

Punjab:



Spokesmen of both East and West decried this summer's events at the Golden Temple and the subsequent assassination of Indira Gandhi as products of "the mindless zealotry of a religious fanaticism which is abhorrent to the modern civilised mind"—and especially abhorrent to these gentlemen who virtually frothed in fury at photographs of

Sikhs holding high their swords in celebration of Gandhi's death. But it is really the rebellion of the masses that terrifies the "civilised" reactionary mind.

In the hundreds of years of colonialist and imperialist plunder of India these gentlemen have mastered the art of encouraging and accentuating national, class, caste and other divisions in India in order to subjugate its peoples and carry out their strategy of "Divide et Impere." Today all reactionary forces present in India are manoeuvring once

again to turn the situation to their own advantage and they are keeping their predatory eyes alert for any opportunity to sink their fangs more deeply into India. Yet they are even more gravely concerned that these very antagonisms that they have nurtured and reinforced are now exploding in their faces. The hallowed peace of India is giving way to rebellions that are hammering at the central state and creating favourable new terrain for the revolutionary struggle of the masses. -ed.

Genesis of a Rebellion

Oh Lord, these boons of Thee I ask,
Let me never shun a righteous task;
Let me be fearless when I go to battle;
Give me faith that victory will be
mine,

Give me power to sing Thy praise;
And when comes the time to end my
life

Let me fall in mighty strife.

—Guru Gobind Singh
(1666-1708)

By **K. Chittaranjam***

Punjab, the land of five rivers, takes its name from the mighty Indus and its branches. The banks of these rivers were the cradle of the ancient Dravidian civilizations and later of the Aryan tribes. Today this fertile land is giving birth once again: this time to a swirl of chaotic rebellion which is shaking all of India and reverberating around the world. The force which these conflicts—today assuming a religious form—have assumed, and the potential for other forms of struggle, can only be understood by an examination of the development of the divisions cleaving India and the ways in which they have been fostered by and interacted with the colonial subjugation of the country. Punjab, today the soft underbelly of the Indian central state, is a case in point.

Pre-Colonial Punjab

The roots of the evolution of modern nationalities in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the Bhakti movements beginning almost a thousand years ago. These movements of religious protest against orthodoxy, religious persecution and caste oppression shook much of what is today India. The Bhakti poets and preachers came from the artisan and untouchable castes, and they sang in the language of the masses. In the course of the movement the role of

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Sanskrit as the acknowledged literary language was shattered and the evolution of different dialects into modern languages was initiated.

Somewhat later, in the early 16th century, even as the Bhakti movements continued to influence events, the Lodi empire in Delhi was battered by invasion as the Mughal army of Babur blazed a murderous trail in pursuit of power.¹ It was into this tumultuous period of war and religious upsurge that Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was born. As he sang, "The age is like a drawn knife, the kings are virtual butchers." Nanak drew heavily from the prophets and fakirs of the Bhakti movement, from both Hinduism and Islam, to found his faith.² As it spread, Sikhism came quickly into conflict with the Mughal overlords: from birth it battled for survival. In the 17th century, the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (male Sikhs conventionally take the name "Singh," which means lion) organised the Order of the Khalsa with the mission of wielding the sword in the cause of Sikhism. The Sikhs repeatedly sought to establish their own kingdom, only to be smashed and subjected to the medieval rule of the Mughals. It was through these protracted battles that the Sikhs gained their militant tradition with a host of religious martyrs.

Another key part of this process was the development of the language of Punjabi. Though it had existed both in its spoken form and in its literary form even before Guru Nanak used it to spread his gospel, its development into a modern language, along with the evolution of a distinct

Punjabi culture, can be marked by the advent of Sikhism.³

The development of modern nations in the Indian subcontinent definitely would not have been a linear progression from the Bhakti movements beginning almost a thousand years ago. Nevertheless the complex process begun during this period was abruptly interrupted through colonial intervention, which shored up and intensified religious and caste barriers and prevented their transformation.

Divide and Rule

After a long period of resistance, the Sikhs under Ranjit Singh finally succeeded in establishing a kingdom towards the end of the 18th century. It was short-lived indeed. By the middle of the 19th century, the British had invaded Punjab and established the United Punjab Province, which extended far beyond the borders of Ranjit Singh's kingdom. The Muslims, the largest group in this extended province, were mainly rural, as were the Sikhs; the Hindus, approximately 30 percent of the population, were based in the urban areas and were mainly merchants or petty traders.

