

What were the events that lead to Operation Blue Star

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In a earlier article we explained 'How the British divided Punjab into Hindu and Sikh' To read <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/How-the-British-divided-Punjab-into-Hindu-and-Sikh-1.aspx>. This article covers events in Punjab between 1947 to 1984.

In 1948, Punjab's princely states were merged into one unit in the Patiala and East Punjab States Union. (PEPSU). Post independence, the ruling parties have been:

1. August 1952 to March 1967: the Congress
2. March 1967 to June 1971: the Akalis
3. President's Rule was imposed twice during this period
4. March 1972 to April 1977: the Congress (with Giani Zail Singh as chief minister)
5. June 1977 to February 1980: the Akalis
6. June 1980 to October 1983: the Congress (with Darbara Singh as chief minister)
7. President's Rule was imposed from October 1983 to September 1985
8. September 1985 to June 1987: the Akalis
9. President's Rule till February 1992

From the above it is clear the Congress ruled the state from 1952 till 1967. It lost power in the first Assembly elections held after Punjab was reorganised in 1966 with the formation of Haryana as a separate state.

The government took two steps “that nurtured the concept of a Sikh state”. One, in 1948 Punjab's princely states were merged into one unit: the Patiala and East Punjab States Union. Second, was the declaration of Punjab as a bilingual state in 1957 with both Hindi and Punjabi as its languages. The demand for a state where Punjabi was written in the Gurumukhi script was driven by Akali political ambition as well as the desire to preserve Sikh traditions and identity. When I was posted in Punjab in 1988-1990, all my Hindu colleagues and friends spoke Punjabi.

So the actual reason for Hindus saying their mother tongue was Hindi and not Punjabi could be the apprehension of living in a Sikh dominated state—what happened in the 1980's ensured their fears were not misplaced.

Thus, the language issue divided Punjab into Hindu and Sikh. This was notwithstanding the age-old relations between the two and one of the tallest Akali leaders, Master Tara Singh, being a co-founder of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* in 1964.

Master Tara Singh (a Khatri Sikh) tried his best for a Punjabi Suba (state) but Nehru did not oblige. Subsequently, leadership of the Akali Dal passed on to a Jat, Sant Fateh Singh, who have traditionally been more aggressive and are considered the weapon wielding arm of the Sikh community.

In 1966, following the agitation, Hindi- speaking plains became Haryana and the rest Punjab. Sant Fateh Singh, the leader of the Akali Dal, helped Indira Gandhi by stating that the Akalis demanded a linguistic not a Sikh state. Notwithstanding this, the confusion on language persists. Even today, in the union territory of Chandigarh there is a police station which writes everything in Gurumukhi while another, just 5 km away, writes in Hindi.

Realizing that Akalis (who had ruled from 1967 to 1971) could not come to power without the support of the Jana Sangh (earlier avatar of BJP), Fateh Singh started a fast unto death to force Indira Gandhi to concede the city of Chandigarh to Punjab. Mrs Gandhi agreed on the condition that two Hindi-speaking tehsils of Abohar and Fazilka go to Haryana. Negotiations broke down.

On becoming chief minister in 1972, Giani Zail Singh tried his best to wrest control of the SGPC from the Akalis and used every opportunity to placate Sikh religious sentiments and assert Sikh identity. In order to regain the initiative, the Akali Dal Working Committee passed the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1973. The key perceived grievances of the Akalis were, unfair treatment by the Centre in the matter of industrial development (perhaps because most of it was Hindu owned), with the Green Revolution on the wane farmer income was inadequate for a large family leading to a rising number of educated unemployed, reducing the percentage of Sikhs in the army and reduced water supply (arising out of the Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan and giving water to Haryana / Rajasthan).³¹

It might be worth mentioning that in the 1970's "the challenge to Sikhism came not from Hinduism but from the winds of modernism and prosperity which swept the community post Green Revolution. An increasing number of younger Sikhs began to question the need of having long hair and beards and looked upon them as archaic relics of the past."³²

Sikhs were worried they would get reabsorbed into Hinduism. Ironically, Sikhs continue to be obsessed with maintaining a non-Hindu identity whilst ignoring conversions of Sikhs to Christianity in Punjab.

