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**Ethnic Conflict and State
Security in South Asia:
India's Punjab Crisis**

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ETHNIC CONFLICT AND STATE SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA.

INDIA'S PUNJAB CRISIS

by

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Ethnic Conflict and State Security in South Asia India's Punjab Crisis

Shekhar Gupta

THE CONTEXT

It is sometimes said that only a cricket match or a war can unite the people of India. The stereotypes are well-known: the perennial Hindu-Muslim communal divide, the relatively recent Sikh unrest in Punjab resulting in a wider Hindu-Sikh distrust, the frequent, though considerably restrained, Hindu-Christian rivalries in some parts of the country, friction between followers of the same faith (e.g. caste problems among the Hindus, Shia-Sunni riots, and the Sikh faith's vicious differences between Nirankaris and Radha Soamis). There is also social strife due to tribalism and socio-economic tensions, epitomized by the recent massacres in Bihar, which even the Indian media now treat with the same cynical disdain displayed by their western counterparts for the ferryboat disasters of Bangladesh.

In addition, India has states constituted on a linguistic basis (except for some in the northeastern region). In large part because of this, at least 20 of India's 25 states are involved in disputes with their neighbors over issues of territory, water or language. Riots take place frequently, and even the use of armed police force by one state against another is not unusual. The extreme example here is the border dispute between Assam and Nagaland, two states that were once one. In 1980, and again in early 1986, the armed police forces of the two states fought with each other, resulting in more than 125 confirmed deaths. Other prominent examples are Punjab and Haryana, which are involved in a highly publicized dispute over land, waters and even a state capital. The most surprising conflict is that between Haryana and Uttar

Pradesh These states have experienced recurrent tension over territories along the Yamuna river, even though they both fall within the Hindi-belt, share a common language and, even in the area of dispute, speak the same dialect, and share religious, social, and economic characteristics

With a few exceptions, each Indian state has one or more linguistic, tribal, or social minority demanding a province of its own Some of the better known examples follow In West Bengal, the Darjeeling Hills Gurkhas demand for a separate province of their own (Gurkhaland) the Jharkhand movement among the backward tribals in Bihar and the on-again-off-again agitation by the hillmen in Uttar Pradesh for a new hill state Uttarkhand Other examples include the plains tribals who draw several small circles on the map of Assam to denote their mythical state of Udayachal, the Bastar movement in Madhya Pradesh, and the now-defunct Telangana agitation in Andhra Pradesh

Even minuscule tribal states with populations of barely one million have to live with similar pressures The following instances can be cited the Hynniewtrep movement in rain-drenched Meghalaya, which demands a separate province for the dominant Khasi and Jaintia tribes (while the Garos are left to fend for themselves), the demand by less than a hundred thousand Kukis for a state of their own in neighboring Manipur, and, occasionally, similar claims made by the dominant Ao Naga tribe in Nagaland and less than 50,000 Chakma tribesmen, who constitute an oppressed minority in the new state of Mizoram

Frequently, these conflicts are irretrievably enmeshed with deeper and broader aspects of ethnic and linguistic strife The communal (religious) angle is, fortunately, not usually involved Exceptions to this are the Christian Mizos and Buddhist Chakmas, Hindu Miteis and Christian hill

tribes in Manipur and, to a lesser extent ,the Buddhist Bhutia-Lepchas and Hindu Nepalis in Sikkim ¹

I have presented this broad sketch to emphasize the point that India is fraught with problems that make it the most fractious democracy in the world. Before and after Independence, India has had an unenviable record of civil strife in one region or the other. Very often the strife has had shades of separatism and every once in a while a separatist movement has raised doubts about India's very survival as a nation-state. And yet India has survived, absorbing most of the separatist movements in its huge constitutional entity, just as most of the invasions across the northwest were absorbed into the mainstream of society during the course of India's history.

With this discussion of India's continuing internal strife and its rather unusual recent history of dealing with the problem as background, what are India's options and its prospects as it tackles the greatest challenge to its nationhood since Independence—the separatist agitation in Punjab. There are already a number of excellent studies of this challenge. This essay takes a new approach by comparing and contrasting the Punjab problem with the thirty-year-old trouble in another region of the Subcontinent, northeast India. There the government has had constantly to wage a battle against strong armed and highly motivated separatist forces in the tiny, but strategically located, states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and, to a smaller extent, Tripura. The Indian government has also had to deal with a tremendous crisis in the main northeastern state of Assam where a popular mass-based agitation against the infiltration of illegal migrants from Bangladesh crippled

¹ In the English language media in India we make a distinction between Nepalis (Nepali speaking Indian citizens) and Nepalese (immigrants from Nepal)

the state's economy, stopped the flow of its crude oil to inland refineries and resulted in nearly 7,000 deaths¹

While I have drawn on the analyses of others, the discussion here is based not so much on published texts as on my own experiences, interviews, and notes over the course of a decade of news reporting in the northeast and Punjab. The situation in these two regions which are separated by 1 800 miles of land and a broad span of cultural, ethnic, and economic differences offers some insights into India's plans for long-term strategy in Punjab and more broadly, into the security and stability not only of India but the bordering nation of Pakistan.