The British took pains to maintain this pattern even as they restructured social relations to meet their own imperial needs. A series of irrigation works were constructed, and a new system of revenue collection was implemented which overturned traditional relations and converted land into a commodity. Through these and other measures Punjab was developed into a major grain producing area—but with the traditional divi-

sions intact. For example, as new land opened up, it was Sikh peasants who were steered towards it. From 1857 to 1893, nearly 12 lakhs (1,200,000) acres (485,600 hectares) of cultivated land were grabbed by usurers. In 1901 the British enacted the Land Alienation Act which regulated the sale of land and maintained the division between Sikhs in the country-side and Hindus in the urban areas. A few years later the British went a step further and set up separate communal electorates through the Minto-Morley reforms: one reason advanced was that the Muslims were about to rebel against their domination by "inferior" Hindu traders and money lenders. At the same time the colonialists adopted a conscious policy of recruiting rural Sikh males as cannonfodder for their imperialist army.⁴ One member of the colonial administration hypocritically recorded their achievement thusly: "Sikhs in the Indian Army had been studiously nationalised and encouraged to regard themselves as a totally distinct and separate nation, their national pride has been fostered by every possible means."⁵

The growth of communal organisations was fostered by British policy—but this growth was also related to the different class bases of the various religions and to the response in India to the invasion of the British and to their efforts to impose Christianity.⁶

Politics of Religious Reform

As early as the end of Ranjit Singh's rule itself, before the British invasion, movements for religious reform (such as the Nirankari and Namdhari movements) had sprung up among the Sikhs. The Namdhari movement soon developed into an anti-colonial movement and was brutally crushed by the British.⁷ Later movements, though less militant, gave birth to the first Punjabi newspaper as well as to the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a religious-cultural-political organisation which spearheaded a drive to establish educational institutions among the Sikhs as well as to challenge the British use of feudal priests to control the gurudwaras (the religious centres of the Sikhs).

World War I saw the growth of anti-British sentiment among the masses. This was spurred on by the

Hindustan Ghadar Party, which carried out anti-imperialist and anti-war propaganda and even led a revolt during the war.⁸ For their part, the religious heads called on the Sikhs to supply more recruits for the British, and they excommunicated the Ghadar revolutionaries. They stooped to their lowest though when they awarded a high honor of Sikhism (the Saropa) to the British General Dyer, the butcher of Jalianwala Bagh.⁹ Disgust with this servile crawling led to the powerful Gurudwara Reform Movement: stretching over several years, nearly five hundred people were martyred and countless others suffered imprisonment and torture.¹⁰ The Akali Dal was formed in the course of this movement and then in turn helped to lead it; another institution, the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), also arose to finally take over direction of the gurudwaras. As shall be seen, both of these organisations play a central role in the politics of Punjab.

A Divided Nation

Around 1939, at the beginning of World War 2, the British government started decolonisation maneuvers in India to shore up support among the different political forces there. The communal divisions they had fostered established the terrain on which this decolonisation was carried out. The Muslim League had advanced schemes for separating areas with a predominantly Muslim population.¹¹ In response the Akali Dal, which, while working with the Indian National Congress, had also remained a vehicle for the political-religious aspirations of the Sikhs, put forward the call for Azad Punjab. During the war the Akali leadership supported the British war effort, yet in 1942 they rejected the Cripps proposal of the British government on the grounds that, upon the proposed decolonisation of India, provinces would be given the right to separate.¹² Their fear was, as one of the Akali leaders put it, "If India were divided the Sikhs would come under the majority of one community or the other; in that case, they would prefer a separate independent Sikh state with the right to federate with Hindustan or Pakistan."¹³

But by war's end the die had already been cast. Despite the vehement opposition of the Akali Dal, British Punjab was divided in 1947 between Pakistan and India. In the communal holocaust whipped up in both countries thousands were killed and hundreds of thousands were uprooted from their land and sent hurtling into an unknown future as refugees. Estimates put the number of Muslims who fled to Pakistan at 65 lakhs (6,500,000) while an equal number of Hindus and Sikhs were forced into India. The majority of refugees who fled into East Punjab were Sikhs, out of which a big section were businessmen and traders. For more than a decade to come Akali politics was to be influenced by these sections desperately trying to build up a new economic base in competition with the established Hindu traders.

One of the immediate developments in Punjab after the Partition was the launching by Hindu communal organisations (such as the Arya Samaj), with the support of the new Indian ruling classes, of a conscious campaign to claim that there was no longer any basis for a separate religious existence for the Sikhs. Their argument was that Sikhism had developed to protect Hindu society from the Muslims and since the Muslims had been driven out (into Pakistan) the Sikhs were no longer needed!¹⁴ Hand in hand with this went a campaign to reject the Punjabi language and establish Hindi.¹⁵ On certain points the Akalis caved in completely. But in 1948, when they finally did advance a demand for communal safeguards and raised the prospect of a separate province, they met a storm of official denunciation and the charge that they were following in Pakistan's footsteps and fomenting communalism in "secular" India. This communalisation of the basic issues of the Punjabi nationality by India's new rulers was part of their effort to suppress national aspirations more generally. But it also had a particular target: the Sikhs, overwhelmingly concentrated in a homogenous territory along a sensitive border area and united by national ties, were a potentially serious threat to the ambitions of the new rulers.

