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Regionalism in India: Two Case Studies

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REGIONALISM IN INDIA: TWO CASE STUDIES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Government
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Tehnaz J. Dastoor

1989

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, August 1989

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I. WHAT IS REGIONALISM?.....	11
CHAPTER II. ASSAM AND THE NORTH-EAST.....	37
CHAPTER III. PUNJAB.....	69
CONCLUSION.....	112
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	117
VITA.....	124

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate if regionalism in India would cause the secession of any of its parts into independent states.

Two case studies are used: North-East India and Punjab.

North-East India is examined during the years of riots which developed into large scale violence from 1979 to the signing of an agreement between New Delhi and Assam in 1985.

Punjab was studied from India's post-independence status through the 1984 violence at the Golden Temple, which led to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and to the signing of the accord between New Delhi and moderate Sikh leader Harchand Singh Longowal.

The thesis concludes by reiterating the theme of "unity through diversity" and illustrates that regional problems in India can be contained when the central leadership in New Delhi is responsive and deliberate in its actions.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is entitled "Regionalism In India" and delves into the problem of regionalism, primarily prior to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh extremists. In January 1985, her son, Rajiv Gandhi coasted to a landslide victory for Prime Ministership, while winning more than 50% of the popular vote for the first time in history.¹ The decisive mandate reflected in part a longing in India for security and continuity.² Rajiv has managed to appease various minority groups partially, launch his campaign against corruption, use business school theories and computer readouts³ rather than consulting astrologers, and combine tradition with innovation.⁴

Hence under his guidance the socio-economic and political situation has continued fairly smoothly, and will be used to substantiate my thesis that regionalism will not cause the disintegration of the Indian Republic.

My thesis will be divided into several chapters. The introduction will deal briefly with various views on the term "regionalism" as understood by political scientists Harry E. Moore, Merril Jensen, Jyotirindra Das Gupta, Clifford Geertz and Louis Snyder.

Moore uses the term "regionalism" in a narrow concept, emphasizing its geographic connotation with special focus on

climate and soil types,⁵ whereas Jensen undertakes an intense study of American history and the formation of the states to accomplish the task.

Das Gupta, Geertz and Snyder on the other hand display a more comprehensive and adequate view of the subject. They link together the multi-faceted social, cultural, ethnic and linguistic disparities between areas or regions which assist in causing regional loyalties or attitudes. Thus regionalism for these individuals is not only geographic, but all encompassing.

Das Gupta uses the term "regionalism" as an extension of various local points of view and states that this could help promote "political integration rather than disintegration".⁶ Geertz expounds the argument of natural versus civil ties, and Snyder utilizes the colonial background and formation of independent states to exhibit his attitude towards the subject. The only difference being that Geertz uses the term "primordial ties" and Snyder "mini-nationalism" instead of "regionalism".

The first chapter of my thesis shall expound the various views mentioned above on regionalism, but will also use for the main body of literature Selig S. Harrison's India: The Most Dangerous Decade as an important source on the history of the evolution of regional loyalties, and the role they play in power politics in India.

The second chapter shall deal with the case study of North Eastern India and its importance for regional politics in the country. The North East during the period between 1979-81 was in a state of turmoil regarding the issue of whether "foreigners" should be allowed to vote. These "foreigners" were people from the bordering states of West Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh. The North Easterners felt that too many outsiders, mainly Bengalis, would swamp the vote in their own favor, shunting the native population to the position of second class citizens. Hence, they revolted against this so called illegitimate vote, striking against the government and causing a total breakdown of all communication within this region. Naturally when the issue could not be resolved through normal channels of communication, President's rule was imposed, and after a year of turmoil and turbulence, the situation was eventually stabilized by the central authority.⁷

The various books which shall be used to facilitate the writing of this chapter are Hill Politics in the North East by Shibanikinkar Chaube, Conflict in Nagaland by V.K. Anand, Social and Economic profile in North East India edited by B. Datta Ray, Problems of the Hill Tribes, North-East Frontier, 1873-1962 by H.K. Barpeigoni and Minority Safeguards in India by K.K. Wadhwa. Regarding the daily events between 1979-81, various newspapers articles, journals and literary magazines have also been utilized.

Both Hill Politics in the North East by Chaube and Conflict in Nagaland by Anand, undertake a fairly detailed study of the North Eastern region of India from the pre-colonial period through the 1970s, the major difference being that Chaube blames separatist feeling in this region on British meddling, whereas Anand imputes British administrative efforts for similar results. Both books deal with the geographic, social, cultural, religious and linguistic aspects of this region, and also focus on the "psychological maladjustment" which gave birth to the conflict of minds between the hill and plains people.

Social and Economic Profile in North East India uses a geographic cum historical approach to demonstrate the formation of various tribes on an ethno-linguistic basis. The author states that this was the main reason for the formation of separate states in North East India and continues to provide a challenge to the proponents of national unity in India.

H.P. Barpeigani's book on the problem of hill tribes uses a totally diverse approach to the subject. Barpeigani believes that the drawing up of borders on the whim of colonial powers did much to destroy the confidence of the hill tribes. He states that with the introduction of the Inner Line to the extension of control to the McMahon Line, increased the contingency of border conflicts with China. Thus a strong united Peoples Republic of China began to pose

a severe threat to the Indian government on its North-Eastern frontier and exacerbated the already unstable situation in this region. Barpeigani's account is based on historical events and the public's attitude towards these events.

Finally, K.K. Wadhwa's Minority Safeguards in India is an important source of information regarding the Indian Government's present policy towards the hill tribes. Mr. Wadhwa demonstrates through the use of Government data the various concessions and exemptions made to these minority groups in the North East. He states that not only are they exempt from the payment of income tax, but are also entitled to unremunerated education facilities which include tuition, stipends and scholarships, and specially reserved seats in all Government controlled or owned, offices and facilities.

The third chapter of my thesis will deal with the second case study, the Punjab. Through the efforts of the Indian Government with the Green Revolution, this region became a vital area of food cultivation for the Indian people. Unfortunately in the late 1970's, Mrs. Gandhi's proponents turned out to be her most fanatical opponents, when under the guidance of their leader Sant Bhindranwale they took over the prestigious Golden Temple at Amritsar and converted it into an ammunition cache. These militant Sikhs demanded an independent state of Khalistan on the basis of religion, and when Mrs. Gandhi refused to buckle under these

demands, they decide to turn the Punjabi countryside into a battlefield. Eventually, Mrs. Gandhi gave orders to the Indian army to storm the temple, thereby killing Bhindranwale. Many politicians stated that this perhaps was her greatest political blunder. On November 1984, Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by two of her own Sikh bodyguards, and communal riots between Hindus and Sikhs broke loose in most of Northern India. However, under the guidance of her son Rajiv Gandhi as the new Prime Minister, the situation appears to be under control, and legitimate Sikh demands are being studied by the Indian Government.

The various books consulted on the subject were Indira Gandhi Returns by Khushwant Singh, Minority Safeguards In India by K.K. Wadhwa, Gandhi and the Punjab by S.L. Malhotra, Dynamics of Punjab Politics by Dalip Singh and The Evolution of the Sikh Community by W.H. McLeod.

Indira Gandhi Returns is an important book with regard to achieving insights into the Prime Minister's character. Mr. Singh, through his numerous interviews with Mrs. Gandhi assists in the understanding of the Prime Minister's psyche, and hence her attitude towards others, which helps the reader to realize the reason she had retained her Sikh bodyguards even after threats of assassination had been issued from numerous quarters.

Minority Safeguards in India is an important source of information on the formation of the state of Punjab on the

basis of separate linguistic needs, after indian independence in 1947.

Gandhi and the Punjab on the other hand, deals with the political mobilization of the Punjabi populace under the direction of the Mahatma, before independence. The author demonstrates how an apathetic region was converted into a highly politicized state under the leadership of Gandhi. He also states the importance of control over the temples in this region not only as a political but also a financial leverage.

Dalip Singh's Dynamics of Punjab Politics is an extremely important source not only on the geographic, social and cultural aspects but also the political dimension to the present day problems of Punjab. Singh not only gives his reader a historical background but also describes the formation of the militant Akali Dal, the role it plays in Punjabi politics, the importance of the Green Revolution, and the impact of Congress Rule in this region. Singh concludes with a fairly concise overview of the situation in the Punjab until the late 1970's.

Finally, The Evolution of the Sikh Community by W.H. McLeod consists of five distinct essays of which only three are pertinent to this thesis. The usefulness of this book lies in the fact that it provides a keen insight into the composition of the Sikh body, its moral guidelines, ideals, work ethics and relationship with the Hindu community.

The concluding and fourth chapter of my thesis will present my main argument that regionalism will not cause the disintegration of the Indian Republic. Most of the above sources will be used to augment this view. Two additional books, Conflict in Indian Society and Inside India Today shall be utilized to counter my own views on the subject. Conflict in Indian Society by V.B. Kulkarni is an excellent book regarding the political situation in India during the 1960's which led to "regional chauvinism plus communal disharmony",⁸ growing restiveness of the student community, challenges by industrial laborers and depressed classes,⁹ causing the eventual "breeding storm"¹⁰ to continue to rage, burdening the country's excessive population and leading to frustration and despair amongst large sections of the population.¹¹

Inside India Today by Dilip Hiro defends a Marxist point of view as against my own "centrist" position. Hiro is a strong champion of minority rights, however, the means of achieving these rights has led him to take an unpopular stand on the subject.

Finally, India in the 1980's by Philip Talbott shall be utilized to demonstrate by means of fairly recent statistics, the progress made in independent India since the Transfer of Power in 1947. Talbott manages to show his reader the enormous problems which the Indian government had to overcome, and the considerable amount of progress made

in most areas of development.

Besides books, various newspapers, literary magazines, periodicals and journals shall also be utilized to help demonstrate to the reader that even though regionalism has existed from time immemorial, and does cause problems for the Indian government, the disintegration of India is not seen on the horizon, because underneath the surface, there is a basic ideal of "unity in diversity" prevalent amongst most people on the Indian subcontinent.

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Notes

1. "A Landslide for Gandhi", Time, 7 January 1985, 68.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 7.
4. Ibid.
5. Harry E. Moore, "What is Regionalism", Southern Policy Papers No. 10, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 1.
6. Jyotirindra Das Gupta, Language Conflict and National Development, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1970), 2.
7. Under Article 123 of the Indian Constitution the President, on advise of the Prime Minister, may declare President's Rule in a state when Parliament is not in session, if he is satisfied that circumstances exist that demand immediate action.
8. V.B. Kulkarni, Conflict in Indian Society, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1981), 4.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 5.
11. Ibid.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS REGIONALISM?

In the first chapter, the evaluation of the concept of regionalism will be reviewed, drawing on the views of authors Harry E. Moore and Merrill Jensen, who have researched the growth of regionalism in America, and the totally divergent view point seen in the work of Jyotirindra Das Gupta, Louis Snyder and Clifford Geertz. Selig S. Harrison's perspective on regionalism will provide a most useful summary of this discussion, due to its particular emphasis on the nature of regionalism in India.