TWO REGIONS

So that I might remain true to my journalistic roots, let me recount a telling anecdote from my reporting notebook in Punjab. On the afternoon of June 2, 1984, just a day before the army began moving into Punjab for Operation Bluestar² I was among a small group of newsmen who climbed up the building of the 200-year-old Brahm Buta Akhara (a semi-religious shrine or gathering place) overlooking the Golden Temple complex—a rectangular conglomeration of buildings about the size of four city blocks and sacred to the Sikhs. Because of its strategic location, the armed soldiers of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF, India's paramilitary national gendarme) had occupied the Akhara for months, keeping an eye on the Golden Temple with field-glasses and rifles. This had obviously resulted in tension between the police and the extremists, both sides were peeping out of their sand-bagged

¹ The Assam agitation and violence has been dealt with in detail in my book Assam: A Valley Divided (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984).

² The Assam agitation and violence have been dealt with in detail in my book Assam: A Valley Divided (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984).

and brick-and-concrete battlements Just two days before our arrival, the strain had taken its toll The police and the extremists had exchanged thousands of rounds of fire resulting in 16 deaths

The newsmen visiting the Akhara were briefed by a junior officer of the CRPF who proudly introduced to us a slit-eyed jawan (trooper) of his battalion The jawan, he said, had nearly been killed by sniper fire from inside But, said the officer, he reacted quickly and proved that he was the best shot in the battalion The jawan added for effect I was the one who gave that clock a whole burst, he said, pointing at the shattered remnants of a clock-tower at one of the temple entrances

The jawan was rather garrulous, certainly unlike the Gurkha that many of us newsmen had presumed him to be As it later turned out, he was from the northeastern state of Manipur and was recruited there while the same CRPF battalion was involved in local counterinsurgency operations It was hard for us to conceal our surprise at the unusual enthusiasm with which he talked — Indian troopers are, more often than not quiet and shy of civilians Finally an explanation was forthcoming from the jawan himself With articulation uncommon for a mere rifleman he said For years the Punjabis have come, beaten us up and insulted our women, because they said they had to keep India together Now see what I did yesterday

With that simple statement he summed up the changing fortunes of these two utterly dissimilar and most distant regions of India and the reversal of roles for their peoples From being India's sword arm and the guardian of national unity Punjab has now become India's greatest challenge It is thus natural that people tend to compare Punjab with the northeast, sometimes with sweeping generalizations Many government officials often say We sorted out the northeast, we will sort out Punjab And in several interviews

Sikh extremists have repeated to me The governments should not underestimate Punjab This is not the northeast

The two situations have striking similarities and crucial differences The campaign of terror in Punjab today feeds on a minority's feeling of alienation — as was the case with the tribal insurgencies in the northeast It has a certain degree of popular support even if it is not quite as strong as it was in the case of the Mizo and Naga rebels And the Sikhs are sustained to a considerable extent by arms training, guidance and logistical back-up from Pakistan, just as the Chinese-backed rebels in the northeast operated from sanctuaries what was then East Pakistan In both cases, the trouble came from sensitive border states

But there are also vital differences that, unfortunately make a solution to the Punjab crisis a much tougher proposition

— First, neither the Naga Mizo or Manipuri guerillas of the troubled northeast were driven by an all-consuming religious fervor While the Nagas and, to some extent, the Mizos did draw some sustenance from the Baptist Church, this was incidental and not central to their motivations As a matter of fact in both cases the church and the pastors, rather than urging the youths to fight, constituted a vital middle ground They were close to the extremists and yet remained in communication with the government The experience in Nagaland, as well as Mizoram has shown that it was because of the efforts of the Church there that the government was able to achieve results through negotiations ¹ Incidentally, a similar hope was held in some circles for Darshan Singh Ragı, the Sikh head priest in the Golden Temple

¹ For in depth study of the role of the Christian church and pastors in peacemaking in Nagaland and particularly Rev Zairema in Mizoram see Nirmal Nwabedon's Nagaland The Night of the Guerillas and Mizoram The Dagger Brigade (New Delhi Lancers 1978 and 1979 respectively)

However, he could not retain the confidence of the extremists and left the Temple in the first week of August. Since the northeastern tribals' motivations were purely political, it was possible to assuage them with the offer of regional power within the framework of the constitution. In the case of Sikh extremists, religion was an additional complicating factor.