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Punjabi Suba

Over the next years, an important battlefield between the Akali leadership and India's rulers centered on the establishment of a linguistic state of Punjab. Commissions appointed by the Congress Party, including one led by Nehru himself, conceded popular support for a Punjabi state, but repeatedly ruled against such a move. The Congress appealed to Hindi communal interests, even exaggerating census statistics on how many people in Punjab spoke Hindi, in order to secure its own base there. At the same time, it also sought to make use of caste contradictions among the Sikhs themselves, particularly between the rural Jat Sikhs (who comprised nearly 40% of the Sikhs) and the Dalit Mazhabis (the oppressed caste). In the 1950s, the Akali leadership tried to compromise by accepting a Congress proposal calling for the division of a reorganised Punjab into both Hindi-speaking and Punjabi-speaking regions; it even joined the Congress Party. Within a year, a new challenge from within forced the Akalis to withdraw and renew the call for a Punjabi state.

The new leadership, led by Sant Fatah Singh, took the Akalis away from their earlier position of identifying the Punjabi state with Sikh demands and posed the issue on a purely linguistic basis.¹⁶ This, together with a growing fear among Hindi communal forces that the Sikhs might try to separate completely, paved the way for swinging over substantial support from various Hindu forces.¹⁷ In 1967, the Akali came to power in a reorganised Punjab state in alliance with other political parties (including the pro-Moscow Communist Party of India).¹⁸

Even with the reins of power in their hands though, the Akalis swung wildly between their two self-conceived roles: first, being the "one exclusive manifestation of the corporate will of the Sikh community," and secondly, playing its strictly non-communal role in parliamentary politics. After coming to power, for instance, the Akalis dropped their insistence that Punjabi be the official

language. Such manoeuvres gave the Congress favorable terrain on which to operate: organising factions within the Akalis, they toppled the Akali Dal ministry and then proceeded to pose as better saviors of the Sikhs themselves (they even dispatched a senior minister on a world tour to publicise discrimination against the Sikhs!).¹⁹ Discontent with the Akali leadership soon developed into another major challenge, one which was to capture centre stage in Punjab politics.²⁰

A Package from the Ford Foundation

In 1953, a Ford Foundation team of experts submitted a report titled "India's Food Crisis and Steps to Meet It." The report was accepted without delay by the Nehru government. The fertile fields of Punjab were selected to launch the "Green Revolution." By the mid-70s almost the whole of Punjab had come under the sway of the new agricultural technology, and agricultural production more than doubled between 1960 and 1980. As a part of this transformation, irrigation, roads, railways, rural electrification and other infrastructural facilities developed at a phenomenal rate. Electric pumpsets, tractors and lately combine harvesters have changed the old mode of production. Punjab was transformed into a vast granary providing more than half of the total volume of foodgrains procured by the government. But the package did not stop there. Once the box was opened, a chain of interrelated developments unfolded, hurling back a far more intense crisis.

The boom sparked off by neocolonial transformation in Punjab challenged all traditional values and relationships.²¹ Capitalist development of agriculture had sundered all remnant ties. But the modernisation which took place was not the result of a thoroughgoing radical transformation which drew from the heritage of the land to give it a new content. What passed as modernisation was a thin veneer for degenerate comprador values, which only debased and vulgarised feudal values without touching their essential roots. Religion was not to be spared this metamorphosis. Among the peasantry Sikh religiosity and faith was replaced by ties of convenience and position. Among the

youth there was a drift away from religion itself.²² Alcoholism became rampant. The sprouting of religious preachers with their fiery calls to return to the faith was not far off.

At the economic level, the major gains were made by a rising section of capitalist farmers who, as far as caste was concerned, consisted of a section of the Jat Sikhs. Though the position of the Naghabhi Sikhs (mainly agricultural labourers) had improved slightly, especially in terms of loosening of caste relations, higher wages and mobility, they remained oppressed and exploited.

Prosperity generates its own contradictions. The spread of capitalist agricultural production led to a high degree of dependence on the market in the urban centres. There the capitalist farmer and the peasantry had to deal through commission agents (mainly Hindu traders) whose grip on the market structure was near total.²³ Though their economic position was improved, at the market they were fleeced by the agents in a double sense—at sowing time the agents distributed all the modern inputs needed by the peasants at credit and at harvest time they redeemed their advances with interest, thus ensuring that the peasants and farmers would come to them with their produce which could be bought up at lower prices. The capitalist farmers and rich peasants were more capable of resisting this snare through their ready access to cooperative and banking credit, but they were not totally free. As the effects of the oil crisis made themselves felt, prices of inputs such as fertilisers and diesel shot up, cutting into the profits of the agrarian classes. On the other hand, the control of the government over the food-grain market prevented a steep upward revision of prices for their products.