Harry E. Moore states that in spite of its antiquity, the

"...ideal of regionalism has not yet achieved a clear-cut definition which would be acceptable to all regionalists. A working idea of the notion might be stated in some such terms as these: A region is an area large enough to display most social factors, distinctive enough to make recognition fairly easy, and possessed of a characteristic mode of life."¹

Moore emphasizes that regionalism was "born of geographic study" and "always has to do with space...:"²

"...people cluster together and form institutions of various sorts which reach out into surrounding areas for part of their support. Cities and towns form an hierarchy of points of influence; the metropolis dominating the city, the city the town, the town the hamlet, and the hamlet the countryside."³

However the influence has not always flowed in one direction. The rural districts also affect the cities, acting as a conservative force and slowing down the processes of change.⁴ Thus regionalism, as understood by Moore, in an American context, is a natural phenomenon, grown as a result of man's effort to live together and supply common needs.⁵ It offers an escape from a national standardization and regimentation which would lead in the direction of mediocrity.⁶ Similarly it opposes the processes of disruption which would deny the necessity of co-operation and peace with neighbors.⁷ Summarizing his views, he quotes the adage that "regionalism promotes union, but not unity."⁸

Regionalism in America utilizes the "sectional concept" to describe regionalism, and employs William Craigie's definition of the term section, as being "a distinct part of the country; a territory set apart by geographical, economic, or cultural lines."⁹ The book ranges over the period from about 1750 to 1900 opening with the consolidation of the old, far-flung system of sections within British America, it goes on to show how the "British American" system of sections that existed up to the Revolution was destroyed by war and independence, and was replaced after 1783 by a new contracted "American" system of sections.¹⁰ Differentiation between territories was made on the basis of divergent economics. In 1763 British America

consisted of an immense tract of land and islands ranging between the frigid and tropic zones.¹¹ For example,

"...the valley of the St. Lawrence was narrowly inhabited by a resident population relying on farming and fur trading for support...Cape Breton and Nova Scotia were distinct from the St. Lawrence country and were recognized as such; timber-working, agriculture, and fishing dominated their economical activities."¹²

A system of sections characterized by local, differences and variations in climate and soil types was also prevalent. From "New Britain" (Hudson's Bay) on the north to the British West Indies on the south, the entire area was divided into numerous sections.¹³ Behind and above all these tidewater settlements which ranged from Pennsylvania to Georgia lay the "back country", and this "Indian country" beyond it, constituted still other sections in the system of sections that was being evolved in British America about 1765.¹⁴

Fenning and Collyer in A New System of Geography had devoted a series of chapters to the subject of American geography which bore the title "Of the Northern Part of the British American Dominions, Particularly of the Countries Bordering on Hudson's Bay; with the Islands of New Foundland, Cape Breton, and St. John."¹⁵ The following chapter was entitled "Of Nova Scotia, Canada, New England, New York, the Jerseys, Pennsylvania, and Maryland", and the Continent of America, Particularly of Virginia, Carolina, Georgia, and Florida."¹⁶

Thus Fulmer Wood has summarized his stance on the subject by indicating an emphasis on the geographic, climatic and terra-types, together with local economics to help differentiate one section or region from another. He summarizes that,

"...given time, there arrives the moment when men in several sections looking at each other, and at themselves, come to the realization that they are not as their fellows are, nor are their fellows as they are. Thus sectional consciousness has come to birth, and, therewith, consciousness of differences between kindred."¹⁷

Jyotirindra Das Gupta in his book Language Conflict and National Development delves deeper into the problem and states that regionalism should be seen in its social, political, ethnic and lingual context. However, he stresses the problem of language conflict, as the most important aspect of regionalism, specially in developing areas.¹⁸ He further argues that "both in Europe and elsewhere the transformation of traditional societies into modern political communities"¹⁹ was usually accompanied by corresponding linguistic modernization. However, traditional societies appear to show extremes of linguistic diversity, in a sense that "in such societies, administration, religious affairs, literary activity, and ordinary communication tend to be carried on in different languages."²⁰ Thus in an traditional society the use of a foreign language may be employed for administrative and religious affairs, whereas a variety of local dialects are

employed by the general masses.²¹ Emphasizing John Gumperz's view on the subject, he states that low literacy and the considerable efforts needed for language training tended to favor polarization of power in a relatively small elite.²² Internal linguistic diversity thereby symbolized extremes of social and political stratification.²³

Das Gupta concludes by suggesting that there is no reason to assume that sub-national or regional loyalties are necessarily inconsistent with national loyalties.²⁴ He argues that social divisions are not automatically translated into political cleavages. Even when some of them are politically translated into political cleavages, there may be a wide variation in their direction, momentum and consequences. Hence, he reasons, not all political cleavages are translated into open conflicts, and even when they are, such conflicts may actually promote integration rather than disintegration.²⁵

Snyder and Geertz have investigated the question of regionalism on the basis of its social, political, ethnic and lingual contexts. Snyder states that Asian nationalism started as a progressive, liberating force, only to descend into an unhealthy reaction after liberation. Along with the "creation of larger nationalisms came the expected plethora of unsatisfied mini-nationalisms."²⁶ The pattern of centralization versus de-centralization was the same as on other continents.²⁷ Post independence governments found

themselves enmeshed in the usual problem of how to deal with minorities in a plural society.²⁸

"Such conflicts extended to all corners of Asia: Kachins and Karens in Burma; Nagas in India; Sabahs, Sarawaks, and Singapores in Malaysia; Muslims in the Philippines. Everywhere in Asia it was the same story-- the centralized state versus rebel regionalists."²⁹

These volatile peoples of Asia had their own ethnic, religious and linguistic differences.³⁰ Their communal rivalries caused nation building to become a process of the "utmost complexity."³¹ Hence, cultural and religious differences were also accentuated by ethnic concerns. Throughout the vast Asian continent there were feuds between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.³² Added to religious and racial differences were linguistic rivalries which "broke the continent into a hodgepodge of opposing regionalist factions."³³ More than three thousand languages and local dialects were distributed though Asia.³⁴ Minorities were seen to hold to their special linguistic affinity, a practice which encouraged clashes with the central authority.³⁵

"The same kind of linguistic drive governing the Basques in Spain, the Walloons in Belgium, and the Quebecois in Canada impelled varied Asian peoples to demand autonomy or independence."³⁶

Finally, Snyder argues that invariably there are unsatisfied ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural sentiments resisting control from the center.³⁷ "Unified centralism was threatened with becoming a dissolving factionalism, the familiar theme of an unsettled social

order throughout the world."³⁸

Clifford Geertz does a thorough job of not only explaining the term regionalism and applying it to several contexts such as the Indonesian, Ceylonese, Iraqi, Kurdish and Thai. He states that:

"Regionalism has been the main theme in Indonesian disaffection... The Tamil minority in Ceylon is set off from the Sinhalese majority by religion, language, race, region, and social custom; the Shiite minority in Iraq is set off from the dominant Sunnis virtually by an intra-Islamic sectarian difference alone. Pan-national movements in Africa are largely based on race, in Kurdistan, on tribalism; in Laos, the Shan states, and Thailand, on language. Yet all these phenomena, too, are in some sense of a piece...[of regionalism]"³⁹

Geertz furthers that each individual has one aim, which is a search for an identity, and a demand that identify be publicly acknowledged as being important, or "being somebody in the world."⁴⁰ Unfortunately, tensions soon begin to develop between "...gross actualities of blood, race, language, locality, religion or tradition and of the steadily accelerating importance in this century of the "sovereign state as a positive instrument for the realization of collective aims."⁴¹

The author states that a more exact definition of the nature of the problem of regionalism involved is that considered as societies, the new states are abnormally susceptible to serious disaffection based on primordial attachments as against civil ones.⁴² By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the "givens" or "assumed givens" of social existence.

"Immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givens that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. The congruities of blood, speech custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves."⁴³

Hence one is bound to one's neighbor or kinsman, hence, as a result not only of "personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but also because of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself."⁴⁴

Civil ties, on the other hand, are maintained not by calls to blood and land, but by a vague, intermittent and routine allegiance to a civil state, supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by governmental use of police power and ideological exhortation.⁴⁵

In conclusion, Geertz maintains the havoc that is wreaked by both primordial and civil ties, has wrenched societies in divergent directions causing "competing loyalties of the same general order, on the same level of integration."⁴⁶ Thus we find that Clifford Geertz has given us the most complete, and hence the most useful definition of the term "regionalism" and its use will help towards the general explanation of regional loyalties in present day India.

Regionalism in India is an extremely complex issue, as Selig S. Harrison has demonstrated. The concept will be developed here from an historical-physiographic perspective.

The earliest recorded traces of civilization in India were the Dravidian, Mohenjo Daro-Harappan civilization in North-Western India, which date to about 5000 B.C. These early dravidian cultures were probably pushed southward by the arrival of the Aryans from Persia some 1,500 years later.⁴⁷ The light skinned Aryan nomads who crossed India from Persia brought with them a language (a branch of the Indo-European linguistic family) which, evolving into Classical Sanskrit, was to become the unifying medium of the new composite Hindu civilization.⁴⁸ In the South, the dark skinned Dravidian people, with their own distinct Tamilian culture and script, developed as a parallel civilization within the South Asian subcontinent.

Even within their North Indian limits however, northern imperial rulers never established, up to Mughal times, more than the loosest sort of political control over the regions beyond their home bases.⁴⁹ "Aggrandizement was a Hindu monarchic ideal; annexation was not."⁵⁰ Although to secure his home base a king would occasionally annex his immediate neighboring kingdoms, but he did so normally for pillage and prestige and not for the extension of any permanent machinery of bureaucratic power.⁵¹ When the empire dissolved these annexed territories reverted back to their old independent status as a matter of course.⁵² Thus in the case of North India, the growth of separate regional identities in Gujarat, Bengal and Assam, for example,

persisted despite the recurrent subordination of these regions to the dominant Ganges heartland.

It was the Aryans who eventually imposed form and unity, discipline and order, on the culture which resulted from the interchange with the earlier Dravidian and Austric settlers; and the new Hindu scriptures, written in the language of the Aryans, had as their setting North Indian Aryan territory.⁵³ Thus we see the early formation of regional identities on the basis of race and language, beginning to develop within the subcontinent.

Unfortunately, the political history of India cannot be examined by itself and must also be viewed with an eye to the physiographic differences within the country. Geography played an important role in the formation of various regions within the country. The west and east flow of so many rivers in a country lying north to south, accentuated the natural separation between the northern and southern plains, and a vast tableland in between.⁵⁴

Harrison claims that soon India became sub-divided into three broad regions.

"The Ganges plain and its appendages were the most that any North Indian dynasty controlled..., the southern plains and their outworks all that most southern rulers say as their proper horizon, and the Deccan tableland the province of middle Indian emperors..."⁵⁵

In the north, the Ganges basin, "one of the world's greatest expanses of rich, tillable soil, was hemmed in by the Himalayan ranges and the forested slopes and ragged

desolation of central India, which constituted a great natural enclosure inherently destined for political consolidation."⁵⁶ K.M. Pannikar stated that the eastward flow of the Ganges lead to the integration of populations in a closed area bound together by the river and its tributaries.⁵⁷

In the center, the Krishna and Gadavvari rivers, rising near the Arabian Sea and emptying some nine hundred miles away on the other side of the peninsula, gave a coast to coast unity to the Deccan.⁵⁸

In the south, the Tamiland plains, stretching south and west as the peninsula receded inland from the Andhra coast, offered a decided contrast to the Deccan tableland lying above and beyond.⁵⁹

Thus with these historic-physiographic divisions playing an important role, various regional, linguistic sub-cultures soon developed within India. In the north the two major linguistic forces were Pali and Prakrit.⁶⁰ These languages were passed on from generation to generation, through an oral tradition, largely in the custody of the priestly classes, substantially without change.⁶¹ Sometime around the 7th century B.C., Sanskrit evolved as the standardized language of the north.⁶² Sanskrit for many centuries thereafter was the one language of culture amongst the literati in all parts of India.⁶³ Although universally recognized as the language of culture, and widely used by

the priestly and intellectual classes all over the country, classical sanskrit was never the language of the common people who resorted to the use of Prakrit as the form of speech.⁶⁴

The original Indo-Aryan Prakrit subsequently developed into Apabhramshas or spoken languages of the masses which, in their turn, evolved into the modern Indian languages.⁶⁵ Thus from the root language sprang western Hindi, Rajasthani, Gujarati, and Bengali.⁶⁶ Hence each region in Northern India developed its own language using Sanskrit as its basis, in much the same way that the romance languages of Europe evolved from Latin after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

In the south, the Tamil language has the oldest continuous literary tradition, followed by Kannada, Telegu and Malayalam.⁶⁷ These languages were based on Dravidian a totally different script and are spoken almost exclusively in South India. However, even today, when we speak of linguistic areas or regions, we find that at the frontiers of each region the transition from one language to the next is not sudden but very gradual and almost imperceptible.⁶⁸

In 1953 Andhra Pradesh was the first state formed in response to popular demand for a state border coinciding with a linguistic boundary.⁶⁹ Thereafter many Indian state borders were reorganized to accord with language limits: Maharashtra state with the Marathi language, Gujarat with

Gujarati, Tamil Nadu with Tamil, Kerala with Malayalam, and Karnataka with Kannada.⁷⁰

Thus within each of the three basic arenas, regional, linguistic and political identities took form, as development progressed around agricultural core areas.⁷¹

However, Ashoke Dutt states that after language "the most pervasive element within the cultural landscape of India is religion."⁷² All traditions in India seem to be related to the Hindu social order.⁷³ Hinduism, a native religion, has been defused throughout India from its place of origin within the Indus plains.⁷⁴ The Aryans who nurtured this religion form around 2,000 B.C.⁷⁵ migrated eastward, settling almost all of the Indo-Gangetic plain.⁷⁶ The Aryans being racial but not religious fanatics⁷⁷ found no difficulty whatsoever in borrowing the gods of the conquered races and giving them niches in their pantheon.⁷⁸ Hence the historical development and intellectual expression of Hinduism was the meeting and fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan elements. Unfortunately, in course of time, the fate that befell the Dravidians befell the Aryans too, and they in turn, were conquered by foreign races.⁷⁹ But social intercourse with the foreign races and to be prohibited in order to preserve the racial purity of the Aryans.⁸⁰ Hence each community that was admitted into the all-embracing Hindu fold, was organized into an independent social unit, with a definite status and a code of its own.⁸¹

In religious matters however, a more lenient attitude was adopted.⁸² People were allowed to worship any gods they pleased and hold any vies they liked as long as these did not seriously challenge the fundamental principles of social organization.

