

Self Determination, Secession and Khalistan

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"More than anything else, Khalistan is a project for bringing about the destruction of the Indian state in a welter of communal disturbances..."

--Connor Cruise O'Brien, 1988

Introduction

The declaration of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 and the religio-political vision that came with it fired the Sikh imagination of the right to rule Punjab. In 1710, under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur, Sikh forces captured Sirhind, the most powerful Mughal administrative centre between Delhi and Lahore, and established a capital in nearby Mukhlispur. They minted coins, designed an official seal, and issued letters of command invoking the authority of God and of the Gurus. The region around Punjab had been ruled by Banda Bahadur between 1767 to 1769, until their confederacy was unified into the Sikh Empire by Maharajah Ranjit Singh from 1799 to 1849. Khalsa Raj's rapid decline and its final loss to the British in 1849 failed to extinguish the hope that someday it would return in some form. The concept of Khalistan germinated when the British colonial policies of Sikhs in the British army against the rebellious Hindu rulers was concocted. The Sikh separatism emerged as a reaction to Pakistan's resolution of 1940 for a postcolonial settlement, when Nehru promised the Sikhs a semi-autonomous unit/state, so as to have a sense of freedom, which continued even after partition in the form of a demand for a separate Punjabi subba or linguistic state. When Jinnah proposed the creation of an Islamic-majority Pakistan, Sikhs being majority with 41.6% only in the Ludhiana district, staunchly opposed the concept. When a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India became imminent, Sikh leaders started mobilizing meta-commentaries and signs to argue that

Punjab belonged to Sikhs and Sikhs belong to Punjab, and thus began the territorialization of the Sikh community. The proposed state of Punjab was to consist of parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Sindh in Pakistan; Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and parts of Jammu and Kashmir, and Rajasthan in India. It was imagined as a theocratic state led by the Maharaja of Patiala with the aid of a cabinet consisting of the representatives of other units.

After the partition of British India into Muslim Pakistan & Hindu India, the Sikh population that in 1941 was as high as 19.8% in some districts of Pakistan, dropped to 0.1% in all of them, and it rose sharply in the districts assigned to India. The Akali Dal's maximal position of demands was a Khalistan and minimal position was to have an autonomous state within India. The Indira Gandhi-led Union Government accepted the demand, and on 7 September 1966 Punjab Reorganisation Act was passed in Parliament, whereby Punjab was trifurcated along linguistic lines into Punjab as a Punjabi speaking state, and Haryana and Himachal Pradesh as Hindi speaking state. After its 1972 defeat in the Punjab Assembly Elections, the Akali Dal put forward the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1973 demanding (i) transfer of Chandigarh and certain areas to Punjab, (ii) land reforms and industrialisation in Punjab, (iii) enactment of an all-India Gurdwara (Sikh House of worship) Act, (iv) revision of government's recruitment quota restricting the number of Sikhs in armed forces, and (v) the distribution of river water flowing through Punjab. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution

of 1973 was supported by the likes of Amritdhari Damdami Taksal preacher Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. People believed the movement would solve problems like the larger share of water for irrigation and the return of Chandigarh to Punjab, but Indira Gandhi had evidences to consider the Anandapur Resolution a secessionist document with an attempt to secede Punjab from the Union of India. According to Jagjit Singh Chohan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto the Prime Minister of Pakistan had proposed to make Nankana Sahib (currently in Pakistan), as the capital of Khalistan during his talks with Chohan after the conclusion of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. The first explicit call for Khalistan was accordingly made in an advertisement published in *The New York Times* by expat Jagjit Singh Chohan. With financial and political support of the Sikh diaspora, the movement flourished in the Indian state of Punjab, which has a Sikh-majority population. Jagjit Singh Chauhan, sitting in UK created the Khalistan National Council in 1979, and issued Khalistan's Passports/postage stamps/currency and declared himself as president of "Republic of Khalistan". In order to implement the Resolution, the Akali Dal and Bhindranwale joined hands with Harcharan Singh Longowal and launched the Dharam Yudh Morcha in 1982. The Government of India curbed the mass agitation by Dharam Yudh Morcha, making over 30,000 arrests. Since the inception of Akali Dharm Yudh Morcha, the militants had killed 165 Hindus and Nirankaris, even 39 Sikhs opposed to Bhindranwale were killed. The total number of deaths was 410 in violent incidents and riots while 1,180 people were injured.