Moreover there was an inherent limit to this transformation. By the mid-70s the boom had tapered off. The annual growth rate in agriculture fell from 20% between 1970-1971 and 1973-1974 to around 12% between 1977-78 and 1980-81.²⁴ The limits of the new technology had been reached, and a massive dose of capital for soil improvement, water management and a higher degree of mechanisation were required to pull

out of the rut.

Among the capitalist farmers some had turned to agricultural trade—but the opportunities were limited. The possibility of accumulation had been cut short by the rise in input costs; the chances of spreading into the industrial sector were also limited. The industrial structure of Punjab reflects the distortions induced by neocolonialism. The number of large and medium industries with a capital intensive base doubled within the decade 1970-80. The average annual growth rate of their production in value terms was 33%; fixed investment increased by 1000%; while employment barely doubled. At the same time, small scale industries, which contributed 52% of industrial production in 1978-79, have seen a stagnant annual growth rate of production in value terms though employment has increased by 40% in this decade.²⁵

A significant feature revealing the lopsidedness of development is the absence of any industry linked to raw materials—both agricultural and others—produced in the state. In a certain sense this is true for output as well; the hosiery industry, for example, is totally dependent on its exports to the Soviet Union. An organic link between agriculture and industry could never develop in an overall situation like this. In fact, establishing such a link was never part of the neocolonial strategy, which had allotted Punjab the role of grain producer. The rate of growth of production of commercial crops, such as cotton and sugar cane, which is very low when compared to that of food crops, is a natural outcome of this enforced division of labour, as is also the absence of industries based on raw materials. Stagnation in agricultural production, limits to accumulation in agriculture due to the market structure and limits to the spread of capitalist farmers into the industrial sector—these were the end results of the imperialist plans for development.

The swelling tide of economic discontent which to a greater degree affected all classes transformed by the Green Revolution linked up with backlashes against changes in the superstructure: the Akali movement surged forward once more. In the

historical context of developments in Punjab, its ready linkage with the unfulfilled demands of the Punjabi Suba and with the deep sense of discrimination against the Sikhs was a natural course. The path of this movement in the '80s was to some extent charted by a resolution adopted by the Akali in 1978. Like all other Akali positions, the Anandpur Sahib resolution reflected both religious and political-economic aspirations, mainly those of the Jat Sikh capitalist farmers who could rally the masses of the Sikh peasantry against their age-old enemy, the Central government. The new economic foundation provided a solid structure for reviving notions of a Sikh nation. But this was no longer a response of a weak minority to preserve its religious identity but now the powerful demand of a rising class colliding with those very imperialist relations which had given it birth.

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution

The Anandpur Sahib resolution consists of two parts: one puts forward religious tasks and openly identifies political goals with the commandments of the Tenth Lord and with the history of the Sikhs. But having stated this, the remaining sections are as secular as those in the manifestoes of most bourgeois political parties. The main points here are demands for unifying all Punjabi-speaking areas and for a radical change in the Indian Constitution such that the Centre's powers would be restricted to defence, foreign affairs, finance and communications.²⁶ A third point denounces the foreign policy of the Congress, stating that "our foreign policy should in no case play second fiddle to that of any other country"—an obvious attack on the pro-Soviet positions of the Congress.²⁷

The section on economic goals drops all references to religion and to the Sikhs. What remains is a clear statement formulating the demands of the rising rural bourgeoisie, directed against its immediate enemies: "the big traders, capitalists and monopolists." The preamble states that "political power has . . . been misappropriated by these classes which are wielding the same for their benefits . . . any peaceful attempt . . .

(for) . . . a new era of social justice would have to break the economic and political strongholds of these categories of people." It strives to unite all other classes behind it by pointing out the obvious truth: to abridge "the growing gulf between the rich and the poor" "the first assault would have to be made on the classes who have assured all the reins of economic power in their hands." The very next sentence betrays the class essence of this by arguing for a land ceiling of 30 acres (12.1 hectares) in order to distribute excess land; this ceiling actually *pushes up* the present one of 11.5 acres (4.7 hectares) which itself has not done much to change the economic position of the agricultural labourers and other sections!

The central demands in the agricultural sector relate to the prices of produce and changing the structure of the grain market. The price of produce is sought to be determined on the basis of returns of middle class farmers; more importantly, it is stipulated that "only the State governments would be empowered to fix such prices." This demand has usually been criticised by pointing out that such powers would lead to a steep upward revision of food prices, benefitting mainly the capitalist farmers. No doubt this is true. But what else would one expect from a bourgeois class? The point that is overlooked or sometimes even covered up is that this demand is aimed at breaking up the Central Agricultural Prices Commission, an important tool of the ruling classes (and through them of imperialism) to transfer surplus out of agriculture.²⁸