Together with the development of Hinduism the caste system also flourished. This was a social rather than a religious phenomenon, and is the product of many centuries of immigration and geographical isolation.⁸³ It was thus evident that the earliest phase of the caste system resulted from the conquest of one people by another of a different skin coloring.⁸⁴ The old divisions were separated into 5 grades: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (merchants or agriculturalists), Shudras (artisans and landless workers), and Pariahs (outsiders).⁸⁵ Thus the additions of vast numbers (something over 2,000) of minor castes, either occupational, or due to conquests, and the effects of colonization, had complicated the system enormously.⁸⁶

In the 6th century B.C., we witnessed the birth of a spiritual movement in India called Buddhism.⁸⁷ This was in the nature of a reform movement within the Hindu fold. Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha who was born in 623 B.C. at Lumbini (Northern India).⁸⁸ The faith started with the basic principles of rebirth and Karma which were then accepted by Indian philosophers as truths.⁸⁹ The Karma

doctrine referred to the merits and demerits of a being in his past existences which determine his condition in his present life.⁹⁰ Hence, on the death of a person, the only thing that survived is not the soul, as the Hindus believed, but the result of his action, speech and thought.⁹¹

About 250 years after the death of Buddha, the Indian emperor Asoka (273 B.C. - 232 B.C.) embraced Buddhism and sent Buddhist missionaries throughout India.⁹² Buddhism was made the state religion and spread rapidly to China, Burma, Ceylon, Tibet, Korea, Japan and Cambodia.

However, with the passage of time the number of Buddhists have gradually depleted from India due to a variety of causes. The wealth of the monasteries and the easy life soon attracted many undesirable and unworthy tenants into the fold. Also, the preponderance of monks over the laity, and the ritualism of Buddhism in its later stages detracted from its earlier simplicity and purity. Finally, the reorganization and revitalization of Hinduism under Sankara (788 - 850 A.D.) and the Muslim invasion of India in the 18th century all aided to bring about the decline of Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent.⁹³

The 1981 census ed that the Buddhist population was about 5 million.⁹⁴ The concentration of Buddhists are to be found in Maharashtra and North-East India. The Maharashtra neo-Buddhist movement was founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who converted to Buddhism at a special ceremony with a large

number of his followers from the so-called "untouchable" caste.⁹⁵ This upset large sections of the Hindu traditionalists who felt that these conversions would sidestep the traditional caste system, thus elevating the lower classes.

The Buddhists of the North-East, especially the Chakma of the Chittagong and Lushai Hills and those Buddhists from Arunachal and Assam belong to the same school of Buddhism that prevails in Tibet.⁹⁶ After the Third century B.C., when Asoka sent his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghmitra to Sri Lanka on a Buddhist mission, three streams of Buddhism developed in Asia. One stream went to Sri Lanka, Burma, Siam, Cambodia and Malaya. Another flowed to central Asia, and from there to China, Korea and Japan, and yet another to Tibet.⁹⁷

The Muslim conquerors who came to India, had a traditional culture of their own and they believed that the salvation of mankind could be achieved only through their religion.⁹⁸ They hated idolatry, and considered it their duty to remove it from the world.⁹⁹ They had definite dogmas on religion, and the slightest deviation from them, even in thought, was believed to lead to eternal damnation.¹⁰⁰ While they held such strong views on religion, they had the most lenient social code in the world.¹⁰¹ They were free from many social prejudices and believed that all men were equal in the eyes of God, and that social inequalities were

man made.¹⁰² Thus Islam, was in nearly every respect, the antithesis of Hinduism with its social rigidity and spiritual anarchy.¹⁰³

In their first onrush the Muslims were extremely violent towards the Hindus.¹⁰⁴ They destroyed Hindu temples and idols, plundered and forcibly converted the Hindus and put to the sword those who would not accept Islam.¹⁰⁵ But with the occupation of India, the Muslims became responsible for the good government of the country and had to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards Hinduism, the professed religion of the overwhelming majority of their subjects.¹⁰⁶

Finally, the most modern Indian religion of any substantial proportion is Sikhism, and was founded by Guru Nanak in the Punjab in 1469.¹⁰⁷ Though Sikhism was monotheistic and adopted both Hindu and Muslim beliefs, W. H. McLeod states that this did not constitute a synthesis of "Hinduism and Islam", but was a Sant synthesis, which Guru Nanak "reworked according to his own genius, and passed on in form unequalled by any other representative of the tradition."¹⁰⁸ However, under Guru Amar Das, the second successor to Guru Nanak, various innovations were introduced which must be seen as concessions to social needs, not as a conscious shift in doctrine.¹⁰⁹

During the period of Jahangir's rule (1605 - 1628 A.D.), due to the increase of Mughal hostility and fear of the growing power of the Sikh Guru, there was a large

increase of a substantial number of Jat members. Jats were a rural and agrarian community, with strong martial traditions and for centuries constituted the elite of the Punjab villages.¹¹⁰ Hence, the growth of militancy within the Panth must be traced primarily to the impact of Jat cultural patterns. Yet it was only towards the end of 18th century under the able leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that the Sikhs became a power to be reckoned with, and that Sikhism became the e religion in the Punjab.¹¹¹ The religion remained confined mainly to it's area of origin until the 19th century, when relocation through migration took place.¹¹²

During the 1947 partition of India, may Sikhs from the Western Punjab Plain in Pakistan, migrated to the Eastern Punjab Plain in India.¹¹³ With the States Reorganization Commission appointed in 1955 by Prime Minister Nehru, the Akali Dal, the paramilitary political party of Sikh nationalism, increased their agitation for a "Sikh" state.¹¹⁴ The demand for a separate state of the Punjab (Punjabi Suba) was voiced not in communal, but in linguistic terms. Punjabi was the mother tongue of both Sikhs and Hindus, but communal passions had led large sections of the Hindu community to renounce the Punjabi language by naming their mother tongue as Hindi for census tabulation.¹¹⁵ However, in 1966, supposedly as a concession to the valour and suffering of the Sikhs in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965

and partly due to the growing response in the Hindu speaking areas for a separate state of Haryana, the government announced that the Punjab would be divided into two units, Punjabi Suba and Haryana, corresponding to the regions of language dominance, thereby eventually satisfying Sikh demands based on the "totality of language conflict mixed with religious intransigence."¹¹⁶

Thus we may conclude that regionalism in India was not only historical, geographical, racial and lingual but was also based on religious lines and that religion played a very important role in regional politics.

Religion also molded many other aspects of Indian life. In a society in which tradition surrounds its inhabitants, where mobility is restricted for most persons, and where life expectancy was quite brief until very recently, religious attitudes have placed their stamp on a wide range of cultural features and processes.¹¹⁷ A prospective student of Indian society would shift his manner of greeting from the generally used "namaste" in Hindi or "namascar" in Tamil to a more specific religious greeting depending upon the religious community of the person greeted.¹¹⁸ Thus, if that person were a Muslim from the North West, the greeting is "salaam walekum" in Urdu and "Sat sihri akal" serves for the Sikh who speaks Punjabi.¹¹⁹

A second cultural area in which the influence of religion is pervasive is that of diet, food selection and

customs.¹²⁰ Dietary habits in India are complex, regionally varied and strongly orientated towards religion.¹²¹ Although most Hindus are vegetarians and will not consume beef, some non-Brahmins are not strict vegetarians and will eat fish, mutton and pork.¹²² Consumption of flesh among Hindus is closely related to caste us, with higher ranking castes exhibiting the greatest restrictions.¹²³ Muslims on the other hand eat all meat except pork, Christians and parses have no taboos, whereas Buddhists and Jains are strict vegetarians and therefore, do not consume any kind of meat.¹²⁴ The following example form the city of Calcutta is particularly revealing:

"In Burrabazara area...we find a large number of fruit stalls. Mechua Bazar Market has no fish or meat stall. This can be explained by the fact that the community composition of that area is of non-Bengali vegetarians. In the Muslim and Christian dominated localities there is a large concentration of beef stalls in the markets...In bengali Hindu-dominated localities, fish stalls predominate..."¹²⁵

In conclusion, viewing the 5,000 year history of India we may observe that it was conquered by several different races, who spoke various languages, had special dietary habits, and followed disparate customs. It seemed natural that the separate regions with distinctive regional identities and loyalties would also evolve. Thus, a growth of regionalism began to take shape and this was soon to play a major role in shaping the political focus of New Delhi to the troubled areas of North East India and Punjab.

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CHAPTER 2

ASSAM AND THE NORTH EAST

In order to evaluate the thesis that regionalism will not cause the disintegration of the Indian republic, two case studies, North East India and Punjab, have been utilized. In both these areas we have seen mounting tension leading to violence and bloodshed in the ten years from 1976 to 1986, and yet in both cases a measure of understanding and rationality in centre-state affairs has helped alleviate the problem.

North-East India consists of five states (Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, Manipur, and Meghalaya) and two union territories (Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh) which form a wedge between Bangladesh, Burma and China.¹ This region is enclosed by the "blue hills" that are made of the:

"..Eastern Himalayas on the north, the Naga Hills on the east, the Mizo and Tripura Hills on the south, and the Shillong plateau...and Meghalaya on the west, form almost complete natural boundaries of the Brahmaputra Valley, the heartland of Assam."²

The entire region is connected to the rest of India by a thin neck of West Bengal, that at one point, is scarcely 25 miles wide.³

For several centuries the valley and the hills of north-eastern India have been exposed to waves of invasion

and migration. The province of Assam at the far northeastern corner of India is a museum of nationalities. Of them, the Garo, living in the western parts of the Meghalaya plateau, had a legend of having migrated from the northwest, i.e. the southern side of central Tibet. The Khasi, at least some of them, claim to have migrated from southeast Asia, part of their route probably passing through Russia. The Kuki and the Chin inhabiting the southern hills of Manipur, Tripura, and most of the Mizo Hills, are supposed to be from southern China. The Naga, settled in Nagaland and the northern hills of Manipur, and some of the groups in the northeast are assumed to have immigrated from eastern Tibet.⁴ Thus, the northeast frontier is not inhabited by Indo-Aryans as is most of northern India, but by nomadic Mongoloid tribes who have strong ethnic and cultural connections with the people of China, Tibet, and Burma.⁵

Significantly, not even one of the regions' seven political units is bound by a common language of the original fold.⁶ Arunachal Pradesh, for example, has no less than 50 different languages.⁷ The Ao Nagas cannot follow the language of their neighbours, the Angami Nagas.⁸ The Khasi speech is almost Greek to the Garo's, although they belong to the same state, Maghalaya.⁹

The religious composition is no less complex. Hinduism reached the valley of Manipur probably in the 15th century,

to which some Manipuri Brahmins trace their settlement.¹⁰ The Chakma of the Chittagong Hills, a section of whom are now living in the Lushai Hills, profess Buddhism.¹¹ Several sections of people from northern Arunachal belong to the same school of Buddhism as prevails in Tibet.¹²

Finally, since the late 19th century, Christianity has been embraced in the Garo, Khasi, Mizo, Lushai, and Naga Hills, by about half of the total population in this region.¹³

Thus after the British secured and blocked the boundaries of northeastern India, when they were eventually opened up to the rest of the country, this geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and racially isolated minority became apprehensive and obsessed with self-preservation.¹⁴ Though some observers may feel that the emotional links between the people of the northeast and the rest of India is tenuous,¹⁵ in reality the differences amongst these various tribes are as wide as the differences between them and the rest of India. In older times, certainly, hostility among them often went deep.¹⁶ Today, regional ties and affiliations exist in abundance in northeast India, but it is important to note that this is not manifested in an individual seeing himself as a northeasterner; he is more likely, even today to see himself as Mizo, Naga, or Assamese.