The Khalistan movement peaked in the 1980-90s and the violent campaign included bombings, kidnappings, selective killing and massacres of civilians, and assassinations were witnessed. In 1981, Lala Jagat Narain, a Congress leader and owner of "Hind Samachar" group of newspapers was assassinated by Sikh militants for writing against Bhindranwale, and promoting Hindi as official language against Punjabi. The Dal Khalsa, which gained notoriety for hijacking an Indian Airlines plane in 1981, placed severed cow heads at several Hindu temples in the state to intimidate Hindus, who consider cows to be sacred. Posters appearing in villages threatening Hindus to leave, grenades and bombs being thrown into Hindu

religious festivals and movie theatres; militants firing indiscriminately into crowded markets; Hindus being pulled off busses and trains and massacred were common occurrences during that period. As the Khalistan movement expanded and violence escalated, Bhindranwale and his heavily armed followers occupied the Harminder Sahib of Amritsar-The Golden Temple in 1982, to stockpile arms and ammunitions, openly defying the state and the federal governments. DIG Avtar Singh Atwal, was killed on 25 April 1983 at the gate of the Darbar Sahib, and his corpse remained there for 2 hours as even police officers were afraid to touch the body without permission from Bhindranwale. Open shipping of arms-laden trucks were reported, but the government feared entering the gurdwaras might hurt the Sikh sentiments. Finally, after the murder of 6 Hindu bus passengers in October 1983, emergency rule was imposed in Punjab, which continued for more than a decade. On June 6, 1984, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered an army operation, code-named Operation Bluestar to flush out Bhindranwale and the militants holed up in the Golden Temple. The fallout from Operation Bluestar resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

On July 28, 1984, Ajaib Singh Bagri, a leader in the Khalistani militant group, Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), declared at a public rally in Canada that "I give you my most solemn assurance that until we kill 50,000 Hindus, we will not rest!" The crowd of thousands of pro-Khalistan supporters responded with chants of "Hindu dogs! Death to them!" BKI, along with International Sikh Youth Federation, were later designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) organizations by the US Department of State under section 1(b) of Executive Order (E.O.) 13224. The violence took on an international dimension when on June 23, 1985, the Khalistani separatists based in Canada exploded a bomb on an Air India flight enroute from Toronto to New Delhi, killing all 329 people on board, including 82 children under the age of 13. That incident remains the deadliest terrorist attack in Canadian history. In September 2007, the Canadian Commission of Inquiry disclosed in the Indian investigative news magazine *Tehelka*, that Lakhbir Singh Rode, had masterminded the explosions. Inderjit Singh Reyat, a Canadian national and a

member of the ISYF pleaded guilty in 2003 and was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for assembling the bombs that exploded on board the Air India Flight. In 1985, The Central government attempted to seek a political solution to the grievances of the Sikhs through the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, which took place between the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Harchand Singh Longowal, the President of the Akali Dal. The accord recognised the religious, territorial, and economic demands of the Sikhs that were thought to be non-negotiable under Indira Gandhi's tenure. Harchand Singh Longowal was later assassinated by those militants who didn't favour the solution.