— Second, unlike Punjab, none of the rebellions in the northeast involved the leading, frontline Indian communities. The rebels were all tribal minorities and ranged against them were people from Punjab and the other parts of what is sometimes termed mainland India. The northeastern rebellion remained at most a distant blur in the mind of the average Indian. He knew that the army was fighting some misguided tribals in some part of his country, but it did not really matter. In fact, it was often said that the average Indian knew more about the Eritrean insurgency than about what was happening in Nagaland. Punjab is entirely different. Every little development there registers on the minds of the entire nation, and with special intensity in India's northern political hub.

— Third, the trouble in the northeast was perceived to be a fight between some tribes and the government and not in any way a part of the national political process. Thus when, on April 1967, a wad of *plastique* planted by Naga rebels (trained in what was then East Pakistan) blew up 65 passengers travelling in the Tinsukia-New Jalpaiguri passenger train near Lumding in Assam close to the Nagaland border, it did not cause any outrage.¹ Contrast this with what happened in July, when Hindu bus passengers were massacred by suspected Sikh terrorists in Haryana, the

¹ Even before this an explosion in a train had resulted in 10 deaths. Interestingly the explosions were taking place just when mediation efforts were in a crucial stage. Compare this with the trend in Punjab where major terrorist strikes have a nasty habit of occurring whenever peace-making efforts seem to be getting somewhere.

neighboring province of Punjab. A major Punjab-related incident can easily cause trouble as far away as Bombay, if not Cochin.

— Finally, in the same vein, the fight in the northeast was purely between the state and the tribes. It did not involve selective killings of innocent people from a particular community as is the case in Punjab. There were, of course, some aberrations in the dying phase of the Mizo insurgency when the guerillas served the quit notice on all non-Mizos and killed a few plainsmen. Barring that, the rebels' targets were well defined and thus the battlelines were clearer.

These differences have brought entirely new security problems to the Punjab. For example, at the operational level it presents hard choices for officials who have learned their counter-insurgency expertise in the northeast (a fact admitted by the military). Police and intelligence officials in Punjab confess that, for the first time ever, they are facing the dilemma of fighting their own. In the northeast they simply told their troops in Punjab that they were there to fight the enemy, and the jawans did the rest. But the harsher methods used in the northeast — a scorched earth policy in Nagaland and village regrouping in Mizoram — would never work in Punjab, which is so close to Delhi and constantly under the eye of the national and world media. Just six months after the 22-day India-Pakistan war of 1965, Laldenga and his Mizo National Front (MNF) declared independence in Mizoram and on February 28, 1966, they even hoisted their flag on the government treasury in Aizawl (now the state capital) which was then the headquarters of Mizo Hills district.¹ The government in New Delhi, still recovering from the aftereffects of the war, was shocked and retaliated with all the firepower it could muster.

¹ For excellent details of the bombing of Aizawl town again refer to Nibedon's Mizoram: The Dagger Brigade.

in the region. While helicopters dropped troops to save the beleaguered garrison of the paramilitary Assam Rifles in Aizawl, Indian Air Force fighters strafed the town until each one of the rebels had fled. It is a cruel irony, but can the government ever contemplate such methods in Punjab?

Linked to this, also, is the question of calling out the army in Punjab. The demand has been raised several times in the recent past by groups within the government, the ruling Congress-I party, and by at least one major national party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has lost most of its orthodox Hindu base over the years and now uses the demand for the army as a kind of mantra. This clamor can also be examined in light of the army's experience in the northeast.

LESSONS FROM THE NORTHEAST

In the northeast the army had a slightly different mission. Entire tribal communities could be and were considered to be hostile. There was a state of armed conflict, and ambushes and counter-attacks took place all the time. In Punjab the problem is not an all-out insurgency but one of selective terrorism with which the army is neither equipped nor oriented to deal. The army operates in the minimum strength of a company and the terrorists in the maximum strength of four, or at best six. Unless they make the mistake of concentrating *en masse* in the Golden Temple yet again the army would never find them.

Besides, the army's performance in the northeast was sobering. In no case except perhaps the smaller urban insurgency of Manipur, was the army able to kill or capture the major extremist leaders. While it fought bravely in both Mizoram and Nagaland, it also suffered heavy casualties. The army's approach paper to the fourth pay commission — an unclassified document — states that for fourteen years after the Bangladesh War of 1971 (a period in

which there was no war with a foreign country), more than 10,000 troops died due to operational reasons. It is reasonable to presume that not all of them died in truck accidents.