This brief case study will consist of five parts. After a brief description of the history of northeastern

India, causes of building tension will identified. In the third section, the events leading to the violence of 1979-84 will be probed. Fourth, an analysis of the case will be presented, and finally, a conclusion of the case of Northeast India will complete the chapter.

History of the North-East

The British entered the northeastern frontier from Bengal in the seventeenth century; as a result, the communications network was centered in eastern Bengal. Assam was left as an appendage rather than as an integral part of British India.¹⁷ Early British records about the hills of northeast India were almost uniformly contemptuous of the "savage", "barbarous", and "primitive" tribes. These characterizations arose out of the hill peoples' dress, war-like habits, and attachment to the recently condemned systems of headhunting, human sacrifice, and slavery. Chaube states that the Angami, the legendary headhunters of the Naga Hills, were brilliant terrace cultivators in the pre-British days. The rice yield of western Angami was higher than the all-India average. The Sema, another object of early horror tales, had mastered the technique of preparing salt from brine springs.¹⁸ Cotton was widely cultivated and iron was in use in almost all the hills.¹⁹ The tools may have been primitive, but their skills were not. Chie Nakane in the 16th century praised the economic system and method of wet-rice cultivation among the hill

people.²⁰

The immediate impact of British power on the hills was territorial. When in 1832, Upper Assam was restored to a subordinate monarchy, the Prince was granted limited authority on criminal justice and an unlimited authority on civil justice.²¹ Civil laws of the hills societies were based on customs of almost innumerable varieties, and so long as they did not affect British commerce, the British government had no intention of changing them.²²

In 1872-73, however, the British saw an absolute necessity for bringing under more stringent control the commercial relations of the British subjects with those of the frontier tribes.²³ Therefore, the government came to the conclusion that it was necessary to assume special powers and lay down special rules for regulating the relationship between the plains and the hill peoples.²⁴ This regulation gave power to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal to prescribe the line to be drawn, "beyond which no British subject, and certain classes of foreigners, could cross without a license or pass."²⁵ This Inner Line also prohibited "any subjects living inside the area from moving therein."²⁶ Beyond this line the tribes were left to manage their own affairs with only such interference on the part of the frontier officers, in their political capacity, as might be considered advisable by the British authorities.²⁷ The plains people argued that this was a device by which the

British sought to alienate the tribal people from the peoples of the plains and thereby promote their imperial policies. It is true that the regulations were not enforced against the Christian missionaries but were imposed rigidly against the Indians, and that the Inner Line regulations generated a separatist tendency in the tribal people. Some have argued that much of the trouble in Nagaland and Mizoram today may be attributed to it.²⁸

Bardolai, who along with Nichols-Roy and B. N. Rau drafted the Sixth Schedule of the Constituent Assembly, debated that:

"it is not unknown to you that the rule of the British government and the activities of the foreign missionaries always went together... During the war, the then rulers and officers developed in the minds of their tribal people a sense of separation and isolation and gave their assurances that at the end of the war they will be independent states managing their affairs in their own way. They were made to believe that the entire hill would be constituted into a province and put under some irresponsible government. You might possibly have read in the papers that plans were hatched in England in which the ex-governors of Assam evidently took part, to create a sort of kingdom over time."²⁹

However, the growth of British administration in this region during the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century necessitated the building of small townships within the deep hills, the construction of pony or cart roads over the hills, and the introduction of a monetary system therein.³⁰ During the two World Wars several hillmen had the opportunity to join the armed services and travel around the world.³¹

Though trade was not unknown in the hills before the arrival of the British in this region, the bulk of it was done through a system of barter. Monetization of the entire hill area took place with the spread of British administration, and a small business community consisting of shop keepers and petty contractors was born among the natives.³² Thus, the offshoot of this limited monetization together with the early success of education helped in the creation of an embryonic middle-class among the indigenous people.³³

Upon the attainment of independence in 1947, New Delhi's attitude was summarized by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who stated that "we cannot allow matters to drift in the tribal areas. At the same time we should avoid over-administering these areas. It is between these two extreme positions that we have to function."³⁴ Ironically, it was, in fact, the very success of government policies in this area which led to increased tension.

Causes of Building Tension

There are actually four easily identified causes of building tension in the Northeast: firstly, the success of the measures undertaken by the government; secondly, the language conflict; thirdly, the Bengali attitude towards the indigenous peoples; and lastly, the volatile immigrant issue. Together these forces exacerbated existing tensions and led to the problems, unrest, and violence of 1979.

The initial cause of the increased friction which developed in the Northeast from the 1950s through the 1970s has been attributed by some, to the "success of the measures taken by the government. These have led to an awakening among the Schedule Tribes and given them the ability to stand up against vested interests. Now they are ventilating their grievances."³⁵

The measures undertaken by the government of India in September 1950 were in pursuance of the provisions contained in Articles 16(4) and 335 of the Indian Constitution, which was intended to benefit these backward people, in more or less the same way the U.S.A. has employed its Affirmative Action program. They made reservations for previously suppressed classes such as the Schedule castes, Harijans (the untouchables) and Schedule Tribes (peoples from the Northeast), in jobs under the government's control.³⁶ Through recruitment by open competition as well as other forms of recruitment, the reservation of posts for people belonging to Schedule Tribes was sealed at 5% of all vacancies, and in 1970 by orders issued by the Ministry of Trade Affairs it was further increased to 7.5%. The maximum age-limit prescribed was also increased by five years in the case of candidates belonging to Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes.³⁷ The fee's prescribed for the admission to any examination or selection to the service or post would be reduced to one-fourth for these special classes.³⁸

Because the general level of literacy was lower among these depressed or backward classes, the government of India began a campaign for the active participation in the educational development of these people.³⁹ Besides the liberal allocation of funds and constructive programs for educational development, the government of India increased educational facilities which included free tuition, stipends, scholarships, free primary education, and the initiation of success scholarship schemes for post-graduate and research studies.⁴⁰ Thus, it seemed to some that greater educational facilities had made larger sections of people more aware of their rights, and this new awareness had led them to revolt against vested interests.

Another cause for an increasingly aggravated situation was the language conflict and the Bengali attitude towards the Assamese peoples.

Initially, the British did not suspect that the native officers (who were aristocrats in their own society) imported from Bengal to help administer Assam, which was acquired in 1826, would usurp linguistic leadership and replace indigenous Assamiya with Bengali. But Bengalis who settled in Assam as the British East India Company's servants, exercised great influence on their masters.⁴¹ During those years of Bengal cultural resurgence and upheaval, when Calcutta was the Capital of British India, a large exodus of educated Bengalis went both to Assam and

Orissa, to run the administration. The Bengalis had a natural advantage in being the first to acquire the English language and British concepts, values and ideas, and both the language and the ideas enabled them to run the Raj. In the process Assamiya lost its position as the official language for about three decades. Although Assamiya was restored as the official language of schools and law courts, the Bengali language continued to play a dominant role in many spheres. Many Bengalis' not only refused to recognize Assamiya as a rich and separate language, but considered it to be a vulgar dialect of Bengali.⁴² This may have been due either to ignorance or to a deliberate attempt to slight the indigenous language, but either way, its effect on the attitudes of Assamese toward Bengali domination, of which the language issue was a symbol, were long lasting.

Differences between these two peoples seemed to worsen, especially after independence. During the States Reorganization Commission's work in the 1960s, West Bengal began to demand that the Goalpara district of Assam be attached to its state, which immediately provoked the Assamese plea for the addition of Cooch Bihar to Assam.⁴³ Though the States Reorganization Commission maintained the status quo, the bitterness generated by the claims remained. Hence, in the 1960s the debate over Assam's official language and language of instruction in college, between Bengali and Assamiya only caused further aggravation.⁴⁴

A further problem in the Northeast was the Bengali attitude towards the indigenous population. The Bengalis even after independence maintained a stance of superiority with regard to these people. They seldom mingled or participated in the cultural activities such as the "Bihar Festival" in Assam.⁴⁵ Naturally, to the native population this smacked of the past British imperialist policies which could hardly be tolerated in independent India.

The major cause for friction, which developed into large scale violence in 1979, seemed to be the immigration issue.

Until 1947 the Northeast had been a sparsely populated region compared to the rest of India, and had been cut off from it due to the previous British policy of strict adherence to the Inner Line. Land was so readily available that traditional agriculture had been carried out by cutting down and burning trees to fertilize the land, and the land was cultivated until the soil became less productive, at which time the people moved on to new plots of land.⁴⁶ From being left "largely to themselves" after independence, during the 1950s and 1960s these hill people were confronted with large scale immigration into their states by Bengalis, Nepalis, Orriyas, Madhya Pradeshis and East Pakistanis (later Bangladesh), who immigrated from areas of high density to the last valuable open ground closest to them.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the inhabitants of those pockets in the northeast

had learned that they had rights, and that they were threatened.⁴⁸

Tripura state, where the native tribesman were outnumbered by Bengalis by the 1960s, was often cited by other residents of India's northeast as an example of what would happen to them if they did not rid their state of these "foreigners." In Assam, by 1979, five million of the state's nineteen million people were non-Assamese, and most of these were accused by the native Assamese of infiltrating from Bangladesh.⁴⁹

Hence, the northeasterners were or became accustomed to their geographic, ethnic, lingual, and historic isolation and the new 'open door' policy of the Government of India seemed to threaten not only their cultural and ethnic traditions but also their political and economic status in their own state. These were the circumstances which set the stage for the events which led to the violence in the region in 1979.

Events Leading To The Violence

On Friday, November 2, 1979, in Assam, the local people began agitating against the registration of up to 200,000 people who some Assamese organizations considered "illegal aliens." Mr. Y. B. Chavan, the Deputy Prime Minister in Charan Singh's government, tried to squelch this threatening electoral crisis arising out of a campaign against "outsiders."⁵⁰

The people who were the targets of these campaigns had lived in Assam for years, in some cases contributing greatly to the development of the forested region, which was sparsely populated in Indian terms. Part of this group came from Bangladesh, Bengali-speaking Muslims who, during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, fled the poverty of what was then East Pakistan, and later became Bangladesh, for the opportunities of Assam.⁵¹ Another portion of those labeled aliens was made up of the Bengali-speaking people from West Bengal, and a third were Nepalese from neighbouring Nepal.⁵²

At issue was a challenge to the registration of up to 200,000 people who were, some Assamese organizations insisted, "illegal aliens." There were demands that the names of these "foreigners" be stricken from the voter rolls for the forthcoming elections in January, 1980.⁵³ Bengalis (from West Bengal), after calls were raised for disenfranchising those alleged to be aliens, felt threatened and quickly formed a group called the "Indian Citizens Rights Preservation Committee" in Assam.⁵⁴

In response to this group, the country's election commission ordered that no name be struck from the voters rolls before the Parliamentary elections in January.⁵⁵ This led to outcries from Assamese who claimed that the election could well be determined by votes of people who were not citizens and who might even be deported after the elections.⁵⁶ Since over 40% of the 19 million people in

Assam were Bengalis, and at least 5 million were illegal aliens, the Assamese now worried that through the electoral polls these Bengalis could win a large portion of seats in the state legislature and introduce numerous bills to suit their own needs and purposes.⁵⁷ They felt this would be detrimental to their own interests.

As the election approached, violence against "foreigners" increased. On December 12, 1979, the Central Government in New Delhi instituted President's Rule in Assam making it's administration under the direct control of New Delhi.⁵⁸

In December, 1979, the tension was further heightened by the exchange of fire in Belonia (North East) between India and Bangladesh.⁵⁹ The dispute had occurred over a 44 acre patch of paddy and sugarcane along the Mahuri river, 80 miles south of Agartala, the capitol of Tripura.⁶⁰ Farmers from the Indian side had been cultivating this land. That year, Bangladesh claimed rights to the property. Due to an exchange of fire, the Tripura government had ordered the raising of a protective embankment along Belonia and had charged that the government of "Bangladesh is up to some mischief and was deliberately trying to whip a minor dispute into an international situation."⁶¹ This hostility between the two countries helped to aggravate the tensions between the North Easterners and the Bangladeshi inhabitants of Assam.