The question is, had the Hindu equivalent of a church asked the Sikhs to give up their traditions? One of the best things about Hinduism is its all encompassing nature and the freedom it gives every follower to choose the path he wants.

Note that "when Akali leaders approached the then Prime Minister, Morarji Desai and Deputy PM Charan Singh to declare Sikhs a minority community, both turned down the request on the grounds that they regarded Sikhs as a part of the Hindu community."³³

In 1977, Congress leader and former chief minister Zail Singh, with an intent to break up the coalition of Akali Dal and Janata Party who had come to power, recommended to Sanjay Gandhi that they look for a new religious leader who will discredit the traditional Akali Dal leadership. Bhindranwale, then head of the respected Damdami Taksal (an influential school founded by one of the greatest Sikh heroes, Baba Deep Singh Ji) was the chosen man.³⁴

The Congress were on the lookout to create a divide and when the Akalis allowed the Nirankaris (a sect of the Sikhs) to hold a convention in Amritsar on 13 April 1978, Bhindranwale protested. The Akalis tried to reason that permission for the convention was granted because Nirankari traders had links with Hindu traders who supported the Jan Sangh, its coalition partner. Actually the reasons for protests lay elsewhere. The Nirankaris had begun to revere their founder and his successor as Gurus, inspite of Guru Govind Singhji's statement that he was the last Guru. The clash actually took place between Damdami Taksal and Akhand Kirtani Jatha who opposed Baba Gurbachan Singh claiming to be the living Guru in *Avtar Bani* and *Yug Purush* (religious books of the Nirankaris). How could the day of creation of Khalsa (Baisakhi) be misused for apotheosising someone? The background of clash was ideological—the Sikhs believe *Guru Granth Sahib* to be the Guru; the Guru is the

Word, while the Nirankaris, Radhasoamis, Namdharis and other Sikh sects believe in a living Guru.

Bhindranwale and an agricultural inspector Fauja Singh marched out of the Golden Temple shouting slogans against the Nirankaris. Enroute to Nihang's shelter an agitated Sikh cut off the arm of a Hindu sweetshop owner. When the Sikhs reached the convention, Fauja Singh tried to behead Nirankari Guru, Baba Gurbachan Singh. Violence erupted in which 12 Sikhs and three Nirankaris were killed. The Congress was successful in creating the issue they had wanted to. Note that the Nirankari Guru was gunned down in April 1980 and the Central Bureau of Investigation accused Bhindranwale of 'hatching the conspiracy to murder'.

Some consider this 1978 incident to be the real cause of the terrorist movement in Punjab. Absolutely untrue. The fight was then between two Sikh sects whose enmity went back years and had nothing to do with the Hindu community. The truth lies in Bhindranwale's reply to a middle-aged woman's plea to finish her husband because he had deserted her.

He said in 1983, "*I only finish those who are the enemies of the Sikh faith like policeman, government officials and Hindus.*"³⁵ The seeds for such thoughts were sown by the British as is stated above.

It must be mentioned that during the 1980 elections Bhindranwale campaigned actively for the Congress in three constituencies.

When Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, Zail Singh was made home minister and his arch rival Darbara Singh the chief minister of Punjab. Darbara Singh opposed Zail Singh's type of religious politics and was opposed to compromise with communalism. This increased his differences with Zail Singh.

Meanwhile, three killings during Mrs Gandhi's first year in office brought Bhindranwale into the limelight.

The first was of Baba Gurbachan Singh, Guru of Nirankaris, in April 1980. Bhindranwale's name was mentioned in the police report on the Baba's murder after which he moved into one of the hostels of the Golden Temple. He stayed there till Zail Singh told Parliament that Bhindranwale had nothing to do with the murder.

The second was the killing of Lala Jagat Narain in 1981 after which Bhindranwale was arrested. As soon as he was taken away, his supporters opened fire on the police leading to the death of at least 11 people. The same day, three Sikhs fired at Hindus in a Jalandhar market killing four, and the next day another Hindu was killed. Five days later, a goods train was derailed near Amritsar. Nine days later Sikhs hijacked an Indian Airlines plane to Lahore.

Some might justify the killing of Lala Jagat Narain, proprietor of Hind Samachar newspaper group because he had exhorted Punjabi Hindus to declare Hindi as their mother tongue, sided with the Nirankaris and criticized Bhindranwale. But how does having a different point of view justify the murder of the man?

