addition to these radical changes in life-cycle rituals, other innovations were introduced by the Tat Khalsa with regard to dress, language, the annual calendar and appropriate festivals, dietary taboos, and so on to strengthen the distinctions and non-religious boundaries between Sikhs and non-Sikhs. A critical step taken with far-reaching implications was espousing the Punjabi language and the Gurmukhi script, in which the Adi Granth was written, as emblems and vehicles of Sikh identity. The appropriation of Punjabi, with its implications for educational instruction, employment recruitment, and administration, and its distinctness from Urdu and Hindi, the markers of Muslim and Hindu identity, inevitably fed into issues of linguistic nationalism and the carving out of linguistic states, which came to a head in postindependence times. The second partition of Punjab took place in 1966, with Haryana hiving off to form a separate state.

Oberoi has convincingly argued, especially against Richard Fox’s thesis in his Lions of the Punjab (1985), that Sikh identity as we know it today...
Anglo-Sikh war in 1846 turned into a regular flow following the annexation of the Punjab. Governor-General Lord James Dalhousie encouraged the recruitment of Sikhs, and the Sikhs’ loyal fighting side by side with the British during the 1857 Indian Mutiny reaped rich rewards. “Thus was Punjab turned into the army barracks of the Raj, and Sikhs made the most formidable human resource within the imperial fighting machine.”

Of interest to us is that the British military authorities required a Sikh recruit to undergo the initiation rite, and to exhibit the external symbols of his faith, and employed “grantees” (readers of the Granth and gurdwara functionaries) to conduct Sikh rituals. Thus, ignorant or unmindful of the complex array and diversity of Sikh practices, “army commanders enforced an extremely narrow, functional and mechanistic definition of the Sikh faith.” Since the army’s sponsorship of a particular image of Sikhism accorded so well with that upheld by the Tat Khalsa, it is no wonder that Sikh soldiers became the staunchest supporters of the latter’s project.

**Sikh Protest Politics Against the Raj**

Where Oberoi leaves off is an apt place to review the submissions of Richard Fox in *Lions of the Punjab*. Fox attempts to fit together the ethnographic and historical particulars of what he calls the “Punjab puzzle,” which consists of two questions. First, “Why did followers of Sikhism, specifically those called Singh or ‘Lions,’ engage in a mass rural protest against British rule that shook early twentieth-century Punjab?” (The protest in question took place between 1920 and 1925 and was part of a vigorous political activity mounted by the Akali movement.) Second, “Where did the Sikh identity that provided the cultural meaning for the social movement come from?”

Let us take the second question first. Fox’s answer is that “British rulers, in pursuit of their colonial interests, through means dictated by their cultural beliefs, foreshadowed, even constructed, the Sikh identity which was later espoused by the Singh Sabhas.” By “cultural beliefs,” Fox has in mind nineteenth-century British “orientalizing beliefs” predicated on notions of racial divisions of humankind, which in India took the form of treating certain Indian religious communities, castes, or regional populations as so many distinctive and bounded species. The primary agent of this identity-shaping process was the British Indian Army, which nurtured the orthodox, separatist, and martial identity of the turbaned and unshorn Singh among Sikh rural recruits to its regiments and companies.

This claim has, as we saw earlier, been refuted by Harjot Oberoi, who has convincingly sketched the Tat Khalsa’s forging of this specialized identity in the eighteenth century. Others have supported this critique. But all are
agreed that the British Army played an intensifying and sustaining role in that kind of Sikh identity formation adopted and reworked by the reforming urban middle- and lower-middle-class Sikhs who led the Akali movement.