From January to April 1980, the situation was relatively calm, but in May, once again clashes between Assamese and Bengalis were reported. Five Bengalis were reportedly killed in fighting in the Tinsukia and Kamrup districts of upper Assam.⁶² A curfew had been imposed in the troubled areas where once again the Assamese demanded the expulsion of "illegal aliens," and the Indian Army had to patrol the important towns.⁶³ The Assamese students had intensified their protests by starting a nine day non-cooperation movement, which paralyzed work in Government offices, banks, and other public services. Picketing of oil installations continued, blocking the flow of oil through the pipeline leading from refineries outside, for the fifth consecutive month.⁶⁴

The talks between the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi and students were broken off when the students refused to accept a stipulation that only those "foreigners," mostly Bengali refugees from Bangladesh, who had entered the state since 1971 would be identified and deported.⁶⁵ The student leaders demanded that all those who had come since 1951 should be identified and disenfranchised as a first step to their deportation or resettlement.⁶⁶ Because the situation became so tense, authorities jailed many student leaders. Kumar Mahanta, President of the All Assam Student's Union, one of the few not jailed, said that the agitators were prepared for negotiations, provided the Indian Government

stood by the Constitution and expelled illegal residents.⁶⁷ He claimed that millions of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Nepal enjoyed political rights in Assam and that more people were crossing the unchecked borders daily.⁶⁸

By Tuesday, June 10, 1980, additional security forces had been flown into Tripura and Assam to contain the spreading violence. New Delhi had declared two districts of Tripura "disturbed areas" and ordered in Army and paramilitary forces. Mrs. Gandhi also hinted at a foreign influence, namely the C.I.A., being behind all this agitation.⁶⁹

By this time, the inter-communal violence death-toll in Assam was over 2000.⁷⁰ There were reports from Bangladesh that 700 bodies had been washed down by rivers from this state.⁷¹ Shelter materials, food, and drugs were sent by the Government of India to help more than 200,000 rendered homeless.⁷² The irony of the Government's situation was not lost on the Western Press:

"...In colonial days the sort of unrest now spreading in many parts of India would have been called 'native uprisings.' These days the Government officials speak of 'cultural clashes' and 'the rising self-confidence of once shy tribal groups.'⁷³

In 1979-80 in Assam, Northeast India saw the worst massacres in India since the blood baths that had accompanied its partition almost 33 years earlier. More than 15,000 houses in two districts alone had been burned,

the traffic had been crippled and supply trucks ran only in convoys as protection against hit-and-run raids by rebelling tribesmen who battled the Government security forces. In all, the Government arrested more than 1,500 persons in the state of Tripura during the month of June, 1980. The strikes and picketing in Assam, which had started in the Fall of 1979 over the issue of who should be eligible to vote in the January 1980 national elections, had turned into India's largest mass demonstration since the "Quit India Movement" that ended with India gaining her independence from Great Britain in 1947.⁷⁴

Violence spilled over from Assam to some of the other states and Union territories in domino fashion. In the state of Nagaland, an underground movement arose which called for a long war with the Indian authorities to gain "the liberation of Nagaland."⁷⁵ In Mizoram, the Mizo Liberation Front claimed it assassinated 7 persons, including 4 soldiers in July, 1980. Unrest in Manipur had caused 10,000 persons to flee the state by the summer of 1980. Things were so unsettled in the Northeast that the Indian Government refused foreign correspondents a visit to this area.

'It's like fishing,' explained one Senior Home Minister, when an attempt to use force against Assamese picketers failed. 'When the fish pulls, you have to let up on the line.'⁷⁶

Hence, by July, 1980, Mrs. Gandhi's government was beginning to maintain a go-slow approach, trying to keep the peace and protect the minorities in the hope that the Northeast region would cool down enough so that it could deal with specific demands.⁷⁷

In spite of the Government's efforts at conciliation, the dissenters continued their stern opposition. The All Assam Student Group, generally acclaimed the leader of the movement, on 9th July, 1980 refused a new request by the Prime Minister to end the strike.⁷⁸ The student leaders stated that the strike would continue until the Government presented a programme that would guarantee the separate identity of the Assamese people, and chided Indira Gandhi for failing to stop the "repressive measures" in the state.⁷⁹ Northeast states wanted to preserve their separate cultural and ethnic identities against the encroachment of people they considered foreigners.

In August, 1980, hope of concluding the massive anti-Government unrest first emerged in Assam.⁸⁰ In an agreement reached between the Government and student leaders in the state, demonstrations against the immigrants were ended. This agreement followed a ceasefire in the 14-month civil war in neighbouring Mizoram. It appeared that the Government offered to deport all Bangladeshis who had entered Assam illegally since 1971, while conferring alien status without citizenship or the right to vote on those who

entered the state before 1971. However, there was little the Government could do about the deportation of Bengalis who had migrated to Assam from elsewhere in India. Nor would it have been an easy diplomatic task persuading Bangladesh to take back people who had left that already over-populated country during the past ten years.

With the failure of the talks October 27, 1980 between the Indian and Bangladeshi Governments on this matter, once again the Assamese renewed their drive for expulsion of the immigrants.⁸¹

It was the view of Mrs. Gandhi's government that agreeing to meet the demands of the Assamese student leaders was impossible, since it would mean the uprooting of several thousand Bengalis who had long been settled in Assam and had no prospect of returning to their original homes.⁸² On November 2, 1980, the ten-month blockade of oil installations by demonstrators had reportedly come to an end. Troops arrested pickets at wells and started pumping oil to the refinery at Gauhati.

Finally, the violence abated and on December 6, 1980. One year of President's Rule ended when a new administration made up of eight members of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Congress Party, took control of Assam's state government.⁸³ Anwar Taimor, a trusted leader of the Congress Party, was sworn in as Chief Minister, amid heavy security, and once again the revival of local government was instituted.⁸⁴

However, it was only in August of 1985 under the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi that a "peace deal" with the Assamese Chief Minister was signed and a measure of peace ensued.⁸⁵

Under this new accord between the Prime Minister and the Assamese Chief Minister elections were to be held "soon" in Assam. The Central Government also bowed to the demands by Assamese protestors and declared that all immigrants who arrived in Assam after 1965 were to be disenfranchised. In addition, immigrants who had arrived after 1971 were to be deported.⁸⁶

This Assamese accord called for the then current state legislature, elected in the disputed voting of 1983 to be dissolved. A caretaker government was to take control until after the new elections. Additionally, certain unspecified "legislative and administrative safeguards" were promised by the Central Government "to protect the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage" of the Assamese people. The government also promised to intensify economic development of the region.⁸⁷

Newspapers and politicians proclaimed that the Assam dispute had finally been "solved" by the accord.⁸⁸ Mr. Gandhi was hailed as having brought an attitude that contrasted on the Assam issue with that of his predecessor and mother, P.M. Indira Gandhi. The Governor of Assam Bhishma Narain Singh praised Mr. Gandhi for his "wisdom and

statesmanship."⁸⁹

Thus we find under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, years of disputes, violence and strife were resolved and a new understanding and attitude was reached between the Centre and Assam. Finally, the Central Government had taken the initiative and brought the North East's most troubled state back into its fold. The Centre, through Rajiv Gandhi's pragmatism and political manoeuvring had managed to resolve a decade of social, political and cultural antagonism, and had created a climate of hope, cooperation and empathy between Assam and the Centre.

Analysis of The Situation

The genesis and growth of this regional outburst was the accumulation of aggravations over several problems. These problems had been initiated by British policy in the northeast and were systematically ignored by the Indian Government after independence. Hence, decades of shouldering ill-feeling and consequent inaction in this region caused North Easterners to conclude that they had to take fate in to their own hands. They decided that recourse through violent means was the only answer to their plight.

The British policy of segregation, established by the drawing of the Inner Line, helped to isolate and alienate the hill people from the plainsmen. The only community allowed into this region by the authorities during the

British rule had been the neighbouring Bengalis who had assumed all senior posts during the British administration of the region. Bengali chauvinism spread from language to attitudes and helped to alienate further the people in this "closed society."

After the declaration of independence in 1947, the government's attitude toward the northeast was similar to that of the British, in that they did not directly interfere or intervene in the region, but, on the other hand, they did nothing to prevent migration into the hills. Due to economic pressure on the land, mass migrations from neighbouring West Bengal, East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), and Nepal continued for three decades from 1947 to 1977. The hillsmen found themselves swamped by people who not only spoke different languages, wore different garments, showed an ethnic diversity, and separate religious affiliations and belonged to a completely different culture, but also owned large portions of their land and controlled most of the top administrative positions in the state.

Some Assamese viewed their situation as similar to the Palestinian problem.

"To those who are aware of Jewish travails in Europe, Israel's moral right to exist is unquestionable. But from the Palestinian point of view, Israel is only the result of a forcible take-over of their land by people who are backed by western money and arms."⁹⁰

Behind the Assamese perception lies the peculiar history of the demographic transformation of a frontier area

within a relatively short period of time and its enduring effects on the evolution of Assamese society. The census reveals that in 1971 Assam had a population of 15 million people, of which only 6.5 were a result of natural population growth among the ethnic Assamese.⁹¹ In effect, the other 8.5 million, i.e., the majority, were assumed to be migrants and their descendants.⁹² Hence, Baruah states that:

"Such a high level of migration does not easily lead to assimilation. The sheer logic of numbers argues against harmony. It is difficult to imagine any situation where such a phenomenon would not cause social tensions and resentment."⁹³

There were primitive rebellions against the influx in the 19th century when the hill peoples raided tea gardens. In the plains the protest against immigration began in the 1920s, leading to the British Inner Line permit systems.⁹⁴

"National and sub-national upsurges are often forms of political intervention of the masses when institutional channels fail to articulate public grievances. Along with demographic changes, structural underdevelopment has been the inescapable fate of the frontiers..."⁹⁵

"Stripped of all its abstractions, the Assamese fight for their cultural identity to maintain their majority status in Assam. It is against all historical logic to expect Assamese sub-nationalism to die out because the presence of 'foreigners' has become a fact of life, any more than Palestinian nationalism can be expected to end because Israel is a formidable reality."⁹⁶

Baruah suggests that Assam's problems might require further reorganization of the state by "lopping off" Bengali speaking Cachan district and carving out a genuinely Assamese speaking majority state to avert a "permanent

Northern Ireland type of conflict."⁹⁷

Article 6(a) of the Indian Constitution explicitly recognizes the right to citizenship of a person if "he or either of his parents or grandparents was born in India as defined by the Government of India Act, 1935."⁹⁸ Hence, migration to India after July 19, 1948 was categorically permitted even by people who initially went to Pakistan. The right to sanctuary and citizenship is not barred by time no matter when a person chooses to come back, they shall be deemed to have migrated to the territory of India after the 19th of July, 1948.⁹⁹

Clearly, the founding fathers of the Indian Republic would not have written these provisions if they had not felt in 1949 that population shifts were bound to occur.

Besides migration, the North Easterner's problems were a culmination of post-independent India's mood of rising expectations of growth and prosperity when the British had departed and which remained unfulfilled after 1974. Added to this was the government of India's systematic help extended in the educational sphere which aided the North Easterner's understanding of the political situation. Hence, when the economic and political landscape appeared bleak, student leaders helped mobilize the once apathetic masses into a large scale civil disobedience movement against "foreigners."

Supplementing the problem was the Congress Party's

dependence on minority votes.¹⁰⁰ To counter Communist Party activities and neutralize its influence, Tripura's Congress Party leaders assisted by transporting in refugees from Comilla (in Pakistan) and other districts.¹⁰¹ This gamble did not pay, but having acquiesced in these tactics, the Congress leaders were not in a position to oppose other groups which also found it profitable to connive at illicit immigration.

Jute and sugar cane growers looking for cheap labor were abetted by touts who provided an ever increasing supply of illegal manpower and "jungle passports."¹⁰²

Adding to this predicament of clandestine operations along a 3,654 kilometre frontier was the attitude of both the Union and State governments (at New Delhi, Tripura and Calcutta) of turning a blind eye to these activities. Naturally, this attitude inspired the activities of agencies in India that found it rewarding to smuggle in manpower. Politicians, settlement officials, contractors, land owners, employers, policemen, and border guards were apparently "hand in glove" in a conspiracy that seriously disturbed the demographic balance and created many of the tensions that came to afflict the northeast.¹⁰³

Herein lay the real danger of the 1980s. Naga insurgency, Metei chauvinism and the Mizo rebellion were worry enough without adding an "open-door policy."¹⁰⁴ Not only did this alienate the original inhabitants but it also

jeopardized the security of Bengalis who had lived in this region for generations.