In May 1985 Khalistani militants set off more than 30 bombs over the span of 14 hours at bus and train stations and public parks in New Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, leaving at least 86 people dead. In December 1986, 24 Hindu passengers were massacred and seven others wounded after being ordered off of a bus by militants near Khuda in Hoshiarpur district. In a similar incident, four months earlier, 15 Hindu passengers were slaughtered on a bus in Muktsar after militants told all the Sikh passengers to leave. In March 1988 militants killed 32 Hindus and injured 25 more when they opened fire on villagers celebrating the Hindu festival of Holi in Hoshiarpur district. In June 1989, two Sikh bus passengers were shot dead by militants for intervening and trying to save the lives of Hindu passengers. In November 1989, 19 students were killed by militants while sleeping in a dormitory at Thapar Engineering College in the city of Patiala. In June 1991 125 men, women, and children were killed by Khalistan Commando Force militants on two trains. In August 1991, Julio Ribeiro, then Indian Ambassador to Romania, was attacked and wounded in a Bucharest assassination attempt by KLF gunmen identified as Punjabi Sikhs. In 1991 the Romanian chargé d'affaires in New Delhi, Liviu Radu was kidnapped in retaliation for Romanian arrests of KLF members suspected of the attempted assassination of Julio Ribeiro. In February 1992, militants gunned down election workers, political campaigners, voters, and set off over 18 bombs. In May 1992 All India Radio station director in Patiala, M.L. Manchanda was kidnapped and decapitated by Babbar Khalsa militants for failing to comply with an edict to only broadcast in Punjabi. The torso of Manchanda's dead

body was left in Patiala, while his head was left in Ambala. The pro-Khalistan group Babbar Khalsa claimed responsibility for the assassination of Chief Minister Beant Singh on 31 August 1995 by a suicide bomber. A 2006 press release by the Embassy of the United States in New Delhi indicated that the responsible organisation was the Khalistan Commando Force.

According to Human Rights Watch, "Militants were responsible for numerous human rights abuses during the violent separatist struggle for an independent Khalistan, including the killings of Hindu and Sikh civilians, assassinations of political leaders, and the indiscriminate use of bombs leading to a large number of civilian deaths in Punjab and other parts of India. Under the cover of militancy, criminals began to coerce businessmen and landowners, demanding protection money." As Canadian Political Science Professor, Hamish Telford, has also noted, "Over time, the Khalistan movement descended into thuggery. The militants increasingly engaged in robbery, extortion, rape, indiscriminate killings and ever-escalating terrorist attacks on innocent civilians. The movement resulted in nearly 22,000 deaths of Sikhs and Hindus alike, including approximately 12,000 civilians. By 1991, Sikh militants were generally viewed as unprincipled criminal gangs."

There are several militant groups that coordinate their military efforts for Khalistan. They were mostly active during the 1980s 1990s but are presently defunct in India. However they still have a political presence among the Sikh diaspora, especially in countries such as Pakistan where they are not proscribed by law. The major pro-Khalistan militant outfits include (i) Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), (ii) International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), based in the United Kingdom, (iii) Khalistan Commando Force (KCF), (iv) All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF), (v) Bhindranwala Tigers Force of Khalistan (BTFKz), (vi) Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF), (vii) Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF), (viii) Khalistan Liberation Army (KLA), (ix) Dashmesh Regiment and Shaheed Khalsa Force. Most of these outfits were crushed during the anti-insurgency operations by 1993. In recent years, active groups have included Babbar Khalsa, International Sikh Youth Federation, Dal Khalsa, and Bhindranwale Tiger Force. In November 2015, a congregation of the Sikh community

called the Sarbat Khalsa and adopted 13 resolutions including the declaration of the sovereign state of Khalistan.

The International Scenario

According to Indian Defence Analyst, Ajai Sahni, Pakistan's spy agency, ISI provided refuge, training, arms, and funding to Khalistani terrorist organizations and coordinated their activities with Islamist terrorist organisations such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, as well as with organised crime operators, and drug and weapons' smugglers who have assisted in the movement of men and materials across the border into Punjab. Sikhs in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States played important roles in arranging for cadres to travel to Pakistan, where they received financial and military assistance." Khalistan supporters in the West have actively used American, Canadian, and British soil to lobby their respective governments against India, while raising funds for Khalistan terror groups, often using informal hawala networks for transferring money. There have further been a number of investigations into the activities of pro-Khalistan extremists in the US, including by the FBI, DEA, and United States Customs Service (USCS). In March 2017, for instance, a Khalistan extremist and US resident, Balwinder Singh, was convicted of providing material support to Khalistani terrorist groups in India and sentenced to 15 years in federal prison. Singh was providing support to BKI and another group called Khalistan Zindabad Force, to commit acts of terrorism in India.

