

Identity Crisis and Khalistan Movement: Examining the Roots of Sikh Separatism in India

Prantik Basak¹, Dr. Rahul J. Nikam², Dr. Tripti Chowdhury³, Debasree Pal⁴, Jhilike Saha⁵

¹Assistant Professor of Political Science, Marwadi University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India.
prantik96@gmail.com; Orcid id: 0000-0002-8141-3290

²Associate Professor of Law, Marwadi University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India.
rahulsnikam@gmail.com; Orcid id: 0000-0001-7279-1399

³Assistant Professor of Political Science, Marwadi University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India.
tripti.chowdhury20@gmail.com; Orcid id: 0009-0002-6908-1796

⁴Assistant Professor of Political Science, Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India;
debasreepaul5@gmail.com; Orcid id: 0009-0004-1949-9654

⁵Assistant Professor of Political Science, Kingston Law College, Barasat, West Bengal, India;
sahajhilike@gmail.com; Orcid id: 0009-0004-0529-1764

How to cite this article: Prantik Basak, Rahul J. Nikam, Tripti Chowdhury, Debasree Pal, Jhilike Saha (2024). Identity Crisis and Khalistan Movement: Examining the Roots of Sikh Separatism in India. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 22447-22450.

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the historical, socio-political and international dimensions of the Khalistan movement, assessing its relevance today by studying its evolution within the Sikh community. The evolution of the Sikh identity has been molded by religious teachings, colonial policies, post-independent political dynamics and rising political rivalries, leading to the escalation of the demand for Khalistan. While the initial demands for separate statehood were partly fuelled by colonial era injustices, such demands took concrete shape post-independence despite the creation of Punjab on linguistic basis. Internal party politics resulted into the rise of extremist elements in the 1980s, which was brutally suppressed by the Indian State, hurting the religious sentiments of the Sikhs. The issue escalated with the violent oppression of the Sikhs, infamously referred to as the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. Although tensions had calmed down, the current decade is witnessing a revival of the Khalistan movement and is no longer restricted to domestic politics. Employing a historical-evaluative approach, this paper tries to emphasize the significance of contextualizing the Khalistan movement within broader global frameworks of sovereignty, ethnic identity and diaspora politics, stating that unresolved historical tensions can escalate local conflicts into international challenges.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic militancy, Khalistan, Sikhs, Identity Politics.

1. Introduction

Ethnic militancy, also referred to as ethnic conflict or ethnic insurgency, is a very common phenomenon in the Indian subcontinent. By ethnic militancy, we refer to the use of armed struggle and violence by specific ethnic communities or groups in order to pursue their social, political and economic objectives. These conflicts have their roots in issues such as a demand for autonomy, crisis of identity, struggle for self-determination and protection of culture. The Sikhs in India, concentrated majorly in the northern Indian state of Punjab are one such community that has made headlines when it comes to ethnic militancy. This paper aims to trace the multifaceted evolution of Sikh identity from its inception with Guru Nanak Dev ji through the profound influences of the British era, the demand for separate statehood during 1947, the emergence of party politics in post-independent India and the dissatisfaction within the Akali Dal, the rise of Khalistani militant leader Bhindranwale, operation blue star

and the subsequent assassination of Indira Gandhi, culminating in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

Nearly four decades have passed since the Khalistan movement of 1980s but the issue still remains relevant today. In spite of the relentless persecution of Sikhs in India since 1984 where the government had mostly turned a blind eye, the demand for Khalistan still lives in the hearts of many Sikhs today. This is evident from the recent incidents related to the Khalistan issue. In 2022, we witnessed the short but meteoric rise of Amritpal Singh Sandhu. Sandhu, notoriously referred to as Bhindranwale 2.0, won the hearts of many Sikhs and reignited the demand for Khalistan. This paper provides a historical and evaluative analysis to understanding the Sikh identity as without it, we cannot understand why the demand for Khalistan keeps reappearing.

The demand for Khalistan is not just restricted to the Sikhs in India. Many Punjabi Sikhs had migrated to nations like Canada and UK since the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. There are many among these migrants Sikhs in foreign lands who have created their own communities demanding for Khalistan. It has been speculated that such groups have been funding the Khalistani interests in India. The Sikhs have occupied a position of importance in Canada today. The electoral strength of the Sikhs in Canada have granted them an umbrella of security. Recently, one of the key advocates for Khalistan in Canada was assassinated and the Canadian government has openly called out India in front of the global media. This was followed by diplomats of both nations being expelled. This shows us how the Khalistani issue is still relevant, and how it has now occupied a global stage.

The crisis of identity is an undeniable reality in the age of post-modernism. The experience of the Sikhs tells us how a crisis of identity can become intertwined with complex social, political and economic challenges. This paper aims to highlight the demand for Khalistan was not a creation of the 1980s. There is a long history of discrimination and marginalization, both during the British and post-independent era that is responsible for the current situation. In this paper, the author has tried to establish a correlation between the martial identity attributed to the Sikhs and their persisting marginalization within the Indian society. This inquiry extends to the Sikhs' status as an electoral minority. Through this interconnected analysis, the paper has tried to shed light on the profound dissatisfaction that prevails within the Sikh community. This discontent has fueled the ongoing identity crisis, thereby intensifying the demand for Khalistan, both domestically in India and among the Sikh diaspora abroad. The first section of this paper elaborates on the origin of the Sikh identity. We cannot understand the socio-political crisis surrounding the Sikhs in India without first understanding the basis of the Sikh identity. The first section of the paper sheds light on the birth of Sikhism and how it is different from the two major religions of India – Hinduism and Islam. It briefly elaborates on the life of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and how the religion has drawn influences from both Islam and Hinduism whilst also maintaining its own individuality. The first section also tries to explain the growth of militant inclinations in Sikhism during the reign of the Sikh Gurus that followed Guru Nanak.