Finally, we find that New Delhi's "peace deal" with the Assamese in 1985 brought in a measure of fresh hope for the North-East. This region, which has had sporadic outbursts of violence throughout the 1980s is in more control of its affairs and is willing to work within the constitutional framework of the Indian government. Rajiv Gandhi has managed to take charge of the situation and bring a recalcitrant region within New Delhi's control through political compromise and a fresh understanding of India's problems.

Conclusion

The success of the measures undertaken by the Government of India, the language conflict, Bengali attitudes and the immigrant issue led to the problems in the Northeast. These problems were eventually resolved somewhat, in 1985, after years of violence.

This indifference and lack of swift action by the central government in Northeast India did incalculable damage to this region.

"It has caused high unemployment, tremendously increased land prices, denuded forests, and led to the appropriation of Khas Mahal estates. In human terms it has boosted smuggling, provided muscle for extremist politics, fomented racial antagonism, and made evasion of the law a way of life in the border marshes."¹⁰⁵

However, in spite of the violence and continuing

grievances, the Government of India in 1985 managed to sign an accord with the Assamese government which finally promoted a measure of peace in this region. Due to Rajiv Gandhi's political acumen, peaceful measures were adopted and the process of political resolution began to be realized as a viable alternative after years of violence and conflict. Thus Assam was to be controlled by the Assamese who would voice their feelings and concerns by selecting the candidates of their choice in the new elections.

Thus we find that New Delhi's leadership was the crucial element in the Assamese case. When Mrs. Gandhi manipulated the situation conditions became worse. However, when the central leadership in Delhi addressed the problems in their own terms the case could be resolved.

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Notes

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CHAPTER 3

PUNJAB

History of the Sikhs

The Second case study undertaken describes regionalism in the Punjab. The chapter begins with a brief history of the Punjab, linked with the birth and growth of Sikhism, Punjab's dominant religion. It proceeds to explain some of the major causes of violence in the region from 1981 through 1984. Finally, there is an analysis of the regionalism in Punjab, followed by a short conclusion.

The name Punjab is derived from two Persian words, punj (five) and ab (water), meaning five waters or rivers.¹

From the Presidential address read at the first annual meeting of the Punjab Historical Society (December 27, 1910), it was noted that:

"There are few places in the world, and certainly very few on the continent of Asia, which present a more entrancing field for historical research than the Province of the Punjab. It has from the beginning of time, been the scene of more changes, more movement, than any part of India..."²

Historically, this province was the traditional home of those whose lives colored the Vedic scriptures, and contained the site of the battlefield of the Mahabharata.³

Alexander and his army invaded India in 326 B.C. and left traces of Greek civilization throughout the region, but after their withdrawal all archeological evidence attested to the supremacy of Buddhism in the Punjab.⁴ Following the collapse of the great Hindu empires and with the arrival of the Muslim Era, in the 13th century A.D. Punjab reached the acme of its historic importance and lapsed "into something very like a settled government."⁵

The founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, a Hindu Kshatriya (or warrior caste), was born in 1469 A.D. in the village of Tolwandi Rai Bhoi, now called Nankara Sahib.⁶ He was not an ascetic recluse, unlike most Indian religious leaders. To Nanak, religion was not limited to symbols, rituals, and scriptures, but was embedded in everyday life:

" Religion does not consist in a patched coat, a Yogi's staff, or in ashes smeared on the body. Religion does not consist in mere words; he who looks on all men as equals is religious. Religion does not consist in wandering to tombs or places of cremation, or sitting in postures of contemplation... Abide pure among the impurities of the world, thus shalt thou find the way of religion."⁷

Guru Nanak's ministry was that of education and enlightenment. It was reserved for his successors to amplify and translate his teachings into practice, an evolutionary process in the context of which succeeding gurus merged their personalities into that of their founder.⁸

These gurus strengthened the unifying institutions, popularized the punjabi script calling it Gurumukhi,

opposed the practice of purdah (veiling), led a vigorous campaign against sati, (widow self-sacrifice), composed the Granth Sahib, and constructed a central place of worship, the Golden Temple at Amritsar.⁹ Unfortunately, due to Mughal religious intolerance and bigotry, the Sikhs turned to arms as a means of "protection to the poor and destruction to the tyrant."¹⁰

After the execution of Arjun (the 5th Guru) in 1606 A.D. by the Mughals, the Sikhs slowly began to evolve from a pacifist to a militant people. The final transformation came in 1699, when Guru Govind Singh organized his followers into members of a fighting fraternity or Khalsa (meaning the pure), through baptism, and enjoined them to wear the five common symbols of the new order: Kesh (hair), Kangha (comb), Kara (bangle), Kachha (underwear), and Kirpan (dagger).¹¹ Thus Guru Govind Singh had not taken to military ways for any political aggrandizement, but as a matter of self-defense.

During the 1850s under British rule the Punjab soon began to prosper. Old canals were re-opened and new ones created. Extensive roads were built together with the railway, postal, and telegraphic communications network in the region.¹² Thus, it is not surprising that when most of north and east India revolted against the British in 1857, Punjab, which had initially faced the Mughal onslaught against its people, remained loyal to the British.

Naturally, the British rewarded the Punjabis (mostly Sikhs) for their non-involvement in regional politics, by classifying them a "martial race" and allotting them more than proportional representation in the military.¹³ This naturally irked other Indian communities not so generously endowed with British favor, who soon began to resent Sikh privileges. Other Punjabi Hindu families for economic reasons, often brought up their first born male as a Sikh to accrue benefits and favors with the British.

Looking at the situation from a different perspective, however, Khushwant Singh, argues that the Sikhs were taken advantage of by both the British and later on the Indian government. He stated that within a few years of the passing of Guru Govind Singh, Hindu ceremonies and rituals crept back into the Sikh Gurudwaras (temples), creating tension between the two communities by the threat of absorption of the Sikhs into the Hindu fold.¹⁴

Sikh Gurudwaras, besides being places of worship were also used as congregational centers, for socio-religious activities, transmission of knowledge, and rest houses for travellers.¹⁵ They were well endowed and not only had revenues of large tracts of land attached to them, but also accumulated enormous incomes through individual and institutional offerings.¹⁶ Unfortunately, Sikh power and prestige fell into the hands of Hindu priests who not only controlled the ecclesiastical property but, over time, made

their positions hereditary, and also introduced worship of Hindu idols and reverence towards their customs. Thus, from Singh's point of view, it was only natural for the Sikhs to want the management and control of their shrines returned into their own hands.

Finally, the Sikh community provided loyalty and wholehearted support for the British during the First World War, but their efforts went unrewarded politically, especially compared to British treatment, during the same period, of the Muslims.¹⁷ When the war ended, the Sikhs expected to be compensated for their services.

"The community, which had done so much more than any other in the war, which paid 40 percent of the land revenue of the province and formed 25 percent of the electorate, was treated with less consideration than... the Muslims (who with a population of 10 percent in Bihar), were given 33 percent representation."¹⁸

In 1919, at Jallianwalla Bagh, General Dyer lined up his troops and fired on an unlawful but peaceful crowd, unarmed civilians, many women and children, killing and wounding over 1,500 people: this massacre, together with British support of the Hindu priests concerning the temples, finally caused 30,000 Sikhs to be jailed, 400 killed, and 2,000 wounded over a five year period. The result was a permanent wedge driven between the British and the Sikhs.¹⁹

The toll of the partition of the India in 1947 was the heaviest for the Sikhs. Nearly 2 percent of their population was massacred during the riots and their economic

losses were incalculable.²⁰

According to Maharaja Yadvindra Singh of Patiala:

"There was such a clamor among Hindus and Sikhs of the Northwest to reach Patiala- to escape despoliation and torture. They came in swarms. They came jampacked in trains, huddled on rooftops, standing on footboards, clutching onto handlebars.... A human tragedy on a vast scale. The word "refugee" suddenly acquired such reality- such poignancy.²¹

After the partition the new province of Punjab retained control of only 13 out of 29 districts of undivided Punjab.²² All of the Muslim majority districts were transferred to Pakistan and the non-Muslim majority districts remained in India. The new Punjab inherited only 34 percent of the area with 47 percent of the population of what had been Punjab.²³

As a result of the reorganization of India on a linguistic basis, PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union) was merged with Punjab on November 1, 1956. The Sikhs formed about one third of the state's population and were concentrated in the western districts, whereas the hill areas of East Punjab were organized into a new Union Territory and called Himachal Pradesh.²⁴ Punjabi and Hindi were both official languages of the Punjab. However, with the persistent demand of a unilingual Punjabi speaking state, the government of India announced in 1966 that the Punjab would be divided into two units, Punjabi Suba (Punjab speaking) and Haryana, corresponding to the regions of language dominance. The Sikhs now constituted a majority in

the Punjab, fifty-five percent of the population.

Thus we find that the Punjab, an area invaded by all conquerors from northwest India evolved into a form of settled government under the Muslim era and won favor, for a time, under the British, only to be torn by the chaos of the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947. The Sikh religion which emerged in this region only attained a majority status in independent India after November 1, 1966. Hence, cultural, linguistic and a sense of religious identity was fostered in this region from the mid 1960s.

Causes of the Violence

The causes of the spread of disenchantment against the government of India by the Sikhs can be traced to partition and the coming of independence in 1947, and was the accumulation of numerous grievances, religious fanaticism and political blundering.

In colonial India, Sikh communal representation in the political bodies had been guaranteed through the establishment of separate communal electorates and the reservation of seats on a communal basis. This formula had ensured a degree of Sikh communal representation but it had also served as a form of identity reaffirmation for the Sikhs. However, in a free India committed to secularism, separate communal political representation was abolished.²⁵ Hence, the abolition of separate electorates and introduction

of joint electorates made the Sikhs a minority in Punjab subservient to the Hindus, thereby increasing their agitation for a separate state.²⁶

Moreover, in secular India, minority benefits enjoyed by this community earlier specially in the army, were abrogated. Thus people who observed Sikh forms and symbols for economic benefits gave them up.²⁷

As a consequence of the partition, nearly 2.5 million Sikhs, most of whom were prosperous, had to leave their former homes and flee to India, resulting in a substantial increase in the number of Sikhs in certain contiguous regions. The economically disgruntled refugees in certain compact areas gave birth to the idea of an autonomous Sikh state.²⁸

The "Green Revolution" was promulgated in Punjab during the mid-sixties (1965-66) with the use of the high yielding Mexican wheat seeds. The new technology was so effective that it enabled Punjab, once a deficit state, which produced 3.39 million tonnes of food grain in 1966, to become a major surplus producer in 1976-77 when it's output exceeded 9.21 million tonnes of grain.²⁹

Further, during the 1960s the prosperity of the Green Revolution brought with it, another set of problems. Migrant laborers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar came in the thousands to Punjab as farmhands, many eventually settled here and enrolled on the voter lists, thus increasing the

agitation of the Sikhs who felt swamped in by the Hindus.³⁰

The Shiromani Akali Dal was formed on December 14, 1920 during the days of the Gurudwara Reform Movement with headquarters in the Golden Temple, at Amritsar. However, the Akali Dal emerged as a full-fledged political party in the Punjab during the 1936-37 elections held under the Government of India Act of 1935.³¹ To the present day we find an Akali movement which had previously directed its actions against the Mahants (Hindu priests) controlling the Sikh gurudwaras, vying for control of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (S.G.P.C., which controlled the Gurudwaras).³² This Akali movement was of a social and religious nature in origin, one aimed at winning control of the S.G.P.C. and its vast resources. With such resources, it could help finance its candidates to the Akali Dal Party.

Virtually since its inception, factionalism and splinter groups developed so that the Akali Dal was seldom, if ever, a monolithic party able to command either the complete allegiance of its followers, or to speak for the entire Sikh community. Nonetheless, it consistently dominates the S.G.P.C. within this competitive context.³³

During the 1930s the Akali Dal was divided into Master Tara Singh's group, Baba Kharak Singh's group and Gyani Sher Singh's group.³⁴ However, following independence and through the 1950s, Master Tara Singh and his faction within the Akali Dal dominated with continual challenges from the

Malwa Akali Dal. The Sadh Sangat Board (Congress Sikhs), and the Desh Bhagat (Communist Sikhs). The individuals involved subsequently changed, but the basic patterns of internally contending groups continues.³⁵

From the start of independence the Akali leader Master Tara Singh decided that the only way to prevent modernism and Hinduism from drowning the Sikhs' identity was to demand official recognition as a separate community. Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab (i.e. Pakistan) had to fight to re-establish themselves in the truncated Indian Punjab, and their struggle aroused communal prejudices. But the Akalis' claim that Sikhism was in danger received its greatest boost from the movement for a Punjabi-speaking state or Punjab Suba.³⁶ Punjabi Hindus claimed that the demand was communal.