Fox’s discussion of the roots and direction of the urban and rural protest movements of the early 1920s sets the stage for understanding the Akali politics that precedes the final shift to the fundamentalist extremism of Bhindranwale’s militancy. It is stated that the penetration of capitalist world economy into the Punjab under the aegis of British colonialism generated certain internal contradictions characterized by the differences between the economy of the petty commodity-producing small peasantry, dependent on well irrigation, in the central Punjab, and the more mercantile and prosperous economy of the canal colonies. These two zones came into competition with each other, and the small producers of the central Punjab became increasingly disadvantaged even as they intensified their labor inputs to the point of self-exploitation in order to compete with the labor-saving benefits that canal irrigation provided the colonists. In other words, unequal exchange resulted, value flowing from the former to the latter. “When the Punjab’s rural economy deteriorated after World War I [a collapse precipitated by the contradictions of colonial exploitation], peasants, imbued with the Raj’s image of the militant Singh, joined with urban reformers, who broadcast a similar identity. The upshot was a mass religious protest that was also a political uprising; it lasted for five years and was only put down at great cost to the British.”

Fox’s interesting submission is that the Akali movement began as “religious reformism in Punjab cities and ended as anticolonial revolt in Punjab villages.” He attempts to show that the protest began at urban sites where a spirit of “reformed” Sikh consciousness as a struggle for cultural newness, political power, and economic privileges had developed, especially among lower-middle-class Sikhs. From these urban centers, especially in the immediate postwar years, the movement spread to and induced an aggrieved urban population in the central Punjab, and then the better-placed rural lower middle class of the canal colonies, climaxing as a movement of mass protest that “equally expressed religious intent, anti-colonialism and agrarian protest.”

The Akali movement dynamically moved through three successive confrontations. The identity consciousness of the Singh Sabha movement was in its first phase a response to the Hindu revivalist and reformist militancy of certain Arya Samaj enthusiasts, whose threat of incorporating or converting Sikhs elicited not only an affirmation of separate identity but also a struggle by the Akalis to gain control of Sikh shrines. At the same time, as we saw in Oberoi’s account, there arose a contest on the part of the Takhat Sahib Sikhs (Fox’s “Lions”) to dominate, marginalize, and inferiorize the Sanatan (and Sahajdhari) traditions of non-Khalsa Sikhs. This was an internal war among the Sikhs. Ultimately, a struggle between the Singh Khalsa Sikhs and the British Raj broke out. The struggle of these urban reform Sikhs to take control of Sikh shrines managed by conservative mahants and ritual officiants tolerant of Sanatan eclecticism brought the Singhis into conflict with the British colonial authorities, who supported managers in place and suspected the Singhis of hatching an anticolonial subversion. The actual techniques and strategies of induction of the rural lower middle class and peasantry deployed by the Akali leaders were similar to those used by British army recruiters among rural Sikhs, while the protest campaigns often resonated with military overtones.

According to Fox’s account, while Amritsar, the home of the first Singh Sabha, organized in 1873, was dominated by the rich landed gentry, by the orthodox, who were loyal to the Raj, and by their temple functionaries, the rival Singh Sabha in Lahore, founded six years later, was more egalitarian, espoused the separatist identity advocated by Guru Gobind, and represented the inclinations of the growing urban lower middle class. “The battle between Lahore and Amritsar, between Singh and Singh, between temple functionary and lower-middle class served as the agency for turning the contradiction in British domination into an anticolonial confrontation.”

In 1880, the Lahore and Amritsar associations cooperatively formed the Khalsa Diwan to coordinate the various Singh Sabhas, but their differences were more or less smoothed out by the time the Chief Khalsa Diwan of Amritsar was formed in 1902 to succeed it. “The Chief Khalsa Diwan preached an unequivocal Sikh identity and came increasingly to labor for the religious equality of the low castes.” It was led by persons drawn from the ranks of teachers, professionals, merchants, and government servants. In the early years of the twentieth century, more rural Jats joined the movement as urban Khalsa advocates successfully invoked the Singh image, which was concordant with Jat traditions of “militancy, organized protest, and when necessary violence.”