The second section of the paper delves into the influences on Sikhism during the British Raj in India. Most studies on ethnicity and culture in India would be incomplete without looking into the impact of the British rule in India. This portion of the paper briefly mentions the struggles of the Sikhs against the British India government and the role they played in India's struggle for independence. The third section of the paper dives into the Sikh demands for a separate statehood. This section highlights how the demands for a separate Sikh state was born before partition in 1947 and how and why it had continued in post-independent India too.

The fourth section of the paper focuses on the role of party politics on the identity of the Sikh community in India. The Akali Dal, the regional party of Punjab which supposedly represents the Sikh community were relegated to a minority position against the might of the Indian National Congress. This portion tries to analyze how this feeling of minority in their own state led to dissatisfaction and ultimately to ethnic militancy amongst the Sikhs. The fifth section of the paper introduces us to Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the militant leader of the movement for Khalistan. This portion highlights to the readers the tactics employed behind Bhindranwale's rise; his strategies as a militant leader and how his steps changed the future of the Sikhs for decades to come.

The demand for a separate state of Khalistan ran parallel with the demand for Pakistan; however, being a minority as compared to the Muslims, the Sikhs did not have their demands fulfilled during the partition of 1947. Although the inspirations behind this demand initially fizzled out when Sikhs got their own Sikh-dominated state of Punjab within India, these aspirations intensified again when the Akali dal failed to make a mark in state electoral politics. Such dissatisfaction accumulated for years and finally erupted in the form of Bhindranwale. The sixth section of this paper elaborates on the events surrounding the movement for Khalistan in the early years of the 1980s. The seventh section of this paper narrates the steps taken by the Union government on India to deal with the Khalistani

militants. The Sikh demand for Khalistan was and still is the biggest demand for separate statehood in India. The eight section of the paper elaborates on the aftermath of Operation Blue star. The Indian Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi decided to intervene with the Indian military to put an end to the Khalistani militants. However, the bloodbath in the Sikh holy shrine of Golden Temple hurt Sikh sentiments. It led to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by her own two bodyguards who belonged from the Sikh community. This further led to one of the darkest moments in Indian history – the wide scale mob lynching of Sikhs in different parts of India, especially in the capital city of New Delhi.

The events of 1980s forever changed the future of the Sikhs of India. Violence against Sikhs continued for decades and this led to many Sikhs leaving the country. However, the demand for Khalistan had still not died. The last section of the paper includes some concluding observations on the part of the author. The demand for Khalistan is still alive forty years after the death of Bhindranwale. The year 2022 saw the rise of Sandhu, who had been referred to by the media as Bhindranwale 2.0. Although he was quickly arrested, the recent months in 2023 were one of turmoil too with the Canadian government accusing India of the extrajudicial killing a Khalistani leader who was now a citizen of Canada. In this paper, the author has analyzed the reasons behind the ethnic militancy of the Sikhs by using a historical and evaluative approach. In this decade of global conflict, first with the Russia-Ukraine war and then with the Israel-Hamas conflict, this paper may make the readers think if the issue of Khalistan will transform from a domestic conflict to a global one..

2. Statement of the Problem

A statement of the problem, or the problem statement is the most crucial part of any research as it defines the ‘problem’ in need of study. Having a problem statement clearly highlights the main issue dealt by the research to the readers. While the title and introduction sheds light on the issues being studied, this section aims to define the research problem concretely and elaborate the reasons behind the significance of this particular problem over others and the urgent need for a solution.

India has forever been a land of multiple ethnicity. The motto ‘unity in diversity’ is strictly embedded in Indians – right from childhood through educational textbooks and through diverse experiences as a result of different people of various communities living together in the same place. However, too often this motto is glorified, sensationalized and romanticized. Too often India faces the dark reality of multiplicity – differences leading to dissent, opposition and communal riots. Ethnic differences across the nation has cropped up ethnic militancy on multiple occasions, and Indian history is a testimony to this fact. While in most nations we find a line of division between the majority and the minority, India witnesses a divide between a majority and several minorities. The divide between the Hindus and the Mohammedans are the most publicized and therefore the conflict between the the Hindus and the Sikhs easily fade away from mainstream discourse.

The Sikhs, mainly the Khalistani elements within the Sikh community, have for long demanded for Khalistan, a separate state for the Sikhs. This has been a perennial issue in Indian politics, primarily since the 1980s. The primacy and urgency of this demand for Khalistan boiled to such a horrifying extent that it led to the brutal anti-Sikh massacre in India following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Although the Indian government improved on its response to the riots in 1984 in the future and managed to address the grievances of the Sikhs in India, calls for Khalistan still emerge like in the case of Amrit Pal Singh in 2022, who was being considered as Bhindranwale 2.0. While Amrit Pal is still in prison, he had contested the 2024 elections as a Member of Parliament candidate and won. This highlights the depth of emotions still residing inside the Sikhs, and we may not be wrong to assume that such emotions may once again turn violent and erupt into another massacre.

The world today is a global one – domestic issues become relevant on a global scale. The same logic is applicable to the issue of Khalistan, which has already manifested into reality. The Sikh diaspora is one of the largest and prominent groups of Indian origin at a global scale. Huge populations of Sikhs have not only settled but have also become citizens in nations like the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia. The Sikhs have over time economically established themselves in these nations and now enjoy political leverage which can be used to put pressure on their government to take steps against any policy of India that might hurt the Sikh, better said, the Khalistani sentiments. This is evident from Canada’s recent changes in policy towards India. Diplomatic relations turned sour in September 2023 when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alleged India to be involved in the murder of pro-Khalistani leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey. The relations between India and Canada further

deteriorated when both sides expelled a top diplomat. On September 21st, India suspended visa applications from Canadians until further notice.

