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## India (Sikhs) (1983 - 1993)

Sikhs make up only 2% of India's population, but in the state of Punjab they form the majority. Beginning in the late 1970s, a small group of orthodox Sikhs began advocating for an independent Sikh homeland. At first these calls had little popular support, but in the early 1980s, after several incidents where Sikh civilians were killed by government forces, the militant movement for an independent "Khalistan" grew. In the 1980s and early 1990s, several Sikh guerilla groups fought Indian police and armed forces. By 1993, most of the fighting had ended as a result of a police crackdown. In the decade of violence, an estimated 25,000 people were killed.

In the early 1980s, the orthodox Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his supporters began to arm themselves in partnership with Babbar Khalsa, a new militant group. Bhindranwale's group was based in Amritsar at the Golden Temple Complex, a holy pilgrimage site for Sikhs. In June 1984, the government of India launched Operation Blue Star against Bhindranwale at the Temple. In several days of fighting, the army destroyed many of the buildings and killed hundreds of innocent pilgrims in addition to Bhindranwale and many of his supporters. The incident further alienated the Sikh population. In October that year, Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi was killed by two Sikh bodyguards. In the days after her assassination, rioters killed between 4,000 and 6,000 Sikh civilians. Police refused to impose a curfew, and politicians from Gandhi's Congress Party are alleged to have coordinated the attacks.

Sikh youth, mobilized by the events of 1984, began to join the militant organizations in droves. In 1986, a group called the Panthic Committee declared the independent state of Khalistan and created the Khalistan Commando Force. By 1988, the Panthic Committee had split into three factions, each with their own force. As infighting among the Sikh militants increased, so did atrocities and human rights abuses. Many Punjabi villagers who at first were supportive of the militants turned away from them as the violence spread. In 1992, the Indian government sent in a new police chief, K.P.S. Gill who launched a brutal but effective crackdown. Many Sikhs fled India, creating strong supports for the militant organizations from abroad. Although many of these still advocate for Khalistan, the organized violence within Punjab mostly ended in 1993.

### Print Resources

Mahmood, Cynthia Keppley (1996) *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pettigrew, Joyce J.M. (1995) *The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerrilla Violence*. London: Zed Books.

Gargan, Edward (1993) "Though Sikh Rebellion is Quelled, India's Punjab State Still Seethes." *New York Times*. October 26, p. 1.

### Online Resources

Tully, Mark. "After Blue Star." BBC World Service.

Physicians for Human Rights (1994) *Dead Silence - Legacy of Abuses in Punjab*

Harvard Human Rights Journal (2005) *Twenty years later: Recent reports highlight the continuing struggle for Sikh human rights*

### *Timeline*

1973 - Sikh political party, Akali Dal, pushes for devolution of power to the states

1974 - India passes law requiring proportional state representation in army, which Punjabis had historically dominated

1975 - Indira Gandhi declares state of emergency

1978 - Nirankari sect kills 13 orthodox Sikhs; Babbar Khalsa and Bhindranwale call for vengeance

1983 - violence escalates with militants raiding arsenals, hijacking an airplane, and attacking Hindu civilians; police fire at peaceful demonstrators

1984 - Operation Blue Star destroys parts of the Golden Temple Complex, kills pilgrims, militants; Indira Gandhi assassinated; riots kill up to 6,000 Sikhs

1985 - Sikh militants bomb Air India flight over Ireland killing over 300 people

1986 - Panthic Committee declares independent state of Khalistan

1987 - India passes the Terrorism and Disruptive Areas Act (TADA), giving police vast powers, including "preventive detention" for up to one year

1988 - Panthic Committee splits

1992 - K.P.S. Gill, new Punjab police chief, cracks down and is accused of atrocities.

1993 - battle-related deaths decrease dramatically; Gill declares insurgency defeated