Ian Kerr avers that because Fox does not give full value to pre-existing jat dispositions, such as the use of violence in factional politics, he exaggerates the role of the urban reforming Sikhs in imparting a militant identity to the rural Jats. Be that as it may, the important point for us (and this links up with Oberoi’s documentation) is that the Takhat Khalsa urban reformers increasingly collided with temple authorities and shrine functionaries, who from their point of view tolerated caste inequities and Hindu practices. Although the Chief Khalsa Diwan had been pro-reform in some matters, such as removing Hindu idols from the Golden Temple and passing the Anand Marriage Act in
1909 (which legalized a non-Brahmanical ceremony for Singhs), it was viewed by the younger and more radical reformers as harboring pro-British attitudes. The Khalsa/Singh radicals severed their connection with the Chief Khalsa Diwan and in December 1919 formed the Central Sikh League, which became the left wing of the Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the major support of the Akali Dal in the 1920s.

As the Raj itself progressively came to see the reformers as subversive of imperial interests, it abandoned its earlier espousal of the army recruiter's stereotypic image of the militant and loyal Singh. Meanwhile, "the Central Sikh League called for jathas [demonstrations by volunteers] against temple functionaries and noncooperation with the government at one and the same time. . . . By 1920 at the latest—with the creation of the SGPC and the Akali Dal—both the colonial government and the Singh reformers had become conscious of what their confrontation had always objectively involved: religion, identity, and power."

Kerr has drawn attention to the considerable role of the revolution in communications in the Punjab—the expansion in roads, railways, the print media, and telephone and telegraph systems—in promoting social mobilization by the Akali movement.112 No less important were the campaigns "conducted in the typical format of Akali morchas evolved during the Sikh Gurudwara Reform movement in the early twenties," Attar Singh observes. "Organized essentially as a regular display of collectively nonviolent defiance of state authority, these morchas came to be associated with sending out bands of volunteers known as jathas every day over a considerable period of time to attract public notice and make dramatic impact." This required both a safe assembly point for the volunteers, from which they would also proceed, and a safe sanctuary for the organizers who were in charge of making camping arrangements.113 This legacy of demonstrations would be put to effective use in later times, although there would be a shift to violence as in the case of the 1982 Dharma Yudh morcha begun by Bhindranwale and the Shiromani Akali Dal.

This historical account has covered the dynamic developments among the Sikhs, their internal sectarian religious disputes, their continuous attempts to define their identity and to erect boundaries vis-à-vis the larger Hindu society, the increasing dominance of the militant Pat Khalsas, and the organized resistance they mounted against the Raj. It meaningfully connects with the issues with which we began this chapter: "The Politics of the Akali Dal Movement" and "Political Contests, 1947–1964." It helps us better understand the emergence of Bhindranwale and the roots of his revivalist, purificatory, separatist movement.

6 Ethnic Conflict in Pakistan

Pakistan's peculiar ethnic and provincial complexity, and its dynamic shifting polities conducted in a tense regional environment in which India, Afghanistan, Iran, China and the former USSR were bordering countries, generated many kinds of internal conflicts, as well as stressful relations with India. Ayesha Jalal has vividly enumerated the country's wounds and scars:

| Painfully carved out of the Indian subcontinent—ostensibly to provide a homeland for the Indian Muslims—Pakistan has been remarkable more for the tensions between its dominant and subordinate regions than for the purported unities of a common religion. Of the forty-two years since its creation, Pakistan has seen military or quasi-military rule for twenty-five; it has been governed under six different constitutions and has been at war with India on three separate occasions. In 1971 Pakistan lost a majority of its Muslim population with the breakaway of its eastern wing and the establishment of a new country, Bangladesh—the only successfully secessionist movement in a newly independent state. A civil war in which Muslim slaughtered Muslim might seem to have exploded the notion that religion alone was sufficient cement to hold Pakistan together. There have been continuing tensions in its remaining provinces in the west.1 |

Like those of India next door, the cities and towns of Pakistan have known many communal riots as intermittent events, involving different antagonists. For example, Karachi "has seen anti-Qadiani [Ahmadi] riots in the early fifties, anti-Pathan riots in 1965, anti-Qadiani riots again in 1969-70, Sindhi-Muhajir riots in 1971-73, and a yearly encounter of Shia-Sunni sectarian riots before the Orangi troubles of 1983.2" Since then clashes between Pathans and Biharis have occurred in October and December 1986 and February and July 1987, and between Muhajirs and