The Khalistan issue has the potential of disrupting India's international relations by tarnishing India's image and subjecting India to global pressure. The persisting Khalistan issue not only threatens India's internal security and communal harmony but also long-term impact on India's foreign policy and international standing. Negative image of India on a global scale can affect strategic alliances and disrupt economic relations. Foreign investments, trade partnerships and collaborative international projects can be affected vehemently. Thus, it is the need of the hour to address the Khalistan problem by identifying and analyzing the demands and grievances of the Sikhs. The aim of this research, however, is not to provide a direct solution to the Khalistan, but provide a road that leads to a solution. This paper seeks to, in concrete terms, state the background reasons for the Khalistan movement, diving into its origins, evolution and potential trajectories. Through an examination of these aspects, this research will try to highlight the complex nature of the issue and the need for further in-depth research.

3. Methodology

This study has employed a historical-evaluative approach to understand the formation of Sikh identity and thereby the reasons behind the rise of the movement for Khalistan by extensively examining secondary sources of data. The study tracks the trajectory of Sikh militancy, emergence of separatist elements and the impact of the movement on not only India's socio-political dynamics but also her international relations. Through critical interpretations of historical events and influences of culture, the study has aimed to contextualize grievances of the Sikh community and the rise of separatist sentiments which are still alive. Furthermore, the study on one hand draws on qualitative data to evaluate the negative influences of British colonial policies and religious identity, while on the other hand analyzes the contemporary developments in relation to the revival of the Khalistani movement in India and its impact on Indo-Canada relations and the applicability of international laws to the situation. The methodology employed thereby enables a multi-layered understanding of the interplay between religious identity and separatism.

4. Literature Review

Conducting a thorough review of literature is an essential ingredient in writing a research paper. Without a thorough literature review, it is difficult to gain a holistic understanding of existing stock of knowledge on the issue, barring which the articulation of a relevant research gap becomes unattainable. For this research, a thorough analysis of several research works within the domain have been conducted to gain a wholesome understanding of the issue at hand. Grewal (2008) has explored how the colonial policies during the British Raj in India has fostered a martial identity among the Sikh community, highlighting their distinctive cultural traits. Although this identity was reshaped after independence, it still remained the cornerstone of Sikhism, fuelling separatist aspirations even today. Jetly (2008) elaborated on the British Raj's impact on Hindu-Sikh relations, which saw apparent biases in not only in administrative positions and but also in legislative representation, thereby contributing to rising grievances amongst the Sikhs even in the post-colonial period. Malik (1986) studied the impact of the Sikhs in party politics in post-independent India, elaborating on the rise of the Akali Dal and the challenges faced in a multi-party system. From the perspective of democracy, despite political representation for the Sikhs, the Akali Dal failed to its own internal factionalism, leading to chaos which allowed the rise of extremists. Guha (2015) and Cibotti (2017) analyze the resultant response from the government in the form of brutal military action, leading to the desecration of their holy shrine. The events that followed included the horrific anti-Sikh violence, further deepening the identity crisis and leading to a long-term diaspora-led activism.

5. Discussion

5.1. Who are the Sikhs?

Sikhism was born in northern India during the fifteenth century. Founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sikhism is quite different from Hinduism and Islam, the two major dominant religions in India. The word 'Sikh' in literal translation means 'disciple'. The followers and disciples of Guru Nanak Dev ji are called Sikhs. Currently, there are about 24 million Sikhs globally, with a majority of them residing in the Indian state of Punjab. Guru Nanak was born in 1469 in Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib), in the state of Punjab (now in Pakistan). Born to Hindu parents, Guru Nanak at the age of thirty is said to have been enlightened by God while taking his daily bath in the

river. Thereafter, he gave away his possessions and started his life's work of preaching his spiritual lessons. He gained a community of disciples and settled down in a place called Kartarpur.

Both Islam and Hinduism have influenced Sikhism but this does not necessarily state that Sikhism is a mere combination of Hinduism and Islam. Although Guru Nanak incorporated the positive aspects of both Hinduism and Islam in Sikhism, Sikhism is not a compilation of Hinduism and Islam. Guru Nanak was a spiritual thinker and his ideas were presented in a poetry style which can be found in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs. Guru Nanak was a rebel from a young age, which we come to know from a famous story. At the age of 11, Guru Nanak refused to wear the *janeu* (sacred white thread) which was customary for all Hindu boys to wear at that age. Guru Nanak questioned local Islamic clerics and Hindu priests and stressed internal change rather than external appearances.

Guru Nanak was followed by nine other Sikh Gurus. They tried to do away with evil Hindu customs such as Sati and the caste system. Sikhism preaches equal rights to all with no discrimination. It does not have a clergy class as it is considered to be the breeding ground for corruption. The tenth and the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh proclaimed that after his demise, the Guru Granth Sahib would become the Guru of Sikhs and lead the way forward. Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs, was written in the Gurumukhi script. It includes not only the writings of the Sikh Gurus but also the writings of Muslim and Hindu saints.

During Guru Gobind Singh's term, Punjab was under the reign of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb was intolerant towards non-Muslims and that included the Sikhs too. Some Sikh Gurus had been executed by the Mughals. To defend themselves from the brutality of the Mughal Empire, Guru Gobind Singh decided to transform the Sikhs into a community of fighters. He changed his surname to 'Singh', which means 'lion'. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh assembled his followers in Anandpur, Punjab. He stood in front of a gathering of over 80,000, flashed his naked sword, and demanded a head. Five Sikhs volunteered, and the Guru initiated these five in the new order of the Khalsa. On this day, the Guru gave the Sikhs a unique identity, which includes uncut hair (*kesh*), a small comb for the hair (*kanghi*), a steel bracelet (*kada*), a sword (*kirpan*), and knee-length breeches (*kaccha*).