In about a month, Bhindranwale was released, not on the basis of a court order, but due to lack of evidence of his involvement in the murder. A victorious Bhindranwale drove around

Delhi with 80 supporters many of whom were brandishing illegal arms. No arrests were made.

With his release, Bhindranwale achieved cult status. He was now seen as a hero. After his release Bhindranwale said, "The government has done for me in one week more than I could have achieved in years."³⁶ Zail Singh wanted him released as he believed he could use him to bring about the downfall of his rival, Darbara Singh. Indira Gandhi thought the release would help her maintain control over Delhi's Sikhs.

The third was the killing of Santokh Singh, president of the Delhi Gurudwara Management Committee, who had pleaded for Bhindranwale's release, in Delhi on 21 December 1981. At Santokh Singh's memorial service Zail Singh was photographed in the company of Bhindranwale. By this time, Bhindranwale's men were known to have killed two policemen, 10 civilians, attempted to derail trains, there had been many bomb explosions and an airliner had been hijacked too. Bhindranwale had fallen out with the Congress. The Akali Dal, too, was bidding for his support now as they recognized that this religious leader was the passport to winning over the Sikhs.

The Congress and the Akalis held talks to resolve the situation but they were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile Bhindranwale launched a campaign to stir up hatred between Hindus and Sikhs. *"In order to incite Hindus, heads and other parts of the anatomy of the cows were thrown into temples — the cow is of course sacred to Hindus — and the Dal Khalsa claimed responsibility. Bhindranwale's strategy was to cause such communal tension that Hindus would leave Punjab in fear. He hoped this would provoke a Hindu backlash elsewhere which would convince many Sikhs that they would be safe only in Punjab."*³⁷

The more hatred he spread the possibility of Hindus leaving Punjab increased, creating the probability of a Sikh majority state. Note that "During the 18th century the fighting Khalsa was divided into *jathas*, most of which later formed *misls*. Sometimes they agreed to form a group of *misls* for a particular purpose (such as a campaign against the Afghan invader), and as such would constitute the Dal Khalsa or 'Army of Khalsa'. In 1978, a Dal Khalsa was formed to fight for Khalistan".³⁸

It did not matter to them that the original name of Golden Temple is Hari (Vishnu) Mandir or these facts that Khushwant Singh wrote,

*"There is a new breed of Sikh scholars who bend backwards to prove Sikhism has taken little or nothing from Hinduism. All they need to be told is that of the 15,028 names of God that appear in the Adi Granth, Hari occurs over 8,000 times, Ram 2,533 times, followed by Prabhu, Gopal Govind, Parbrahm and other Hindu nomenclature for the Divine. The purely Sikh coinage 'Wahe Guru' appears only sixteen times."*³⁹

On 4 August 1982, an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked to Pakistan. On 20 August 1982, another plane was hijacked. On 11 September 1982, a bus load of Akali volunteers being transported to jail was hit by a train at an unmanned crossing killing 34. In short there was chaos.

When talks with government representatives and former foreign minister Swaran Singh broke down, Akali leader Harchand Singh Longowal announced on 6 November 1982 that the

Akali Dal would demonstrate in Delhi during the Asian Games that was due to start in weeks. A cordon was thrown around Delhi to prevent any disruption. Since the protestors had to pass through Haryana, Chief Minister Bhajan Lal saw it as an opportunity to please Indira Gandhi. The Haryana Police overdid the checks and hurt Sikh sentiments. It gave Bhindranwale just the sort of ammunition he was looking for.

After the Asian Games, the talks between the Akalis and the Congress failed. This also marked the start of the split between Bhindranwale and Akali Dal leaders that eventually left Indira Gandhi with an option to negotiate with the Akalis or storm the Golden Temple.

Around that time, Bhindranwale organised a meeting of ex-servicemen at the Golden Temple. Close to 30,000 attended raising alarm bells in the government.

On 25 April 1983, A.S Atwal, Deputy Inspector General of police was shot dead at the temple main entrance. New fronts of protests were constantly being opened by Akali leaders like stopping canals and blocking roads. Hit lists with names of people started to circulate.