Bhajan Singh Bhinder, the founder of Organization for Minorities of India (OFMI), which engages in anti-India and anti-Hindu activities received help from ISI. Another US-based organization, Sikhs for Justice, has become the most prominent pro-Khalistan group in the west and reportedly enjoys the support of the ISI. ISI also funded the legal defence of Jagtar Singh Tara, for instance, a leader of Indian designated terrorist group Khalistan Tiger Force, member of Khalistan Tiger Force who assassinated the Chief Minister of Punjab in 1995. SFJ and its legal advisor, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a close associate of Paramjit Singh Pamma, a BKI fundraiser was reportedly arrested by the United Kingdom Police in 2000, for having receiving terrorist training in Pakistan, and was sentenced to 30 months. Even before the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then a member

of the military regime of General Yahya Khan, stated, "Once the back of Indian forces is broken in the east, Pakistan should occupy the whole of Eastern India and make it a permanent part of East Pakistan. Kashmir should be taken at any price, even the Sikh Punjab be turned into Khalistan. General Zia-ul Haq, who succeeded Bhutto as the Head of State, attempted to reverse the traditional antipathy between Sikhs and Muslims arising from the partition violence by restoring Sikh shrines in Pakistan and opening them for Sikh pilgrimage. The expatriate Sikhs from England and North America that visited these shrines were at the forefront of the calls for Khalistan. During the pilgrims' stay in Pakistan, the Sikhs were exposed to Khalistani propaganda, which would not be openly possible in India. The ISI chief, General Abdul Rahman, opened a cell within ISI with the objective of supporting the Sikhs separatist movement According to General Hamid Gul keeping Punjab destabilized was equivalent to the Pakistan Army having an extra division at no cost.

Two years after losing the Punjab Assembly elections in 1969, Chohan, who moved to the United Kingdom, to start his campaign for creation of Khalistan, had placed an advertisement in the *New York Times* on 13 October 1971, proclaiming an Independent Sikh state. Chohan in Britain in 1979 established the Khalistan National Council. On 12 April 1980, he declared the formation of a "National Council of Khalistan", at Anandpur Sahib. He declared himself the President of the Council and Balbir Singh Sandhu as its Secretary General. Operating from a building termed "Khalistan House" he remained in contact with the Sikh extremist leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who was violently campaigning for a Sikh theocratic homeland. Chohan declared himself president of the "Republic of Khalistan", named a Cabinet, and issued symbolic Khalistan "passports", "postage stamps", and "Khalistan dollars". Embassies in Britain and other European countries were opened by Chohan. With the assistance of a wealthy Californian supporter, a peach magnate, he opened an Ecuadorian bank account to support his operation. Apart from Punjab, Himachal, and Haryana, Chohan's proposal of Khalistan also included parts of Rajasthan state. According to B. Raman, former Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat of India and a senior official of the Research and

Analysis Wing, the United States initiated a plan in complicity with Pakistan's General Yahya Khan in 1971 to support an insurgency for Khalistan in Punjab. Canadian Member of Parliament Ujjal Dosanjh, a moderate Sikh, stated that he and others who spoke out against Sikh extremism in the 1980s faced a "reign of terror". On 18 November 1998, the Canada-based Sikh journalist Tara Singh Hayer was gunned down by suspected Khalistani militants. On 24 January 1995, Tarsem Singh Purewal, editor of Britain's Punjabi-language weekly "Des Pardes", was killed as he was closing his office in Southall. Canadian journalist Kim Bolan has written extensively on Sikh extremism. Speaking at the Fraser Institute in 2007, she reported that she still received death threats over her coverage of the 1985 Air India bombing.