At the same time, the heavy deployment of troops and some successes did help suppress insurgents. These then quietly retreated into the jungle fastnesses of Burma and Bangladesh, waiting for a more opportune moment to strike. In fact it was during this period that the Mizo rebels were able to stage their most sensational success of all times. On January 13, 1975 a Mizo hit-squad in police uniforms infiltrated the police headquarters in Aizawl and shot to death Inspector-General of Police G H Arya, his deputy L B Sewa, and Special Branch Superintendent P Panchapagesan. This only resulted in intensification of army and the other security operations. At the peak of these deployments in 1982-83, thirteen army brigades were deployed in the counterinsurgency role and, sure enough, in two years they did not even have thirteen encounters with the rebels. Today, even though there is relative peace, the army is unable to disengage and it has set up an entirely new counterinsurgency corps at Dimapur in the Nagaland foothills. Given the high percentage of Punjabis (specifically, Sikhs) in the armed forces, such overkill involving permanent troop deployment against civilians would have much more serious repercussions in Punjab, itself historically the most imperilled frontier of the country.

In fact, if any lesson of the northeastern experience is applicable to Punjab, it is that rebellions, if tackled properly, run their natural course and, after peaking, are susceptible to negotiated settlement. In Mizoram, Laldenga did not lose to the army. Nor was he suddenly pricked by some latent Indian patriotism into settling with the Center on very minor political concessions and the promise of power. He settled because two decades of blood-letting

had convinced him that even if he and the hard core of his followers could survive, they were not going to win and realize their ambition of an independent Mizoram. Laldenga himself is too shrewd to ever admit this. However, I got a strikingly candid explanation from none other than Vanlalzari who, as a teenaged personal secretary to Inspector-general of Police Arya, had helped her boyfriend, Lalhelia, plan and execute the January 1975 killings in the Aizawl police headquarters. Serving a life sentence for her complicity, Vanlalzari was out on parole when I met her in May, 1986, in the MNF office at Aizawl. "We see no point in going on fighting any longer if we can get a reasonable amount of freedom within India," she said, and then added with a remarkable sense of logic: "Sovereignty by itself does not mean freedom. Poland is sovereign. But is it free?"

A similar kind of feeling in a strong faction of the Naga underground leadership led to their abjuring violence and signing the Shillong peace accord of 1975. The bush war and mediation efforts, led at one time by none other than the late Jaya Prakash Narayan continued simultaneously for several years in Nagaland and succeeded in 1975 only after the insurgency had peaked and a majority of its leaders were convinced of the futility of continuing the fight. There were other reasons, such as inter-tribal rivalries and plain battle weariness, but these were incidental to the decision to sue for peace.

As a matter of fact, Nagaland's is the fascinating example of the only insurgency which might have actually succeeded. In 1962, when the Chinese reached the foothills of Assam, there was hardly anything the Indian government had at its command to stop a takeover by the Nagas who then had 12,000 men under arms and who were better equipped than the regular Indian army. They carried G-3 or Chinese AK-47 semi-automatic weapons,

while the Indian army was still in the age of 303 bolt action rifles. The strange fact that the Nagas, trained, armed, and indoctrinated by the Chinese, never exploited that opportunity was to me one of the most intriguing chapters of northeastern history. I raised the question once on a nighttime jeep drive with Scato Swu, at the time of the Nagaland state elections in October 1962 was the president of the Naga underground¹. He laughed and said, "Yes, I had only to blow the whistle and the two battalions of Madhya Pradesh Special Armed Force would have run away. My youngsters were impatient that I do so. But we saw the moment of truth. What was better? Staying with India, which had a democracy - even if we thought it gave us a raw deal - and respect for Christianity, or go under the control of the Chinese communists. We had all seen what they had done in Tibet and thus it was not such a difficult choice to make."

Manipur is yet another interesting and different example, as this was the only northeastern state where the army had decisive success on the ground. It captured not only the Nameirakpam Bisheshwar Singh, the commander-in-chief of the guerilla's Peoples Liberation Army but also his two successors, and liquidated the entire central core of 32 members trained by the Chinese in Lhasa. Bisheshwar was considered a security risk in the Imphal jail and was thus immediately transferred to Varanasi where he spent more than two years in preventive detention under the National Security Act. Eventually, the government had to decide between prosecuting him and letting him off. Obviously, there were few in Manipur who would stand in the witness box against Bisheshwar and a judge from the nearby state of Assam had to be named to the special court to prosecute him. The judge

¹In 1982 he was a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha the upper house of India's parliament

never turned up in Imphal. Finally, the only charges the state could bring against Bisheshwar were the possession of an unlicensed weapon and the attempt to kill the army officer who had led the raid on his hideout. This against the biggest extremist leader the army had ever captured in three decades of fighting insurgencies¹. The government was saved further embarrassment as the state elections intervened. Bisheshwar contested as an independent, won, and was sworn in on the Indian constitution as a member of the state legislative assembly.

