

PUNJAB'S UNEASY CALM

ROGER BALLARD

Perhaps Rajiv Gandhi has really pulled it off. After all the traumas of the past 18 months, the Punjab goes to the polls next week. If, as Rajiv clearly hopes, the predominantly Sikh Akali Dal wins enough seats to form a government, a much larger degree of normality may soon return. But as I travelled around Delhi and Punjab a few days ago, it was obvious that the polarisation which recent events have brought about will take years to close.

So much has changed. Suddenly Sikhs have become an alienated minority, always feeling that they are suspect in Hindu eyes. Meanwhile a vigorous form of chauvinism has developed amongst the Hindus, especially those of non-Punjabi origin.

Yet, on the surface, everything is calm. Villages and towns are thronged with busy crowds. Green fields are rich with this year's bumper rice crop, and after every few miles there are overflowing warehouses full of last years' surplus wheat. Smoke pours from factory chimneys in every town and many villages too. The Punjab remains India's most prosperous province.

In Amritsar, the Golden Temple lies tranquil in its gleaming lake. As hymns drift round the courtyard, pilgrims crowd in to pay their respects to the Guru Granth and to give honour by service too. Lovingly they brush, wash and polish every inch of marble twice a day, look after other pilgrim's shoes, and prepare the vast amounts of food served to all corners each day.

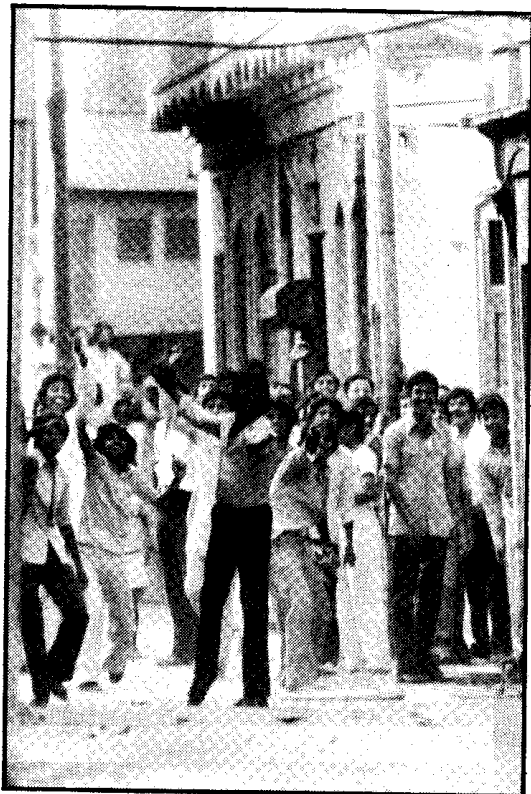
But no one has forgotten how violently this was disturbed just over a year ago by Operation Bluestar. That was when the army eliminated Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who had barricaded himself with 150 of his armed followers inside the Akal Takht, a shrine second only in sacredness to the Golden Temple in the middle of the lake.

After the battle the Akal Takht lay in ruins. It has been hastily restored by the government at great cost, but the results are distinctly tacky. The more you look elsewhere, the more you find evidence of war. Bullet holes still puncture the temple's golden cladding, and double lines of fractures, caused by the brutal impact of tank tracks, still mar the paving round the lake.

Then you begin to hear the horror stories. At the opposite end of the compound from the Akal Takht, and several hundred yards away from it, stand two large hostels. A guide showed me the room in which he slept on the first night of Bluestar. Every room was crowded, he said, because a curfew had been imposed without warning at six o'clock the previous evening. Large numbers of pilgrims who were attending a festival had thus been trapped within the compound.

When firing began early the next morning, everyone locked their doors for safety, but there was to be no escape. Though the main battle was for the Akal Takht, soldiers still came and fired their machine guns into every room. Only by God's grace, said my informant, did he remain unhurt. Just how many died will never be known, for the bodies were cremated before they could be counted—but at least 1,000 innocents had lost their lives. Then several days later, after the fighting around the Akal Takht had ceased, came a final insult. The library, containing priceless manuscript copies of the Sikh scripture, was burned to the ground. The army offered no explanation.

As news of this carnage emerged, Sikhs everywhere began to feel that their whole community was under attack. Many of those who had never supported Bhindranwale began to see him as a martyr; and there was also a feeling that Bluestar had left a score to be settled. From a Sikh perspective, vengeance is a necessary and legitimate response to sacrilege.