Bhindranwale, too, was now targeting more and more Hindu victims. "The first took place in Jagraon, near Ludhiana, where on 28th September young Sikh fired indiscriminately at Hindus out for their morning walks. On the night of 5th October, Sikhs hijacked a bus in Kapurthala district, separated Hindu passengers from Sikhs killing six Hindus and seriously injuring one."⁴⁰

President's rule was imposed in Punjab but it didn't improve the situation and two weeks later a train was derailed killing 19 and four Hindu passengers were shot in cold blood on 18 November 1983.

As the situation worsened, and following a debate in Parliament, Bhindranwale reacted to the possibility of his arrest by asking Gurcharan Singh Tohra, President of SGPC, to permit him to shift to the Akal Takht. Head Priest Giani Kirpal Singh objected and said that no Guru or any serious religious leader had ever been allowed to live in the Akal Takht. He added that if Bhindranwale stayed in the Akal Takht he would commit sacrilege because he would live above the Guru Granth Sahib. Tohra overruled Kirpal Singh and Bhindranwale moved into the Akal Takht.

*"At his morning darbars, or congregations, on the roof of the langar, Bhindranwale used to preach hatred against India and Hindus. The doctrine of hate was spreading throughout the villages of Punjab by means of tapes that Bhindranwale's followers circulated."*⁴¹

On 14 February 1984 the Hindu Defence Committee called for a strike in Punjab. Fourteen people were killed during the Hindu strike. It was followed by anti-Sikh rioting in Haryana where eight Sikhs were killed. On 12 April 1984 a prominent politician Harbans Lal Khanna was killed in Amritsar. Hindu-Sikh clashes broke out at his cremation and eight people died.

"One of the reasons the government was now forced to consider the military option was the deterioration of the police force. Throughout February incidents were reported almost daily. There were raids on Hindu temples, attacks on government offices, including a bomb thrown at Jullundur television station, bank robberies, firings at the police and at Hindus."⁴²

Ironically, even till a month before Operation Blue Star, Indira Gandhi maintained contact with Bhindranwale through the president of the Punjab Congress R.L. Bhatia. “In March 1984, Rajiv Gandhi went to Chandigarh and praised Bhindranwale.”⁴³ What message did this give to the security forces?

Police were given additional powers but to no avail. A critic of the Akali Dal Morcha and well-known Sikh H.S. Manchanda was shot in broad daylight in Delhi. The Congress Member of Parliament V. N. Tiwari was killed in Chandigarh. On 22nd April an Air Force officer was hacked to death. On 30th April, former DSP Bachan Singh was shot dead in Amritsar. On 12th May, Romesh Chander, owner of *Punjab Kesari* was shot dead in Jalandhar.

Meanwhile, the fortification of Hari Mandir, supposedly under the watchful eye of Major-General Shahbeg Singh had begun by March 1984. Through a process of give and take the government tried for a solution of Sikh demands. Once the Akali trinity of Badal, Longowal and Tohra agreed, Tohra met Bhindranwale with the terms of a settlement. Nothing came out of the meeting. The Akali trinity had no control over Bhindranwale. A week later, Longowal announced the Akali Dal's plans to stop the movement of grain in Punjab. Punjab being the largest producer of wheat, an economic blockade would make rest of India starve. The CRPF took up positions in buildings surrounding the Golden Temple on the same day. The Akalis also exhorted peasants to refuse paying land revenue to the government, and instead deposit them at the Akal Takht.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was left with little option than to raid the Akal Takht. Longowal and Tohra were in the Golden Temple before Operation Blue Star started whilst Badal was at his farm miles away from Amritsar.

Former top cop K.P.S. Gill wrote, “Terrorism in Punjab has, on occasion, been projected as a natural consequence of the unfulfilled collective aspirations of the Sikhs, as ‘an idealistic movement for the creation of a state... among the Sikhs of the Punjab’. *The fact, however, is that the movement for Khalistan was created out of a pattern of venal politics, of unscrupulous and bloody manipulation, and a brazen jockeying for power that is too well documented to be repeated. It will suffice to state here that each of the major political players in the state and the national arena participated in the creation of this calamity, and the Congress (I) and the Akali Dal were the most culpable formations.* This, indeed, was the first stage where a pernicious pattern of political intervention contributed not to the resolution, but to the creation and nurturing of terrorism.