An argument forcefully advanced by some Marxist-Leninist forces in Punjab and India projects the Akali agitation and its later communal turn as a conspiracy to check and subvert the revolutionary working class and agricultural labourers movements. It is true that the Naxalbari revolt and the armed struggle led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) had a very significant impact in Punjab as elsewhere. In Punjab the armed struggle led by the CPI(ML) was centred in Sangrur where a series of armed actions took place. While this provided a tremendous impetus to developing a revolutionary consciousness and ex-

posing the state, this armed struggle became isolated from the masses due to a number of left deviations similar to those in other parts of India. Apart from this the impact of Naxalbari was indirectly manifested in the growth of a powerful revolutionary students' movement, the Punjab Students' Union, which at one time was the most powerful and broad-based student organisation in Punjab. Though there was no similar development of an organised revolutionary movement among the working class or the agricultural labourers, all this created a ferment among those sections also, and a number of organisations, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, were successful in organising trade union movements heavily influenced by economism and reformism. The transformations in the agrarian sector which intensified contradictions between the agricultural labourers and the capitalist farmers also provided a basis for such developments.

However, it is important to note that these movements never posed a sustained revolutionary challenge either to the rural bourgeoisie or to the State and to analyse the Akali movement as a response to them is untenable. Conspiracies do not lead to social movements drawing on a powerful and broad mass base. The principal weakness of this view is that it shies away from analysing the complex interrelation between the religious, class and national questions and the neocolonial development of Punjab. Thus its call of class struggle to oppose communalism, etc., is never capable of putting forward a comprehensive proletarian standpoint on burning social issues, and leaves the field wide open for those very classes it wishes to isolate and expose. This is manifested in the decline of the PSU in all respects and the influx of its activists and even leaders into the camp of the fundamentalists.

In order to understand more fully that the Akali agitations principally grew out of objective conditions and not mere conspiratorial plotting, it is also helpful to observe that the economic programme advanced by the Akali Dal is not much different from the essential elements of the farmers' agitations which have arisen

in recent years. Both challenge the barriers of imperialist production relations which impede their ability to accumulate. In the neocolonial set-up of India these barriers are manifested in the regulations and controls enforced by the Central State and benefitting the bureaucrat-comprador classes. And, given the class nature of the forces which articulate these demands, it is obvious that they will overlook the whole question of imperialism and that they will not be consistent.

The Akali agitation had the merit of raising political demands, such as those on autonomy for the states and federalism, which relate to these economic demands. But those demands also reflect the illusions and intrinsic weaknesses of the rising rural bourgeoisie, which is incapable of striking at the root cause: neocolonialism. The relation between the religious aspects of the Anandpur Sahib resolution (its notions of a "Sikh nation" and its concern with reindulging religious values) and its class content is to be sought precisely in the needs of the rural bourgeoisie to restructure the political superstructure in India. It is here that the Sikh religion, its historical association with the development of the Punjabi nationality and its position as a homogenous religious minority blend with the purely secular demands of the resolution. All these elements provided it with a greater ideological cohesiveness when compared to other similar movements in India. Yet at the same time they were its weak point.

Overall then the history of the recent Akali movement is a history of continuous conflict between its religious-national and secular-national goals. It is also a history of the active role of the Congress and other bourgeois political parties seeking to foster the religious aspect in keeping with their own strategy to weaken and undermine the threat of a forceful national movement. It was in this context then that the post-World War 2 neocolonial transformations in the Punjab, centering on the Green Revolution, gave rise to powerful and conflicting religious currents. One of these, based on the teachings of the Nirankaris, essentially went along with and legitimised the transforma-

tions that were taking place.²⁹ At the other end, in violent opposition to the erosion of orthodoxy, were the fundamentalists.³⁰

In 1978, one of a whole host of fundamentalist preachers, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, shot into prominence after a clash with the Nirankaris. The Congress, eager to seize any opportunity to weaken the Akalis, quickly latched onto him. But it is important to state outright that it was objective social conditions, and not principally Congress manipulation, that was chiefly responsible for Bhindranwale's rise. If not him, then some other would have arisen to fulfill this cultural role.³¹

Bhindranwale stood within the long tradition of militancy and martyrdom of Sikhism,³² but in his rise to prominence he had to contend with numerous other fundamentalist groupings as well as with the Akali leadership. In the late '70s his followers were repeatedly defeated in elections to the aforementioned SGPC (which controls the gurudwaras).³³

But this was soon reversed. Discontent with the opportunism of the Akali leadership,³⁴ conscious communal policies of the Congress and Hindu communalists and the government's interest in building up the fundamentalists all went into this reversal. By late 1981 Bhindranwale had gained a powerful following. His arrest in September and release within a few days drew huge crowds who clashed with the police. The Akali agitation based on the Anandpur Sahib resolution continued, but the massive response to Bhindranwale's call for an agitation protesting against the arrest of some of his followers indicated the shift in the mood of the masses. Within months the Akalis were forced to adopt Bhindranwale's agitation as their own. The swing to militant fundamentalism, the suppression of economic demands by religious demands leading to a separate Khalistan, was more or less complete.³⁵ A swift build-up of communalism and communal murders followed.