Frank Spooner Pictures

Anti Sikh rioters in the Punjab last year

Hindu attitudes have changed most disturbingly. Even among the most educated and liberal-minded there are few who understand why the Sikhs are so angry and embittered, or who appreciate that it was Delhi's adamant rejection of Sikh demands for greater autonomy which gave Bhindranwale the space to press his militantly separatist case. Instead, most Hindus now believe the Sikhs have brought their troubles on themselves. Any hint of criticism of Bluestar is taken as implicit support for terrorism and secession. All Sikh movements are dismissed as inherently disruptive and anti-national, and the theory that they are the stupid dupes of Pakistan is widely accepted.

All this is compounded by a long-standing jealousy of the Sikh's hard-earned prosperity. Amongst the less aggressively self-confident Hindus, there is much satisfaction that the Sikhs have been taught a lesson. It serves them right, I was often told.

In the face of such hostile chauvinism, Delhi Sikhs can do nothing but sit quiet. Though frequently subject to abuse and petty discrimination, they dare not show their feelings. A dangerous cycle has set in. The more they are mistrusted, the more alienated they become; and the more Hindu mistrust seems justified. In the Punjab itself, the situation is slightly better, though the election has brought its own tensions. Every candidate is surrounded by armed bodyguards, and huge numbers of armed police have been deployed. But away from these obvious centres of tension, everyone was at pains to stress the normality of everyday life, and that close personal relationships are still sustained between Hindus and Sikhs.

Among economically active Sikhs, farmers, industrialists and businessmen, the idea of Khalistan—a separatist state—was almost universally rejected. The theme was always the same. Since India is the market for Punjab's products, as well as the source of most of its raw materials, what possible advantage could independence bring? Those who sought extreme solutions, I was frequently told, were a very small minority, almost all were either students or unemployed. But other, more bitter, undercurrents are also present. Sikhs remain deeply distrustful of Delhi and all its works, and are strong supporters of greater regional autonomy. The Hindus, in contrast, remember only too well the reign of terror which Bhindranwale unleashed, and still feel that they must look to Delhi for protection.

The most important target was of course the author of the operation; so it was that Indira Gandhi died, slain by her own Sikh bodyguards. And as news of her death spread, so there was yet more violence. Right across northern India Sikhs were attacked, raped and murdered by angry Hindu mobs. Some incidents were spontaneous, but in Delhi the worst assaults were organised by local Congress bosses out to teach the Sikhs a lesson. Many Sikhs died—more than 10,000 in Delhi alone.

The horror of those days is still vividly remembered. Friends told me about the way gangs of thugs, recruited from the poorest of the poor, had been trucked into their neighbourhoods, and then had systematically set about pillaging Sikh households. This was no ordinary communal riot. Those who died were those who dared to stay at home; the survivors are those who were given willing sanctuary by their Hindu neighbours. Following these brutal reprisals, life will never be the same again. Regular social relations are still sustained across the ethnic boundary, but the two communities now harbour grave suspicions of each other. When Hindus and Sikhs sit together, the issues which divide them are carefully avoided. Only when they are alone, do complaints about the other side come pouring out.

When Rajiv Gandhi succeeded to his mother's office—propelled by a wave of anti-Sikh chauvinism—the prospect of unlocking the Punjab tangle seemed remote. But now, to the surprise of many, Rajiv is doing all the right things.

His approach to politics is very different from his mother's, and is winning much respect from Sikhs as well as Hindus. Instead of engaging in bruising battles to sustain power by undermining and discrediting every possible source of opposition—tactics which were responsible for Bhindranwale's rise in the first place—Rajiv is prepared to delegate and concede. Hence his much acclaimed accord with Sant Harchand Singh Langowal, which paved the way for the coming election. If his mother had offered half as much, the present crisis might never have arisen.

Nevertheless, tension and suspicion remain acute. Despite strong protests that Hindu interests had been damaged by the accord, there was still some feeling among Sikhs that Langowal had settled too early and for too little. It was for this reason that four young Sikhs decided to shoot down Langowal, the long-standing and widely respected President of the Akali Dal. They called him a traitor. Perhaps his murder will mark a turning point. His martyrdom has given much greater force to his belief, quite contrary to Bhindranwale's, that an honourable compromise with Delhi could and should be found, and also that Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus have a religious duty to live together in amity.

So far, the calling of the election has undermined the position of those who argue for no compromise. Their numbers are growing steadily fewer. If the election goes without a hitch, and if the Akalis form a government, popular support for those using guns to enforce their view of justice will fade—at least in the immediate future. But it is still very much touch and go.

Underneath, immense uneasiness still remains. Can Hindus be persuaded to trust Sikhs, and Sikhs Hindus? Until recently no one would have bothered to ask the question, for in Punjab the two were so thoroughly intermingled. But once ethnic polarisation sets in, much effort is required to reverse it—especially when the two sides have contradictory material interests. Despite the elections it is only a truce, not a reconciliation, which lies on the horizon.

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