5.2. Sikh Identity during the British Raj

In post-independent India, Sikhs constituted around two percent of the total Indian population and are thereby regarded as a small minority group. Most Sikhs in India live in the northwestern state of Punjab. During the British Raj era, the Sikhs had initially proven their loyalty as members of the British Indian Army. However, the 1919 Rowlatt Act enabled the colonial government to imprison people without trial to maintain order, causing discord in the Sikh-British relationship. In response to protests, the British government committed heinous crimes at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre on April 13th, 1919. Salt was further sprinkled on the wounded Sikh sentiments when the Government of India Act of 1919 gave the Sikhs out of 93 only 15 seats in the Punjab Legislative Council (Jetly, 2008).

The Sikh community had been an integral part of India's struggle for independence from the British Raj. When the Simon Commission report was published in June 1930, retaining communal reservations and electorates, the Sikh leaders rejected it. Sikh leaders were also strongly opposed to the Communal Award. The Akali leaders were displeased with the Indian National Congress's indifference when the Muslim League at Lahore passed the Pakistan Resolution in March 1940. The All-India Akali Conference rejected the Pakistan Resolution. Dr. V.S. Bhatti of Ludhiana published a pamphlet demanding 'Khalistan' as a buffer state between India and Pakistan. The ideas of Khalistan were meant to merely oppose the idea of Pakistan (Grewal, 2008).

The elections of 1946 made it clear that the idea of Pakistan would eventually become a reality. The issue of the Sikh community was presented to the Cabinet Mission by Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, Harnam Singh, and Baldev Singh. They all opposed the creation of Pakistan but if Pakistan was indeed to be created, they wanted a separate state for Sikhs. Later on, the Sikh leaders eventually agreed to both the interim and long-term proposals. The Congress Working Committee passed a resolution that assured the Sikhs of removing all possible grievances to secure the protection of their interests in Punjab (Grewal, 2008). Baldev Singh joined the interim government as its Defence Minister.

The Akalis were able to convince Congress that the best way to safeguard Sikh interests was to divide the province of Punjab into two units. In its meeting on March 5, the Congress Working Committee decided that to divide the province into two parts – a predominantly Muslim area and a predominantly non-Muslim area so as to avoid compulsion of any section. This resolution had a hugely reassuring effect on Punjab's Hindus and Sikhs. The Akalis and the Congress were to take as much territory as they could from the British province of Punjab for the Indian Union's East Punjab. As could be expected, all of Punjab's non-Muslim legislators voted for the Indian Union (Grewal, 2008).

5.3. Demands for Separate Statehood

Although the Sikh leaders fought for the creation of a separate state for the Sikhs, their efforts did not bear any fruits. Their failure can be attributed to two major reasons. Firstly, the Sikh leaders did not enjoy the levels of political advantage that were enjoyed by the Muslim League, which had successfully demanded the creation of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. While the Muslim community comprised around 90,000,000 Muslims at that time, the Sikh community consisted of only 5,500,000 Sikhs (Jetly, 2008). Secondly, the Sikhs were not concentrated in any particular area; they were widely distributed and hence it was difficult to carve out a separate state for them. Therefore, the Sikhs had no option but to agree to the partition of Punjab in 1947, which led to the Muslim-dominated western districts of the state becoming a part of Pakistan and the Sikh-Hindu-dominated eastern districts becoming a part of India.

The partition of Punjab did not end the demand for a separate state by some Sikh groups, as can be seen from the demand for Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) in 1948 (Jetly, 2008). The Indian government was reluctant to agree to the creation of a new state based on religion. However, in 1966, the Indian government divided Punjab on linguistic grounds into Punjab (Sikh majority and Punjabi speakers) and Haryana (Hindu majority and Hindi speakers). This move by the Indian government was still not enough to meet the demands and aspirations of the Sikh community.

5.4. Party Politics

Party politics in a multi-party system is inherently contentious in nature. Post-independent Punjab saw an intensification in the rivalry between the Indian National Congress and the Akali Dal. Although both these parties alternately shared power in Punjab, what hurt the Akali Dal was that despite representing the culture and religion of the Sikhs, the Akali Dal never enjoyed the full support of the Sikh community. While the Akali Dal was backed by only some sections of urban Sikhs and the Jat Sikhs, the Congress enjoyed the support of the Hindus, SCs, and some segments of the rural Sikhs (Jetly, 2008). Political parties in India are major of two types – all-India parties and regional parties. All-India parties like the Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party enjoy the support of different sections of society and contest elections across state borders. Regional parties, on the other hand, represent specific regions on the basis of language or culture. Examples include the DMK in Tamil Nadu and Telegu Desam in Andhra Pradesh. The Akali Dal, however, did not conform to either of these two categories. The Akali Dal is closer to the category of a regional party but it can be described more precisely as a particularistic political party (Malik, 1986). It claimed to represent only the interest of the Sikh community residing in Punjab. For several reasons, the Akali Dal had been unable to capture power alone in Punjab until 1985. As per the census of 1970, the population of Punjab comprised 60% Sikhs while the other 40% consisted of Hindus and other non-Sikh communities. Due to the existing divisions in the Sikh community and the overall dominance of the Congress party, the Akali Dal was unable to secure a majority in the elections. The Sikh community is not only divided on the basis of their caste and class but also on the basis of their area of residence – rural and urban (Malik, 1986). The rural Sikhs are further divided into *Jat* Sikhs and scheduled caste Sikhs. The *Jat* Sikhs are the landowning class who suffer from severe factionalism. Although the Akali Dal enjoyed the support of mostly the *Jat* Sikhs, the Congress and the other parties operating in Punjab enjoyed the support from scheduled caste Sikhs, Hindus, and other non-Sikh electorates. This forced the Akali Dal into a minority position in Punjab even though they claimed to represent the interests of the Sikhs. This also encouraged a rise in the politics of defection in the state. When an opportunity arose, ambitious Akali Dal politicians switched parties for personal gain. The Congress party was in a position to induce defections and further weaken the Akali Dal's position in the state. Under Gurnam Singh's leadership, for example, the Akali party managed to build an alliance with Jana Sangh and keep the Congress party out of power in Punjab in 1969. However, this alliance lasted shortly. The Congress party was able to bring down the Gurnam Singh government in a short period by exploiting the Akali Dal's internal divisions (Malik, 1986).