So far the communal contradiction between the Hindus and the Sikhs and its historical background has been highlighted. But this has always existed as an undercurrent, and its vocal proponents were mainly the

upper classes among both communities. Among the masses, communalism has never made much headway. At the level of religion itself there is a close association between the two communities, stemming from the common historical experience of religious oppression at the hands of the Mughals and the shared trauma of the Partition. The strength of this communal harmony, particularly among the peasantry, was manifested by the refusal of the Sikhs to turn against their Hindu neighbours even after the desecration of the Golden Temple and open provocation by Hindu communal organisations. The interest of the Indian State in destroying this harmony is equally manifest in the selective repression of the Army and in its propaganda.

The fundamentalist creed of Bhindranwale, who openly called for a war against the Hindus, was a product of circumstances—including that it complemented the strategy of the Indian ruling classes. But the simplistic reduction of fundamentalism to a tool of ruling class conspiracy (very common among the left in India) misses its social-cultural roots and today miserably fails in explaining the exalted position of martyrdom Bhindranwale has acquired among the Sikhs.

A Sikh Nation?

As noted earlier, the (neo)colonial strategy of "divide and rule" arrested the organic process of nation formation in India and paved the way for a complex intermingling of religious and caste divisions with the national question and class struggle. We have seen this in Punjab: the conscious policy adopted by the British to divide the Punjabis as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs and to ensure that Hindus remained restricted to their traditional position as a predominantly urban section while the Sikhs remained a rural peasant population. The sham independence of 1947 and the subsequent neocolonial transformation only reinforced this distortion with new dimensions. The 1971 Census Reports data reveals that nearly 70% of the Sikhs continue to be concentrated in the rural areas while nearly an equal percentage of the Hindus are urban.³⁶

The most important element in-

roduced by neocolonialism is the development of a rural bourgeoisie linked to the capitalist transformation of the economy. But this imposed capitalist development is not self-sustaining and the accumulation of capital by the rural bourgeoisie comes up against the barriers of imperialist production relations. When this takes place in a neocolony like India with its diverse nationalities, the imperialist limits to development manifest themselves as limits imposed by the Central State to the development of nations.³⁷ The Hindu communalism of this State, the historical restriction of the rural bourgeoisie to the Jat Sikhs (the biggest caste among the Sikhs) and the fact that the big grain merchants are Hindus provides the objective foundations for the displacement of the Punjabi nationality by the false concept of a Sikh nation.³⁸

In the context of India, the class interests of the big merchants and wholesale traders complement the class interests of the ruling classes, the bureaucrat-comprador classes, to a large extent. On the other hand, there is a basic conflict of interests between the rural bourgeoisie in the different states and these ruling classes. In regions with a relatively homogenous religious composition, the contradiction between the big merchants (who are generally local) and the other rising bourgeois classes would be manifested as a contradiction between traitors to the nation and those championing the national interest.

But this qualification is redundant in Punjab. The national interest becomes the interests of a Sikh nation struggling against Hindu domination. Caste differentiation among the Sikhs whittles the base of this Sikh nation even further. For the Mazhabi Sikhs, the oppressed caste, an autonomous or independent Punjab would be a state dominated by their direct caste oppressors—the Jats.³⁹ This has led a good section among them to vote against the Akalis in elections. During the recent agitation this caste/class contradiction had surfaced in some areas, where the Jat Sikhs imposed a social boycott against the Mazhabis for their opposition to the movement: but common religious identity tends to cut across this—the attack on the Golden

Temple has led to a common enmity with the Centre, to some extent.

Such are the battle lines today in Punjab. On one side stand the protagonists of Khalistan, the Sikh nation, commanding broad appeal among the Sikhs. On the other side stand the Indian state and its stooges, saviours of the Indian nation, with an equally broad appeal among the Hindus. Beneath these false entities for which the swords have clashed lies the Punjabi nationality and its genuine aspirations. The battle of Khalistan and India is no doubt an objective reality. But it is one which is distorted, a product of ages of tradition and of nearly a century of colonial rule and continuing neocolonial domination. So long as this key aspect is not grasped the battle will remain in this false domain: a domain favourable to the oppressors, imperialism and its agents.

Footnotes

1. Babur, the first Mughal (also Mogul) emperor of India and founder of the Mughal dynasty there, was a descendant of Genghis Khan and of Timur (Tamerlane).
2. The *Adi Granth*, a collection of Sikh scriptures, contains 938 poems of various Bhakti poets. Of these, the vast majority come not from Hindu Bhakti poets but from such people as Kahir and Sheikh Farid, a Sufi preacher.
3. The court language of the Mughals was Persian and the language broadly in use throughout the empire (from Punjab in the west to Bengal in the east) was Urdu or Hindustani, a mixture of North Indian dialects with Persian. Even before this time Sheikh Farid, a Sufi preacher, used to write in Punjabi as did others like Shah Hussain and Quadir Yar.
4. Some accounts put the percentage of Sikhs in the British Indian army as high as 60%. More likely the Sikhs constituted about 30%—but at any rate they formed the single largest section. After the Partition in '47 this proportion has been steadily reduced in the reorganised Indian army.
5. D. Petrie, "Developments in Sikh Politics 1901-1911: A Report," as quoted in "The Akali Agitation," Harish K. Puri, *EPW*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4.