The three main languages of the undivided Punjab (pre-1947) had been Urdu, Hindu and various forms of Punjabi. Of the three, Punjabi was the most widely spoken. The Akalis argued that the state's language should be Punjabi written in the Gurmukhi script which was not widely used outside the Sikh religion institutions. Because of the Punjabi Suba Movement and the link between language and communalism, in the 1961 census many Punjabi speaking Hindus declared Hindu as their mother tongue.³⁷

After the election results from the 1947-1962 period in the 1952 elections the Akali Dal had merged with the

Congress party and 26 of its nominees ran on the Congress ticket.³⁸ Hence, out of the 186 seats contested, the Congress party won 122 and the Akali Dal 33 seats.

In the 1957 electoral race, the Akali Dal did not officially contest the elections and the Congress party held onto 120 out of the 154 seats.

However, by the 1962 general elections in the Punjab, the Akali Dal entered as an "independent political party" and declared "war" against the Congress party over the Punjabi Suba issue.³⁹ Out of a total of 154 seats, the Congress party won 90 and the Akali Dal 19 in this election.⁴⁰

When observing the electoral results of Punjab, we must also note that the nature of the problem should indicate changing territorial configurations.

After independence in 1947, a new state of PEPSU (Punjab and East Patiala States Union) was created in addition to a much smaller sized Punjab (with the Muslim majority portion going to Pakistan). In 1956 after numerous demonstrations organized by the Akali Dal, PEPSU was merged with Punjab, but the overwhelming Hindu province of Himachal Pradesh was retained as a separate entity. In the new Punjab, a limited measure of internal autonomy was to be given to two communities of the provincial legislature representing the Punjabi and Hindu speaking regions.⁴¹

After its enormous victory in the 1959 S.G.P.C.

elections, the Akali leaders once again interpreted their victory as a mandate to begin their agitation for a Punjabi Suba.⁴²

Prime Minister Nehru remained adamantly opposed to the Punjabi Suba until his death in 1964, but in 1966 his daughter Indira Gandhi agreed to the formation of a Punjabi-speaking state. The Punjabi Suba proved a hollow victory for the Akalis because the Sikh vote was split between the Congress and Akalis. The only way they could form a government was in alliance with the Hindu Jan Sangh party.⁴³ The Congress party, with its cross-communal following, had always had enough Sikhs in positions of leadership to make it a powerful contender for electoral support from Sikhs. Thus in the five elections to the Punjab legislative assembly held between 1967 and 1980, the Congress party was able to command support from a significant body of Sikh voters, and as a result the Akali Dal was unable to get more 30 percent of the total vote.⁴⁴

From the establishment of the Punjabi Suba in 1966, to 1980, the Akali Dal was able to govern the Punjab only with the assistance of a coalition government, and at the same time they had to contend with the Congress party's support from Sikh voters in the Punjab. In the mid-term election of 1969, the Akali Dal was again able to form a government with the assistance of the Jan Sangh.⁴⁵

However, in the next election of the Punjab assembly in

1972, the Akali Dal was ousted from power by the Congress party. Following the Congress party's historic defeat after the imposition of the Emergency in 1977, the Akali Dal again formed a government in the Punjab through an alliance with the Janata party. After the Congress party resumed power in the center in 1980, it called fresh elections to provincial assemblies and won 54 percent of the seats in the Punjab legislature.⁴⁶

The Akali party also viewed the massive influx of non-Sikhs with alarm, because its chief instruments in getting the Suba (district) was lost, when the Congress Government more often than not, won at the polls.⁴⁷

In April 1973, the Akalis passed the controversial Anandpur Sahib Resolution in which the Sikhs were described as a separate nation. They also demanded greater autonomy for the state, readjustment of its boundaries including many Punjabi speaking areas of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan.⁴⁸

Another issue of contention was that many Sikhs began to feel that too much of their river water was being parceled out to other states such as Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.⁴⁹

The city of Chandigarh also became an issue of contention. After Partition in 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharhal Nehru, had decided that Amristar was too close to the Pakistan border to be the capital of Punjab. Therefore

a new capital city of Chandigarh was built. When the state was divided along linguistic lines in 1966, into Punjab and Haryana, Chandigarh served as the capital of both, and housed the state assemblies and the secretariats of both Punjab and Haryana.⁵⁰

However, by the mid 1970s the Sikhs increased their demands that the city of Chandigarh become Punjab's exclusive capital.⁵¹

The Akali's wanted control of the country's Sikh temples, or Gurudwaras, to come under a single authority. They felt that the income which these Gurudwaras attracted, (about 100 million pounds a year), would help finance the Akali movement, and would also aid the increased concentration power in one governing body.⁵²

Sikhs called for the broadcast of their hymns over the radio, and the ban on sale of meat, alcohol, and tobacco around the vicinity of the Golden Temple.⁵³

Finally, they wanted to be allowed to board airliners with their nine inch Kirpans, the daggers they wore according to their religious custom.⁵⁴ In 1982 on August 4th and 20th two attempted hijackings of Indian Airline planes were carried out by Sikh extremists, after which carrying Kirpans (daggers) on board all Indian Airline planes was prohibited.

Mrs. Gandhi herself contributed in some ways to the radical wing of the Akali Dal. In 1972 the Congress party

ousted the Akali Dal from power in the Punjab, but after its electoral defeat in 1977 it decidedly changed its course of action.

Zail Singh, who had been chief minister of Punjab during the 1972-77 years, advised Sanjay Gandhi (Mrs. Gandhi's son) to try to break the back of the Akali Dal.⁵⁵

In the late 1970s the Akali Dal was dominated by three men - Prakesh Singh Badal (who had succeeded Zail Singh as Chief Minister, Harchand Singh Longowal, a religious teacher who had led the agitation against the Emergency, and Gurucharan Singh Tahra, a politician with communist connections who headed the S.G.P.C. Zail Singh knew that displacing one of the Akali trinity would only lead to a stronger alliance of the other two. Hence, he recommended that a new religious leader be brought into the picture to discredit the traditional Akali Dal leadership. The choice eventually fell on Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who as head of the Damdani Taksal (an influential Sikh school) had a ready made status in the Sikh community.⁵⁶

As a rigid fundamentalist, Bhindranwale could capitalize on the compromises with Sikh interests that the Akali Dal were bound to make to stay in power. However, he needed an issue, a cause to rally behind and both Sanjay and Zail Singh found this in the Nirankaris (a heretical sect of Sikhs who are very influential in the Punjabi trading community). They also needed a party to promote

Bhindranwale and harass the Akalis. On April 13, 1978, a new party called the Dal Khalsa (the party of the pure) was formed. Bhindranwale was never openly associated with the Dal Khalsa, and until his death maintained that he was a "man of religion, not a politician."⁵⁷

When Mrs. Gandhi returned to power in 1980 she continued to support Bhindranwale until he became involved with the murders of Baba Gurbachan Singh (the leader of the Nirankari sect), Lala Jagat Narain (the proprietor of a chain of newspapers) and Santokh Singh (a rival Sikh politician).⁵⁸

Darbara Singh, the Congress Chief Minister of Punjab had insisted that Bhindranwale be arrested, but the central government feared there would be violence because of the larger number of Sikhs who had gathered to protect him.

On September 20, 1981, after the second murder, Bhindranwale surrendered to the police. On October 14, 1981, less than a month after his arrest, Zail Singh told parliament that there was no evidence that Bhindranwale was involved in the murders , and the decision to release Bhindranwale was taken by government.⁵⁹

However, after the third slaying, Bhindranwale had fallen out with the Congress and a new bidder for his support had entered the ring, the Akali Dal.⁶⁰ It was after this stage that the Akali Dal slowly grouped into two sections -- the more radical one followed Bhindranwale and

the moderate elements swore their allegiances to Longowal, the President of the Akali Dal.⁶¹

During the imposition of the Emergency (declared on June 26, 1975), when Mrs. Gandhi had suspended all constitutional rights of individuals, most Akali agitators were jailed, and naturally during the rival Janata rule (the only political party to defeat the Congress party since independence) were resurrected to high offices in their state.⁶² Unfortunately, Janata power dissolved within a couple of years and in the 1980 elections, the Congress Party routed the Akali-Janata combination in Punjab.⁶³ Akalis now out of power and with small prospects of regaining it through the electoral process, decided to destabilize the Congress Government through agitation.⁶⁴

They pointed to the 1973 Anandpur Resolution out and proclaimed it as a charter of Sikh demands, however, tagging along another 45 additional demands. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution demanded a readjustment of state boundaries to include in Punjab the Punjabi speaking areas of neighboring Haryana, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. Now they also wanted Chandigarh to be the exclusive capitol of Punjab, a fairer allocation of river water to Punjab and referred vaguely to a separate "Sikh nation."⁶⁵ They followed this up with a series of agitations such as Nahar Roko (blocking the canals), Rasta Roko (blocking road traffic), Kam roko (stopping work), and finally declared a Dharma Yudh

(righteous war) from Amristar against the central government by sending over 1,000 volunteers a day to court arrest.⁶⁶

Alongside this passive resistance movement, a parallel terrorist one began to develop under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.⁶⁷

On May 23, 1981, The London Times reported that "there is a rumble at present being felt from a small minority of people who have reactivated old separatist sentiments and are calling for a Sikh homeland to be called Khalistan."⁶⁸ The publication astutely warned that most Sikhs did not support the idea of a separate homeland, but a mishandling of the situation could drive the moderates over to the extremist cause.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, events moved rather quickly from this point and the daily exchange between the Sikhs, Nirankaris, and Hindus only worsened relations. On September 22nd, twelve days after the murder of an 82 year old newspaper editor who had written critically of resurgent Sikh separation, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was arrested.⁷⁰ Yet it was not clear that he was at the forefront of the Sikh secessionist campaign, which was led by a few young university graduates.⁷¹ Nevertheless, these extremists were opposed to the moderates of the Akali Party headed by Harchand Singh Longowal.⁷²

On September 29, 1981, becoming bolder, Sikh militants hijacked an Indian Airlines plane carrying 111 passengers in

Amristar.⁷³ The Dal Khalsa (militant faction of the Akali Dal) claimed responsibility for this hijacking and demanded the release of Sikh militants from Indian jails.⁷⁴ Immediately following the hijacking, the police crackdown in Punjab led to the arrest of more than 70 people.⁷⁵ Unfortunately the violence continued to increase throughout the months. Trouble spread to 20 Punjabi towns, Mrs. Gandhi belatedly elected a "crisis committee" to handle the situation.⁷⁶

On August 5th and 21st, 1982, two further attempts at hijacking an Indian Airlines plane were made.⁷⁷ Mrs. Gandhi, trying the course of appeasement, ordered Darbara Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab to release 30,000 Sikh prisoners. Matters only went downhill when a clash between those released and the police ensued in Kapurthala.⁷⁸

To bring a halt to the violence, Mrs. Gandhi's Indian government appealed for negotiations, stating "it is only through negotiations and a cordial atmosphere that issues can be resolved."⁷⁹ The Akalis rejected the government's appeals and announced the launching of a Sikh Holy War on November 4, 1982.⁸⁰ Mrs. Gandhi now began to fear a backlash from Haryana, which shared the common capital of Chandigarh with Punjab.⁸¹ Mrs. Gandhi still tried to appease the Sikhs and allowed them to carry their Kirpans on board aircraft.⁸² Sikh leaders, now still bolder, called this an "eyewash" and continued to encourage militants to

court arrest. On April 25, 1983, Sikh extremists shot and killed Mr. Avtar Singh Atwal, a Deputy Inspector General of Police in Amristar. Mr. Atwal was on the extremists' hit-list because he was conducting inquiries into various acts of violence by Sikh militants.⁸³

President's Rule was imposed on October 6, 1983. Violence once again erupted in this state.⁸⁴ As clashes between Hindus and Sikhs escalated, the government moved in paramilitary forces to try and curtail the bloodshed.⁸⁵ The government also banned the use of motorcycles which had become the terrorists principal means of communication and escape.⁸⁶

In April 1984, a brief respite between the government of India and the agitators was announced. The government announced the amendment of Article 25 of the Indian Constitution. The constitution stated:

"The reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion..."