*“This convoluted pattern of politics, of competitive communalism and brinkmanship in the Punjab, produced the larger than life image of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. An image that owed its proportions as much to the political leadership of that time as it did to the media and, eventually and overwhelmingly, to his seizure and control of the Golden Temple – the most hallowed shrine of the Sikhs. Whatever the causes, it is a fact that, by 1984, Bhindranwale’s murderous creed had captured the imagination of a significant number of Sikhs, particularly in rural Punjab.”*⁴⁴

I will not get into the details of Operation Blue Star except to say that it was unfortunate and is easy to blame Indira Gandhi. In hindsight, perhaps she acted late but it was not an easy decision to take. Of importance is the government's and especially the army's underestimation of the fire power of Team Bhindranwale. “During Operation Blue Star rocket propelled

grenade launchers were used to knock out an armoured personal carrier. The Generals had no intelligence reports of Shahbeg Singh having armour-piercing weapons at his disposal. ”⁴⁵ How did Shahbeg Singh get such weapons?

Those who died in Operation Blue Star continue to be seen as martyrs in certain places. During a recent visit to California, I visited the Fremont and San Jose gurudwaras. Both displayed photos of Bhindranwale prominently. Fremont has pictures of martyrs on the wall of the entire langar hall. At the entrance a banner shows 29 April 1986 as Khalistan Liberation Day. A sign inside the gurudwara reads, “Dedicated in the memory of the Martyrs of Khalistan”. A five-member Panthic Committee of militant leaders was created on 29 April 1986 and they passed a formal resolution proclaiming Khalistan and again hoisted the Khalistani flag in the Golden Temple.

When I spoke about some Sikhs demanding Khalistan, 92 year old Dr Gulzar Singh Johl of Yuba City said, “If these NRI Sikhs are so concerned about the people of Punjab why do they not go and live there? If Sikhs cannot manage their gurudwaras peacefully how will they run a country?”

Here is the year-wise details of deaths caused by terrorism.

Table 2 - Annual Fatalities in terrorists related violence 1981to 5th June, 2016@

Year	Civilians	Terrorists	Security forces	Total
1981	13	14	2	29
1982	13	7	2	22
1983	75	13	20	108
1984	359	77	20	456
1985	63	2	8	73
1986	520	78	38	636
1987	910	328	95	1333
1988	1949	373	110	2432
1989	1168	703	201	2072
1990	2467	1320	476	4263
1991	2591	2177	497	5265
1992	1518	2113	252	3883
1993	48	798	25	871
1994	2	76	0	78
1995	0	11	0	11
Sub-total	11696	8090	1746	21532
1996	0	3	0	3
1997	56	1	2	59
1998-2011	31	2	2	35
2012-2016	4	11	16	31
TOTAL	11787	8107	1766	21660

5 June 2016. Data from South Asia Terrorism Portal www.satp.org

Of the total of 21,660 lives lost, 54% were civilians, 37% terrorists and 9% security forces. Note that civilian killings crossed 1,000 a year for each of the years 1988 to 1992 peaking at 2,591 in 1991. Ditto figures for terrorists for each of the years 1990, 1991, 1992 peaking at 2,177 in 1991.

A point worth wondering over is, what wrong had Hindus done because of which fanatic Sikhs killed them in such large numbers? This is not to forget that a large number of Sikhs also died during the Khalistan Movement and it was only a section of the Sikh community that indulged in terror. But few protested the killing of innocents.

In spite of such unwarranted killings, Hindus continue to flock to the Golden Temple to this day. When I visited Hari Mandir in 2012, an elderly Sikh lamented that all he could hear was Marathi and Gujarati, was it a Sikh shrine? A common misconception is the conflation of Sikhism with Punjab, whereas the original “Panj Piare” or “Five Loved Ones” were from all over India.

Next part is how was terrorism crushed in Punjab.

Reference numbers given in link below or end of next part.

The above is an extract from a mini book titled 'How the British sowed the seeds for the Khalistan Movement before the Indians took over'. It was first published here <https://swarajyamag.com/minibooks/how-the-british-sowed-the-seeds-for-khalistani-movement-before-indians-took-over-part-1>