As in the case of Nagaland and Mizoram, this was an instance of the Indian political system being able to absorb a separatist movement within itself. It did this either by sharing power or by making minor constitutional concessions (such as giving the tribe the first lien on mineral resources, which may or may not exist, and offering restrictions such as requiring inner-line permits for the entry of outsiders). Moreover, although successive Indian governments used force against these movements, they were not shy of talking to people like Laldenga and Phizo who, at their peak, were much more anti-national than even the better known Sikh extremist leaders. And as the experience of these states has shown, rebels who settle make excellent citizens, leaders and even soldiers. The cabinets and legislative assemblies in Nagaland and Mizoram are full of former self-styled generals and ministers. Zuheto Sema, who was the commander-in-chief of the Naga underground and at one time the most wanted man in the region, commands a battalion of the Border Security Force (BSF). He is in fact one of the highest decorated officers in the BSF, and most men in his unit are former underground

¹ Compare this with the demoralized state of judiciary in Punjab where first of all it is almost impossible to bring someone in the witness box against those accused of terrorism. Then the judges, some of whom have been assassinated, are under extreme pressure of terrorist retribution.

guerillas Similarly the single battalion of Mizoram Armed Police, which has had more success against the MNF than the army in recent years, has a substantial sprinkling of former rebels It is logical to argue that the trouble in Punjab could follow the same graph except that Punjab at least at this moment, has some disturbing differences

THE PUNJAB CASE

Punjab is different First, every single incident in Punjab (and related to Punjab) has the potential of bringing retaliation elsewhere in the country This has resulted in a chain reaction making it increasingly unpopular for any government in New Delhi to initiate the process of reconciliation Second, who is there to talk to? In Mizoram, for example, the government negotiated with Laldenga who, in turn, commanded the loyalty of the rebels and was their unquestioned leader In return for political concessions he delivered peace The Sikh terrorists have no Laldenga, nobody who can offer peace in return for political concessions With the benefit of hindsight it is now possible to put the failure of the Rajiv-Longowal accord on Punjab in some perspective It can now be said that an accord need not have been signed with somebody not in a position to deliver peace In the coming months the same question will crop up again and again If Barnala was considered incapable of delivering peace in return for Chandigarh and river waters, can the other former chief ministers and rebel Akali leaders, Parkash Singh Badal, Gurcharan Singh Tohra, and Baba Joginder Singh the aging father of late Sant Bhindranwale, give peace in return for Sikh detenus in the Jodhpur jail or in return for a Kashmir-like constitutional status?¹

¹ Under Article 370 of Indian constitution the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been accorded some special privileges that give it greater autonomy than the other states of the union

Most of the moderate and even middleground leaders in Punjab today are not the leaders of the rebellion. They are purely part players firing the gun from the terrorists' shoulder, as the saying goes, (or from the hip, which is perhaps more apt in a context where the submachine gun is the weapon of choice). The problem in Punjab is that, so far, the Sikh protest is not orchestrated by a figure such as Laldenga, Phizo or Bishehwar Singh, an unchallenged leader who calls the shots. The terrorists at present are a few groups of highly committed youngsters on a mission of murder.

Given this background, the Punjab paradox is that the way out can only begin with a long wait. During that wait the police and intelligence anti-terrorist operations must be beefed up, while simultaneously pleading with the rest of the country not to treat every new incident of killing in Punjab as a national calamity. This should not be misunderstood as a suggestion for increased repression nor do I wish to imply that repression will solve the problem in Punjab. On the other hand I am suggesting avoidance of overreaction. It could either result in panic and too many hasty concessions without getting any tangible returns. It could also lead to a full-scale army operation which, as I have tried to argue at some length, will bring no gains at all. Punjab has to be treated as another of the ethno-security problems that have periodically surfaced during India's continuing search for its national identity, a problem that the Indian leadership and polity are familiar with.

Politically too, it has to be a waiting game -- waiting for a credible new Sikh leadership, in fact a credible extremist leadership, to emerge. And that leadership must be convinced that no matter what the score in terms of bodies, the extremists cannot win against the might of the Indian state power and the collective will of an overwhelming majority of the nation. Only at that stage can the idea of a negotiated settlement have any lasting meaning.