Following the end of the emergency in 1977, the Akali Dal won unprecedented electoral victories. It chose to ally with the Janata Party. The Akalis also obtained cabinet positions for their representatives in the Janata Party's central government. However, the Akali Dal was not able to maintain internal unity and fell victim to factional rivalries. The organizational wing of the party, led by Jagdev Singh Talwandi aimed to subordinate the state government to the authority of the Akal Takhat, which was the supreme religious authority of the Sikhs. Even though the chief minister Prakash Singh Badal was able to keep the Punjab government away from the dictates of the Akal Takhat, he was forced to request the support of priests of the Golden Temple. The support of religious authorities to solve intraparty disputes tarnished the image of the party. It showed the people that the Akali Dal was not able to rise above their sectarian base.

The Akali Dal was forced out of power in the elections of 1980. Whenever forced into the position of opposition in the state legislative assembly, the Akali Dal resorted to street politics to stay relevant in the eyes of the public. Within a year of their electoral defeat in 1980, the Akali Dal presented a list of demands and threatened to launch

a mass protest if the demands were not met. The demands could be categorized as political, economic, religious, and territorial. Under political demands, the Akali Dal sought to reframe Centre-state relations as was originally demanded in the Anandpur-Sahib Resolution of 1973. The aim here was to limit the Centre's ambit of powers only to the areas of currency, foreign affairs, defense, and communications. They wanted a transfer of all other powers to the state government of Punjab along with the right to frame their own Constitution. They also wanted Sikhs to be recognized as a *kaum* and not a religious community. The territorial demands included a redrawing of the borders of Punjab which meant a transfer of all Punjabi-speaking regions of the bordering states to Punjab.

5.5. The Rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale

The three major factions within the Akali Dal during this period were the moderates, the separatists, and the extremists. For our discussion in this paper, we need to focus more on this extremist faction which leads us directly to the Khalistan movement of the 1980s. Although the smallest faction among the three, the extremists were the most aggressive in their demands and approach. Under the charismatic leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, they demanded secession with the aim to establish a separate and sovereign nation for the Sikhs. For them, the recognition of a Sikh nation as declared in the 1973 Anandpur-Sahib Resolution was one of, if not the most important demands.

Although the Sikh Gurus praised the image of Sikhs as fighters, it was the Britishers who had planted the martial image as a part of Sikhs' inherent nature. This label has been imbedded into the Sikh mindset and Bhindranwale repackaged it in the 1980s. What non-Sikhs view as militant, for Sikhs it is holy. 'Holy' does not simply refer to prayers and festivals and rituals but it also meant the destruction of evil. For Bhindranwale, the evil in front of the Sikhs was the Indian central government. He wanted Sikhs to follow in the footsteps of Guru Gobind Singh. His speeches cannot be compared to that of any ordinary preacher (Cibotti, 2017). On hearing his speeches, one could feel the tenseness in his voice. His energy could be compared to someone who leads a rally, not a religious gathering. He demanded that the Anandpur Sahib Resolution be implemented in its entirety and that those who opposed it be executed.

When the All-India Sikh Students' Federation, Bhindranwale's ally, attempted to ban tobacco sales in Amritsar, Hindu merchants protested. Bhindranwale retaliated by marching with 20,000 armed Sikhs through Amritsar two days later in search of the protesting Hindus. Upon realizing that Bhindranwale was on the hunt, the protestors dispersed immediately. Bhindranwale projected a militant image by wearing a belt of bullets around his upper torso. He would appear in the temple with heavily armed Sikhs whenever reporters needed pictures, seizing every opportunity for camera time. The most memorable photo opportunity occurred during a 1981 visit to Delhi when he arrived on a bus literally filled with armed Sikhs. The visit, as well as the photos of it, made headlines. He was well-known for his all-white robe and turban tied in the Nihang Khalsa (warrior) Sikhs' *Dumalla* style. The silver arrow he frequently held during public appearances was perhaps the most theatrical prop of Bhindranwale's image. The silver arrow represents Guru Gobind Singh, a great archer. Gobind Singh is also the Sikh guru most associated with justified violence. Bhindranwale's subliminal message to his supporters and opponents was clear: Punjabi Sikhs were ready to fight for autonomy (Cibotti, 2017).

Bhindranwale was born into a *Jat* Sikh family. Not only was he an effective communicator but he also had deep knowledge and understanding of the Sikh scriptures. He was of the opinion that the Sikhs had been relegated to the position of slaves in post-independent India. The Hindus were corrupt in their ways and consistently discriminated against the Sikhs. He called for a purification of the Sikhs in order to return to the core of their faith. Bhindranwale's attacks were not only directed at the Hindus but also toward the modernized Sikhs (Guha, 2015). But how is it that Bhindranwale rose to such heights? How was it that a communal leader became such a thorn in the road for the Indian government? It is said that Bhindranwale was propped up by the then Union Home Minister Zail Singh and Sanjay Gandhi, the son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Hiding behind the theatrics of Bhindranwale, the Central Government was able to disrupt the Akali Dal's influence in Punjab.