6. Following British annexation a network of Christian Mission Schools was set up in Punjab. The governor of Punjab, Sir John Lawrence, used to take a personal interest in the salvation of the Punjabi "pagans."

7. The Namdhari movement (also known as the Kuka, or Kooka, movement) organised boycotts of English schools, courts and other institutions. It preached self-reliance and encouraged the wearing of homespun clothes as a measure of protest. The rapid spread of the movement led the colonialists to impose restrictions. In 1871 the Kukas raided British armouries but were defeated. The rebels were rounded up and 75 of them were placed in front of the muzzles of cannons and blown apart--the other side of "fostering national pride among the Sikhs."

8. The Hindustan Ghadar Party was a revolutionary organisation founded among immigrants in America just before the First World War. Its journal *Ghadar (Revolution)* was published in English, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and Gurmukhi, and was illegally propagated in Punjab and other regions in North India. During the First World War the Ghadars opposed the British Indian Army, especially among the Sikhs. They organised the immigrants en masse to return to India and start a revolt.

At about this same time, a ship with nearly 200 Sikh immigrants, the *Komagata Maru*, was denied permission to land in Canada under the cover of racial immigration laws. After a long deadlock in Vancouver the ship was forced to return to India. When the passengers landed the British provoked a clash and a good number were killed and injured in the police firing. This incident exposed the hollowness of "equality" between subject nations within the British Empire and inflamed anti-British feelings.

9. Jalianwala Bagh is the site of a British massacre in 1919, in the heart of the Punjabi city of Amritsar. British General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on an unarmed demonstration. It is estimated that 1600 rounds of ammunition were expended; official statistics recorded 400 dead and 2000 wounded.

The Saropa is an honour conferred on an individual for distinguished service in the cause of the Sikh community or for humanity. During the recent agitation in Punjab, the tomb of the Head Priest who had conferred the honour was desecrated by the fundamentalists.

10. Dissatisfied with the non-violent struggles of the Akali Dal a section split away from it and organised the Babar Akali under the leadership of an ex-serviceman. Basing themselves on the militant traditions of the Sikhs, the Babar Akalis preached armed revolt and carried out a number of daring actions against the British before they were suppressed.

11. The Muslim League was formally founded in Dacca in December 1906. After working on and off with the Congress Party, it became a principal vehicle for the splitting off and founding of Pakistan in 1947 at the same time as India gained formal independence.

12. In the spring of 1942, a high-level delegation was sent from England with what purported to be a British proposal for the decolonisation of India. Its actual purpose was described by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as "an attempt to rally Indian support against Japanese invasion"--particularly, drawing the Congress Party and Muslim League leadership into the British war effort.

13. Quoted in "The Akali Agitation," Puri.

14. For example B. N. Mullick (Nehru's Head of Intelligence) uses two whole pages in his memoirs to prove that the Sikhs have no reason for a separate religious existence since "... the Muslim influence and danger has been removed." *My Years With Nehru*, pp. 419-20.

15. Successive drafts of the constitution called for purer versions of Hindi as the official language, including as part of this a conscious effort to remove from Hindi all traces of Urdu (a product of Muslim Mughal rule) and Sanskritise. Such "secular progress" was also reflected in the treatment of the various religions themselves. The final version of the constitution included an Explanation which stipulated that "... the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religions..." This was an obvious attempt to deny the separate existence of these religions and is identical to the propaganda of Hindu communal organisations.

16. Part of the basis for this change had to do with the overturning of the urban Bhaba Sikh leadership by the rural Jat Sikhs, which comprised nearly 40% of the Sikhs and included a number of capitalist farmers.

17. This unity was more a temporary compromise than any real move to sec-

ularism. Among the Hindu communalists it marked the rise to dominance of a long-standing trend which cautioned against antagonising the Sikhs and pushing them over to unity with the Muslims. Proponents of this trend took pains to prove that Punjabi and Sikhism belonged to the Sanskrit Hindu tradition and should not be negated. A good example of this argument is given in "Hindus and the Punjab State," written by Om Prakash Mandal, a leading member of the All India Hindu Mahasbha. At the level of parliamentary politics both the Akalis and the Jan Sangh were attracted by possibilities of a united victory. The 1967 elections led to the formation of non-Congress ministries in a number of states.