Canadian PM Justin Trudeau on 22 Feb 2018 assured Amrinder Singh that Canada would not support separatist movements against India. In 2008 Punjab Police Chief, NPS Aulakh alleged on BBC Radio that militant groups were receiving money from the British Sikh community. According to Lord Bassam of Brighton International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) was committing assassinations, bombings, and kidnappings and were a threat to national security of UK. The ISYF is listed as a Proscribed Terrorist Group in UK and is also added to the US Treasury Department terrorism list. Andrew Gilligan, reporting for The London Evening Standard, stated that the Sikh Federation (UK) is the "successor" of the ISYF, and that its executive committee, objectives, and senior members ... are largely the same.

According to an article by 'India Today', when the Khalistan movement was at its peak in the 1990s, a spate of violent insurgencies claimed 21,532 lives in a span of a decade and a half. The dead included 8,090 separatists, 11,696 civilians and 1,746 security personnel (1,415 alone from the Punjab police). Interestingly, the leaders of four of the nine militant groups, Lakhbir Singh Rode, Wadhawa Singh Babbar, Ranjeet Singh Neeta and Paramjit Singh Panjwar, and Dal Khalsa (International) founder Gajinder Singh operate from Pakistan's Lahore. Notably, Gajinder Singh is one of the five men accused of hijacking an Indian Airlines plane to Lahore in 1981. In 2002, India put his name on the list of 20 'most wanted' terrorists. Singh and his associates hijacked the plane which had 111 passengers and six crew members on board and forced the pilots to land in Lahore, where they were arrested and

underwent imprisonment from September 30, 1981, to October 31, 1994. Other militant leaders who are operating from foreign countries are Gurmeet Singh Bagga and Bhupinder Singh Bhinda in Germany, Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Vancouver, and Gurpatwant Singh Pannu in New York. Over the years, several Gurdwaras in the US cities, such as Stockton, Yuba City, Fremont, Sacramento, New York and Washington DC have formed picture galleries of Blue Star and the 1984 riots.

In Canada, Indian diplomats were barred from entering the Dixie Gurdwara in Ottawa in 2021. Slough Labour MP Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese attacked India at the Referendum 2020 rally in London, a pro-Khalistan movement organised by the SFJ. In December 2015, India sought the extradition of Paramjit Singh Pamma, a militant of the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) after he was arrested in Portugal. But the plea was rejected and Pamma returned to the UK, where he had been granted asylum in 2000. KZF member Kuldeep Singh, living for the past 16 years in the UK is yet to be extradited for allegedly plotting to kill former Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal and his son Sukhbir.

Conclusion

Self-determination in the form of Secession is justified only if (i) institutionalised injustice adversely affects the lives and livelihood of people in a particular territory, (ii) people within that territory does not have access to state institutions and civil society organisations to redress their rights getting violated, and (iii) the perpetrating state shows no sign of stopping the systematic injustice against those people. According to Professor Allen Buchanan Secession is justified only as a remedial right when (i) the physical survival of its members is threatened by actions of the state, (ii) the group has suffered irreparable injustices, (iii) the formal state has seriously violated human rights, (iv) the territory in dispute was taken unjustly and secession is simply settling things right, by returning to the people the disputed territory.

India is a formal democracy where federalism is connected intrinsically to democracy, that permeate to the smallest region in its social, religious, linguistic and cultural life. Every region, state, Union Territories and even autonomous regions participate in the wider democratic and political events. Regional autonomy as a pre-condition to collective self-determination is part

of the democratic imagination. India has witnessed threats of secession many a times. When in 1956, southern states threatened over language, the government redrew the administrative map, and fourteen linguistic states were created. Next when the ethnic groups of the northeast revolted, states like Meghalaya and Nagaland were carved out from the existing ones, in 2000 Jharkhand, Uttarakhand & Chattisgarh, Telengana in 2014 and finally with Article 370 gone, self-determination of the people of Ladakh is respected.

International law and the practices of the UN have held that self-determination can be realised within a democratic state through the institutionalization of minority rights and ethno-federalism. If the preconditions for self-determination are established, secession becomes superfluous, and such grant of self-determination to communities within a democratic plural society helps realise people their quintessential human projects.

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