The error made by the Centre was their belief that Bhindranwale could be controlled. He soon demonstrated his independent style of leadership backed by his charisma. As mentioned earlier, the Akali Dal's defeat in the elections 1980 was a blow to Sikh pride. In response, a group of students in June of the same year met at Golden Temple and proclaimed the formation of a separate and independent Sikh republic. The republic was named 'Khalistan' and simultaneous proclamations were made in the UK, Canada, the US, and France. During these initial days of the demand for Khalistan, the Central government was not concerned. Their immediate attention was on the Akali Dal and their politics of street protests.

5.6. The Khalistan Movement of 1980s

In April 1980, Bhindranwale was under suspicion for the assassination of Baba Gurcharan Singh, a Nirankari leader. He was shot dead in New Delhi. Even though Bhindranwale was under suspicion for this assassination, no action was initiated against him. In September of 1981, Lala Jagat Narain was murdered. Narain was an editor who strongly criticized Sikh extremism. This time a warrant was out for the arrest of Bhindranwale but when the

police went to pick him up from a gurudwara in Haryana, Bhindranwale had already fled. Bhindranwale declared that he would turn himself in, but only at his convenience and only if the arresting officers were bearded Sikhs. Surprisingly, the Punjab government agreed to these degrading terms. Two weeks after the murder, Bhindranwale turned himself in amidst a crowd of his supporters who were chanting slogans and even hurled stones at the police. In other areas of Punjab, supporters of Bhindranwale attacked government properties. The police retaliated by firing on them, and it was reported that at least a dozen people died in the ensuing violence.

Bhindranwale's arrest did not signify a win for the government. Firstly, he had willingly turned himself in on his own terms. He made a public show of his arrest and everyone got to see the kind of support he enjoyed from his followers. Secondly, he was released from jail three weeks after his arrest due to a lack of evidence against him concerning the murder. Bhindranwale was now viewed as a Sikh hero, someone who had challenged and won against the government. In 1982, there were several negotiations between the Akali Dal and the Central government. No agreements were reached and on January 26th, 1983, several legislators from the Akali Dal in the state legislative assembly resigned. Bhindranwale's rising popularity forced the Akali Dal to take drastic steps. The fact that the resignations were made on January 26th signified their fight against the Indian Constitution. Comparisons were made between the then Congress rule with that of the Mughals. The Akali Dal started organizing *shaheed jathas* to fight anyone who tormented the Sikhs.

On April 22nd, 1983, A.S. Atwal, a high-ranking Sikh policeman was killed as he was leaving the premises of Golden Temple. This was followed by several bank robberies in the state. Many sections of the Hindu minority population in Punjab began to flee the state in fear. Bhindranwale described the Sikhs as a separate kaum. He did not ask for Khalistan but if offered, he would not refuse it. He mocked the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi by calling her '*panditain*', which meant daughter of a Brahmin. When asked if he would meet Indira Gandhi, he declared that he did not intend to but if the Prime Minister wanted to, she can come to Punjab. This clearly highlights the high pedestal that Bhindranwale had put himself on. He had no filters on during his speeches to his followers. He reminded them of Sikh heroism of the past and asked them to smash their heads if the Hindus came looking for them.

On October 5th, 1983, terrorists stopped a bus on highway, plucked out the Hindu passengers and shot them. The very next day, Presidents' Rule was implemented in the Punjab. By the end of 1983, Bhindranwale moved into the Akal Takht, which was building of great religious importance, second only to the Golden temple in Amritsar. Bhindranwale residing in the Akal takht had great symbolic significance as it was from the Akal Takht that the great Sikh Gurus of the past issued their orders, and it was here that Sikh warriors came seeking blessings before launching their attacks on oppressors. The attacks on Hindu population in Punjab kept rising and by 1984, communal violence in Punjab had reached new heights. On April 30th, 1984, a senior Sikh police official was murdered. On May 12th, Ramesh Chander, the son of editor Lala Jagat Narain was murdered. Meanwhile, Bhindranwale and his armed supporters began the fortification of the Golden Temple.

It is clear that Bhindranwale continued his aggressive approach without any fear. He knew there would be retaliation but he must have been confident about his defensive capabilities. The militants had laid sandbags on turrets and occupied high-rise buildings around the temple complex. The men guarding from these high-rise buildings were in constant wireless contact with Akal takht. The temple premises were stocked with enough food to survive on for a month. An attack by governmental forces were expected and defenses were prepared to drag out the confrontation long enough to rile up the sentiments of the Sikh population.

5.6.1. Operation Blue Star

On May 31st, Major General R.S. Brar was summoned from Meerut to lead an operation to forcibly remove the terrorists occupying the Golden Temple. This was due to the fact that the Central government believed that the situation in Punjab had passed out of control. Neither did the Centre's negotiations with the Akali Dal nor did the Akali Dal's requests to Bhindranwale to leave the temple bear any fruits. Although a siege was considered, it was later rejected because the government feared a rebellion amongst the common masses. Therefore, the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi decided that the militants had to be 'flushed out' from the Golden Temple. The Operation was codenamed 'Operation Bluestar' with an aim to complete the objective within two days, with no damage to the Golden temple and with minimum loss of life.