18. In the early 1940s, prodded by the Comintern, the CPI accepted the view that India was a multinational country. In line with this a book on the question of Punjabi nationality had also been published. But by the '50s, as the party turned completely revisionist, this position was abandoned and it adopted the concept of an "Indian" nation, with support for linguistic states.

19. The minister, Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan, is the well-known protagonist of Khalistan (the concept of a homeland claimed by some Sikh forces). His continued activities in European countries is some of the main evidence produced by the government to prove foreign interference in Punjab.

20. At times this discontent even reached such peaks as the stoning of the Akal Takht (seat of the SGPC) by Sikh masses who were angered at the leadership's compromise with the Central government around the issue of securing Chandigarh as the capital of Punjab.

21. Together with this the interaction (both economic and cultural) with the sizable Sikh population in countries like the U.S. and England must also be taken into account.

22. There are very few studies on the cultural transformations that have taken place during this period as well as on the social base of the reform movements. One study notes that "... in the case of Sikhism as a religious institution... in rural Punjab, in general and near the urban end in particular, Sikhism was losing ground... quite a number of respondents had shaved themselves clean..." "Changing Social Structures in Rural Punjab," P.S. Jammu, Sterling, New Delhi, 1974, p. 107.

23. The market is dominated by a few monopolies. For example in 1971 less than 8% of the firms controlled 21% of the trade in wheat while 77% handled 56% of the trade. (pp. 91-92) This monopolisation has been reinforced as the commission agents have also branched into agro industries such as paddy shelling and flour mills, besides taking up sales of farm inputs such as fertilisers, deisel, etc. "Changing Food-grain Market Structure in India," Karbans Singh, S.R. Publications, Delhi, 1983.

24. "Punjab Crisis: Context and Trends," CRRID, Chandigarh, 1984, p. 55.

25. "Punjab Crisis," p. 59.

26. This demand was generally supported--though not its entirety--by most parliamentary parties in order to oppose the Congress (I). The CPI and the CPM also supported the demand in order to deal with the problems they faced as heads of state governments due to the financial and political clout of the Central government.

27. Quoted in "Punjab Crisis," p. 128.

28. In the industrial sector, the demands focus on breaking the economic powers of the monopolies through nationalisation. This should not be confused with expanding the public sector in the same form as it exists today (controlled by the Central government) since the resolution calls for transferring industry to the states. The aspirations of this rural bourgeoisie to branch out into industry are expressed in the resolution's call for "A planned effort to establish agro-industries in the rural areas" and its demand that "credit agencies, especially the nationalised banks, should be di-

rected to invest a good ration of their deposits in the rural areas." (emphasis added)

29. The Nirankaris are followers of the old Nirankari reform movement of the 19th century. They were grouped in urban centres such as Rawalpindi (in Pakistan) before the Partition and were forced to flee into India, where they continued mainly as traders and businessmen and are drawn from the trading castes. The Sant Nirankaris, whose religious leader was killed by the Sikh fundamentalists, are a separate sect among them which claims to be "a new world religion."

30. This is not to suggest that these were the only opposing forces or that the religious conflict could be strictly categorised into two compartments.

31. There were at least nine fundamentalist groupings, any one of which could have captured dominance.

32. One insistent theme of Bhindranwale (and of others like the Babar Akalis too) was that of depreciating the struggle of the Akalis for economic demands by raising the question of power. The association was with the famous words of the Tenth Guru, "Without gaining control over the Raj it is not possible to uphold Dharma, and Raj is acquired only through the might of arms."

33. The Congress (I) had thrown its weight behind him in these elections.

34. During the Janata Ministry, in which the Akalis were participants, the Anandpur resolution was quietly buried, even though the person who had drafted it, Barnala, had become a senior minister at the Centre.

35. The vacuum this created was readily filled by the Bharatiya Kisan Union, an

All-India farmers organisation led by capitalist farmers. The B.K.U. was able to rally vast sections of the peasantry for a militant struggle against the Central and state government. This cut across religious lines since it pitted the Sikh peasantry against the Sikh-dominated bureaucracy.

36. Quoted in "The Punjab Problem," Sucha Singh, K.C. Singal, *EPW* Vol. XIX, No. 14.

37. Of course the Central State per se is also a real barrier. The point is that the role of imperialism is concealed in neocolonialism.

38. Above all this completely ignores the historical existence before 1947 of an undivided Punjab. The use of Punjabi as a spoken language in West Punjab (Pakistan) and its growing role as a literary medium there shows that this is still relevant. In recent years a sizeable section of intellectuals in West Punjab have demanded that Punjabi should be taught in schools and in colleges.

39. This sentiment is reflected in the words of a Dalit Sikh: "We are wholly opposed to the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state, which in our opinion would be a state of big jagirdars and in which members of backward classes (here meaning caste--K.C.) will be treated as cattle." "Storm over the Sutlej," S. Narang, Gitanjali Publishing House, New Delhi, 1983. The author also notes that there was an identical reaction among the Dalit Hindus towards the formation of Haryana. ■