On June 2nd, a young Sikh officer entered the temple premises disguised as a pilgrim. He spent an hour checking out the defensive positions set up by the terrorists inside the temple. On June 3rd, all roads, rail lines and telephone

communication was cut off. The very next day, the army began its assault by targeting the high-rise buildings and towers occupied by the militants. Pilgrims inside the temple were asked to leave via announcements on loudspeakers. The attack on the temple itself began on the night of June 5th. However, there was a miscalculation on Major General Brar's part. He had expected to take control of the surrounding areas of the temple by midnight, after which the army could move in and clear out the Akal Takht by morning next day. Major General Brar severely underestimated the intensity of resistance that awaited him. The number of militants inside the temple, their firepower and their willpower was unprecedented. Each window in the Akal Takht was boarded up. Small cracks were left open for snipers to peek out their rifles and fire from within. The remaining militants inside the temple were armed with grenades and machine guns. With their knowledge of the hallways and corridors inside the temple, these militants were scattered all around, waiting to launch a surprise attack on the incoming troops. Such intense defense by the militants disrupted Major General Brar's plan. Finally, on receiving permission from New Delhi, army tanks were deployed. By dawn, around five to thirteen tanks broke through the temple gates and positioned themselves to fire on the Akal Takht (Guha, 2015). Throughout the day, the tanks continued their assault and by evening it was assumed safe to send in the troops to clear out any remaining militants. The bodies of Shubeg Singh, Bhindranwale and his follower Amrik Singh were found in the basement. Official government reports stated the death toll at 492 terrorists, 4 officers and 79 soldiers. But it is safe to assume that the actual number of deaths could have been more than what the government was willing to divulge to the public.

5.6.2. Backlash

Operation BlueStar severely hurt Sikh sentiments. Battle and bloodshed in the most holy shrine of the Sikhs was unacceptable to the Sikh community in general. The military had become a tool to solve a problem created by the government itself. Both sides shared the blame. On one hand, the moderate Akali leadership lost control of the situation which allowed the extremists led by Bhindranwale to turn the Golden Temple into an armed fortress. On the other hand, the decision of the central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to use the military to flush out the terrorists from the Golden Temple, virtually turning it into a bloodbath alienated the entire Sikh community in general.

Religion has a special significance in India. India herself has been the birthplace of major religions of the world. Not only that, but India has also catered for and accommodated with the entry of alien religions into her lands. Religion is a core value of the people of India. As Marx put it, religion is indeed the opium of the masses. Indians have suffered under the hands of exploitation by foreign invaders for over a millennia. The last Empire to exploit us, the British Raj, left us bare naked economically. After a lengthy struggle, India got her independence in 1947 but we had very little to move forward it. Added to that, foreign elites were replaced by native elites who now took charge of the exploitation, making the poor even poorer. In such times of hardship, it is religion that provides people with faith and support. Therefore, religion becomes both a tool of unity and chaos.

The religious sentiments of the Sikhs were hurt by the bloodbath at Golden Temple as a result of Operation BlueStar. But no one could have anticipated the intensity of retaliation that was about to be dished out. On October 31st, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own two Sikh bodyguards. And what followed was a series of violence all over India against the Sikh population. According to one report presented on the floor of the Rajya Sabha by the then Home Minister, an estimated 2146 Sikhs were murdered in November in Delhi alone. 586 Sikhs were killed in other parts of India in the same period. The first Sikh Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh in his parliamentary speech on August 12th, 2005 publicly apologized for the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. He stated that even though the Home Minister was warned of the impending dangers, no military action was taken to prevent the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.

6. Recent Developments

The legacy of Bhindranwale's martyrdom continues to have an impact on the Sikh community and has the potential to inspire future generations. The recent rise of Amritpal Singh Sandhu in 2023, who garnered national attention and was dubbed as Bhindranwale 2.0, exemplifies this phenomenon. However, it remains uncertain whether Sandhu's emergence will lead to a Khalistan Movement 2.0. Presently, Sandhu is incarcerated due to his involvement in anti-national activities.

Notably, Sandhu rapidly gained prominence by utilizing social media platforms to propagate his ideals, reminiscent of Bhindranwale's style. These incidents were short-lived, and although they evoked memories of the

1980s violence, it is too early to ascertain if they were indicative of a sustained movement. Limited scholarly research exists on this particular issue, with most available materials derived from news articles documenting Sandhu's rise and subsequent suspension.

Nevertheless, the ability of Sandhu to incite Sikh sentiments within a brief period and disrupt the state government highlights the influence wielded by religious fundamentalists in the contemporary era. The incident underscores the potency of such individuals to rally support and create social chaos. Further scholarly examination is required to comprehensively analyze the underlying factors and implications of Sandhu's rise, as well as its potential ramifications for Sikh politics and the wider socio-political landscape.

The rapid mobilization of Sikh sentiments by Sandhu serves as a testament to the enduring power of religious figures and highlights the need for continued research into the complex dynamics surrounding the Khalistan movement and its contemporary manifestations.

7. International Law in the context of Indo-Canada Relations

The discourse surrounding international law in relation to the tensions between India and Canada regarding the Khalistan movement predominantly addresses issues such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-intervention principles, terrorism, extraterritorial jurisdiction, and the rights of the diaspora. The Khalistan movement, advocating for an autonomous Sikh state within the Punjab region of India, has significantly influenced both domestic and international relations, especially in relation to Canada's substantial Sikh diaspora.

7.1. Sovereignty and Non-Interference

State sovereignty is a basic concept of international law that holds that a country has the power to conduct its own affairs without intervention from others. This principle is enshrined in the UN Charter (Article 2(7)) and acknowledged within the framework of international customary law. From this perspective, it perceives external support for the movement, including assistance from Canada, as an intrusion into its domestic affairs. Canada upholds its sovereignty and respects the right to freedom of expression and assembly, as long as these activities are conducted in compliance with the law. In Canada, pro-Khalistan action is often seen as a valid manifestation of political convictions that are protected by Canadian law. India believes that Canada's actions in favour of Khalistan violate the non-interference principle. India has persistently articulated its concerns regarding the lack of control over these activities, which it contends contribute to the perpetuation of violence and terrorism.

7.2. Legal Frameworks governing Cross-Border Terrorism

International law mandates that nations take action to stop the funding, planning, and encouragement of terrorism inside their borders, especially via UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions on the subject, such Resolutions 1373 and 1540. International law mandates that nations take action to stop the funding, planning, and encouragement of terrorism inside their borders, especially via UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions on the subject, such Resolutions 1373 and 1540. In accordance with the 1987 Extradition Treaty with Canada, India has asked for the extradition of those it suspects are engaged in terrorism. This problem is worsened by the fact that Canadian law's due process obligations, in addition to the increased burden of evidence for political offences or actions, often lead to delays or rejections.

7.3. Freedom of Expression and Diaspora Rights

International law recognises the entitlements of diaspora communities, encompassing their right to articulate their thoughts and opinions without restraint. Under its rules protecting free speech, Canada, which has a sizable Sikh minority, allows people to support political groups like the Khalistan movement as long as they don't incite violence or violate any other laws. . The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) represents a significant agreement to which both Canada and India are signatories. It upholds the principle of freedom of expression as articulated in Article 19, alongside the entitlement to peaceful assembly as delineated in Article 21. As long as they don't promote violence, such remarks are allowed under Canadian law. In contrast, India believes that the Khalistan movement is inherently linked to terrorism and bloodshed. It often cites international counterterrorism frameworks to support its claim that allowing such operations is a violation of Canada's obligations under international law to fight terrorism.

7.3. Mechanisms of International Dispute Resolution

There are many ways to settle conflicts between nations under international law, most often via mediation, diplomacy, or by going to international organisations like the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, the first line of action to address these tensions is often diplomatic initiatives between nations. India and Canada's relationship has had many difficulties as a consequence of their divergent views on the Khalistan question, which has caused diplomatic tensions. While Canada insists it must strike a balance between its domestic laws and its international obligations, India has often voiced its concerns in diplomatic conversations and used bilateral channels to pressure Canada to act. International legal frameworks, including the ICJ and the UN, may be employed when both nations perceive a breach of international law. Nonetheless, due to the delicate nature of political considerations and the strong focus on national sovereignty, such cases rarely reach the jurisdiction of international courts.

8. Conclusion

The dissolution of Yugoslavia, Kosovo's separation from Serbia, Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan, the Aland Island Case, the Katangese Peoples' Congress versus Zaire, Kevin Ngwanga Gumne et al. versus Cameroon, Reference Re: Secession of Quebec and other notable court decisions, state practice, and *opinio juris* in relation to secession are some examples. From the aforementioned examples, it is reasonable to say that territorial integrity is the norm and secession is the exception. Secession may only be deemed lawful if both the severe violation of human rights and the absence of internal self-determination are satisfied.

The aforementioned test cases must be used as a guide to determine if Punjabis or Sikhs have or lack self-determination. For example, Sir Noel Malcolm, an English political journalist, historian, and scholar, provided the following summary of the situation in Kosovo: Every facet of Kosovo life has been impacted. The vast majority of Albanians who held any kind of state work in 1990 were fired by the Serb authorities using a mix of emergency measures, administrative decrees, and regulations that permitted the firing of anybody who had participated in a one-day protest strike. The majority of Albanian medical professionals were also fired from hospitals; since fewer Albanians were vaccinated, the incidence of fatalities from polio and measles has risen.

In 1990, some 6,000 teachers were fired for participating in demonstrations, and the remaining instructors were fired for refusing to follow a new Serbian curriculum that essentially stopped teaching Albanian history and literature. People who called for independence faced discrimination not just de facto but also de jure—that is, by codified laws and state policies—even in Bangladesh and the other test cases.

One cannot assert that the same holds true for the Sikhs or Punjabis. Indeed, several methods have been implemented to guarantee internal self-determination in Punjab, as outlined below:

The Punjab Reorganization Act of 1966 established a distinct state primarily for Punjabi speakers, ensuring the protection of cultural and linguistic rights for Sikhs within a legal framework. Sikhs are not barred from holding public office; indeed, two individuals from the Sikh community have ascended to the highest positions in India, namely the roles of President and Prime Minister. Punjab contributes a substantial portion to the nation's Gross Domestic Product, and its residents experience a standard of living that is comparatively elevated relative to the average Indian. Individuals of Punjabi descent have a notable presence within the Armed Forces.

Regarding the additional criterion of gross human rights violations, it is important to acknowledge that while instances of such violations are present in Punjab, as they are in other regions of India, the critical factor to consider is whether there exists a systematic and institutionalized pattern of abuse directed specifically at Sikhs or Punjabis as a distinct ethnic or identifiable group.

In a society that prides itself on civility, the tolerance of human rights violations is utterly unacceptable; indeed, even a solitary occurrence of such abuse is excessive. The region of Punjab experienced a profoundly distressing era from the late seventies to the mid-nineties, marked by the deeply sorrowful anti-Sikh riots of 1984, which remain a source of national shame. Nonetheless, the criteria established by the test cases within the framework of international law necessitate that the violation of human rights be entrenched and aimed specifically at the targeted group. In our assessment, this does not hold true for Sikhs in India.

References

- [1] Cibotti, J. P. (2017). *Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale: A Charismatic Authority and His Ideology*. Retrieved from FIU Digital Commons: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4197&context=etd>
- [2] Grewal, J. (2008). *The Sikhs of Punjab*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Guha, R. (2015). *The Bhindranwale cult: How politics allowed an obscure preacher to challenge Indian democracy*. Retrieved from Scroll.in: <https://scroll.in/article/732426/the-bhindranwale-cult-how-politics-allowed-an-obscure-preacher-to-challenge-indian-democracy>
- [4] Jetly, R. (2008). The Khalistan Movement in India: The Interplay of Politics and State Power. *International Review of Modern Sociology*, Spring 2008, Vol. 34, No. 1, 61-75.
- [5] Malik, Y. K. (1986). The Akali Party and Sikh Militancy: Move for Greater Autonomy or Secessionism in Punjab? *Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 345-362.