Sikhs objected to being grouped with Hindus. The government acknowledged that a re-wording of Article 25 to identify Sikhs as a separate group was going to be made. In return the Akali Dal leaders would call off the week long agitation planned.⁸⁷

Unfortunately, violence by extremists was not curbed, and on April 5, 1984 New Delhi introduced stringent measures of detention without trial.⁸⁸ Following Sikh attacks on

Hindus in Punjab, Hindus in Haryana began reacting violently to having Sikhs in their midst.⁸⁹

Violence also spread between the Bhindranwale (extremists) and Longowal (moderate) camps, and the Indian government was beginning to take seriously the allegations that Pakistan was involved with Sikh guerrillas.⁹⁰

Newspapers also claimed that some Pakistanis dressed as Sikhs were found in India among the Sikh warrior class, the Nihangs. A number of arrested Nihangs were found to have been circumcised, a ritual conducted only by Muslims, not Sikhs or Hindus on the Indian subcontinent.⁹¹

On April 15, 1984, Sikh terrorists conducted a well coordinated attack in which more than thirty railway stations were set on fire. The aim of the attacks, according to the United News of India, was to disrupt transport in the troubled state.⁹²

A week later, on April 23, 1984, fifteen Sikh youths rode through the city of Amarkot and opened fire upon turbanless Hindus and Hindu shops. After a few stunning moments the bolder Hindus seized guns "and began loosing off a few blasts of their own."⁹³ Three Hindus were killed and ten were badly injured.

The Golden Temple of Amritsar, the Holy Shrine of Sikhism, was first turned into an armed camp and later into a battleground by the warring Sikh factions led by Sant Harchand Singh Longowal and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

Longowal, the leader of the official agitation to gain Sikh demands insisted that the campaign was not anti-Hindu. "Our demands are Punjabi demands, not simply Sikh demands."⁹⁴

Bhindranwale, on the other hand, made no such concessions. He wanted to make right earlier wrongs committed by "Hindu imperialism" against the Sikhs. He had been quoted as saying, if every Sikh killed thirty-five Hindus then Khalistan would automatically appear.⁹⁵

In May of 1984, the crisis of Punjabi regionalism reached new proportions. On May 8, 1984, Sikh rebels assassinated a village leader in Punjab's Ferozepur district. Followers of the two main Sikh factions exchanged gunfire inside a shrine in the Kapurthala district of Punjab. When Indian troops clashed with the extremists in the area, eight people were killed and sixteen extremists were arrested.⁹⁶ On May 12, 1984, Sikh extremists shot and killed a newspaper editor Ramesh Chander in Jullunder, Punjab (two years earlier, they had shot his father Jagat Narain). Mr. Chander was the third editor killed in Punjab in 1984.⁹⁷ Bhindranwale had been accused of complicity in the murder of Jagat Narain and was released only after riots in which twenty-one people died, and the central government intervened.⁹⁸ On May 24, Longowal threatened a Mahatma Gandhi style "non-cooperation movement" against the government.⁹⁹ Thus, when violence escalated and no other solution seemed appropriate or adequate, the Indian

government decided to launch "Operation Blue Star."¹⁰⁰

It was common knowledge that all kinds of weapons and armaments used to kill their opponents were hidden by the extremists in the Golden Temple.¹⁰¹ India Today suggested that no decision could have been more painful to Mrs. Gandhi and her advisors than "Operation Blue Star--the biggest and most significant counter-terrorist action undertaken anywhere in the world."¹⁰² The consequences shocked the world.

On June 1, 1984, a curfew was clamped on the Holy City.¹⁰³ Within 24 hours nearly 70,000 troops called from the army and paramilitary forces had taken up predetermined positions, to prevent any further terrorists from entering the temple and to keep away the mobs.¹⁰⁴ However, at least ten people were killed and twenty-five injured in a seven-hour gun battle between Indian security forces and militant Sikhs in Amristar.

On June 2, 1984, Mrs. Gandhi went on the air in a T.V. broadcast declaring that the government would put down terrorism.¹⁰⁵ June 3, 1984, saw the entire state "tightly secured" with the Indian troops operating on the psychological level of flushing out, rather than resorting to a full-fledged military operation.¹⁰⁶ Quick to respond, the extremists made their intentions clear by lobbing grenades at the Indian Army outside the Golden Temple and maintaining a heavy fusillade with medium machine guns.¹⁰⁷

On June 4th, it was clear to the General Officer commanding the army that they faced a determined insurgent army charged with religious fervour, and not an armed rabble as had previously been thought.¹⁰⁸

On June 5, 1984, the siege had been laid for 60 hours.¹⁰⁹ Ideally it would have been more useful to continue the siege, due to the growing mob violence outside Amritsar an officer leading the operations noted: to defend the Temple, something drastic would have had to ensue to prevent a dozen Jallianwalla Baghs around Amritsar.¹¹⁰ "It was all very nice to talk of effective, determined fire, but there is a limit to how many people you can kill out of a mob."¹¹¹ It was this that prompted the generals to choose what one of them later called the devil's alternative: the storming of the Temple complex.

By dusk of June 5th "every inch of the temple was covered with machine gun fire from the radicals within the temple. It was utterly frustrating for the soldiers who saw their comrades die under fire from the temple and yet could not shoot back.¹¹² Since Bhindranwale and his key lieutenants had decided to fight the last battle from the Akal Takht, it was decided to overcome the Akal Takht defense by using artillery fire and cannons to bring down the outer facade, pillars and canopy of the building.¹¹³ The Indian Army soon overran the machine gun positions and as Bhindranwale tried to take cover, he was killed in a

burst of gun fire.¹¹⁴

India Today in its long term analysis stated that with the death of Bhindranwale and his key lieutenants, the back of the present extremist movement had been broken.¹¹⁵ Without a charismatic leader to inspire them, the remaining extremists hiding in the country side would have little scope for major mischief, according to the respected magazine. But the danger lay on two different fronts. First, the weapons found in the Golden Temple clearly indicated the involvement of both the Chinese and the Pakistanis. Hence, India had to be cautious about foreign intervention in her domestic matters. Second, many Punjabis felt that notwithstanding all the problems the Sikh terrorists had caused, the Indian army's violation of the Golden Temple was not justified. They felt that the "Sikh community had been given a tight slap across the face," an action which could lead to a solidly alienated Sikh sub-nationality, giving fillip to the Khalistan demand.¹¹⁶

Even the London Times, on June 9, 1984 headlined "Amristar- Gandhi's Falkland Factor?," and suggested that the "swift, clean, surgical operation" was bound to have its effect in terms of the voter turnout.¹¹⁷ In the view of the Times, on the other hand, Mrs. Gandhi's action represented a major blow against communalism, regionalism and secessionism, and in favor of secularism and the maintenance of India's unity.

Hence, no one anticipated what took place, least of all Mrs. Gandhi or her advisors. On October 31, 1984 the Indian Prime Minister was assassinated by two of her Sikh security guards.¹¹⁸ The entire nation received the news with shock and disbelief. Many felt that "...Certain forces were now active to destroy the democratic system by indulging in individual terrorism and violence... and that the whole country would fight against the anti-national and anti-democratic forces."¹¹⁹

In reaction to her death, overjoyed Sikhs danced, sang, and set off fireworks in London.¹²⁰ However, irate mobs of Hindus took to the streets in many of the major cities in India attacking private and public vehicles, and setting them on fire.¹²¹ In West Bengal the help of the army was sought to aid the civil authorities in curtailing mob violence against Sikhs.¹²²

Rajiv, Indira Gandhi's eldest son, was sworn in as Prime Minister immediately. He appealed to the people for calm and an exercise of "maximum restraint" in this moment of profound grief.¹²³

The London Times suggested that the assassination could lead to the collapse of Indian unity. The cult of the mother was widely prevalent in India they argued, and reminded readers of the late Prime Minister's campaign slogan: "Indira is India: India is Indira."¹²⁴ Could anyone hold together the infinitely fissiparous parts of the Indian

union as she did? Could anyone provide the leadership that compared with hers? Was anyone else capable of governing India? Did the murder of Mrs. Gandhi mark "both the passing of an extraordinary leader and the beginning of a dangerous political passage for the world's largest democracy, enquired journalist."¹²⁵

"Rajiv Gandhi's first task," stated the Philadelphia Enquirer, "will be to demonstrate whether he can extend the healing hand his mother often spoke of to calm Hindu-Sikh tensions."¹²⁶ Fortunately, Rajiv Gandhi proved to be up to the task. In July, 1985, he had managed to persuade several Sikh leaders to come to New Delhi for talks.¹²⁷

Although radical Sikhs denounced the settlement, the accord which resulted from these talks went a long way toward meeting several of the Sikhs' demands. The government's main concession concerned the city of Chandigarh, which had served as the common capital for both Punjab and Haryana since 1966. Chandigarh would now become part of Punjab and serve as its capital alone. A new capital would be built for Haryana and a tribunal would select Hindi speaking areas in Punjab that would be incorporated into Haryana. The change would virtually ensure "that Sikhs will enjoy more political and economic power in Punjab..."¹²⁸

The government also agreed to pay compensation to the families for all those killed in Sikh related disturbances

since August 1982.¹²⁹ Rajiv Gandhi also promised to "withdraw" the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in Punjab, which permitted search and arrest without warrant. Another long standing Sikh grievance - the demand for a greater share of river waters for irrigation was submitted to a tribunal which was to deliver its report within six months.¹³⁰

Another major Akali Dal gain was the government's agreement to consider a national law to regulate the function of the thousands of Sikh shrines, scattered around the country. Hence, we find that the Sikhs gained far more than they gave up, under P.M. Rajiv Gandhi.¹³¹

Rajiv moved to placate Sikh bitterness fed by the Golden Temple raid and the violence against the Sikhs by Hindus outraged by his mother's assassination. Approval of this accord marked a major breakthrough in an effort to end this Punjabi confrontation. Mr. Longowal the moderate leader who signed the accord stated: "The morcha has ended."¹³²

Thus a major political crisis had been resolved by a relatively inexperienced Prime Minister who had used every effort to bring peace in this troubled region. Rajiv Gandhi immediately realized the past mistakes of his mother Indira Gandhi, and worked diligently to change that situation. "Luck, political manoeuvring and willingness to take risks" helped produce the historic accord that was reached.¹³³

Arjun Singh the Governor of Punjab stated vehemently, "we will not allow anybody to disturb the peace at this stage. It is the general will of the people to see that these things do not occur."¹³⁴

Hence, once again the Centre through its political manoeuvring, adroitly steered the situation away from violence and towards peaceful resolution between Punjab and New Delhi. These new methods of approaching the Sikh crisis, and a willingness to compromise aided the acceptability of the Centre's control, reach and powers to resolve the conflict in this region. There was relief that one of "India's worst crises appeared to be coming to an end."¹³⁵

The Statesman reported that this was truly a tremendous achievement for a young and relatively inexperienced Prime Minister and Sant Harchant Singh Longowal, still head of the Akali Dal, hailed this settlement and claimed emphatically that "the period of confrontation is over."¹³⁶

Analysis of the Situation

In analyzing the situation, we must note that beside the growth of communalism in Punjab the situation was exacerbated by miscalculations on the part of the Congress leadership.

There can be no doubt that the foundations of strong regional identity are present in Punjab. Language,

religion, a sense of history, etc., all serve to reinforce such an identity. But the crisis of 1984 was not a product of regionalism alone; it was a product of regionalism fueled to the point of explosion by slights and oversights, and grievances ignored by the Central Government for over three decades, and in the end, by positive reinforcement of the Prime Minister herself in the strengthening of the most radical factions in the regional leadership.

Bhindranwale was the product of Congress politics rather than Akali ones. In March 1977 there was a general election which ended her emergency rule. On March 21, 1977, the London Times reported that "Mrs. Gandhi loses her seat in Congress disaster." In 1975 Mrs. Gandhi had declared an Emergency to save the country from chaos fomented by opposition parties and to give it instead, firm discipline and stable government. She vehemently repudiated the charge that the maintenance of her own rule was as strong a motive. However, the March 1977 elections displayed that her rule, her leadership, and her Emergency were rejected. The Congress Party, for the first time since independence, lost control of the government in New Delhi, and Mrs. Gandhi was put out of office by her overwhelming defeat in her own constituency.¹³⁷ Later in 1977 when the Congress Party lost Punjab in state elections which were called in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's own fall from power at the center, a coalition led by the moderate faction of the Akali's took over.¹³⁸

During this time, Bhindranwale and the radical elements of the Akali Party were consequently encouraged by Mrs. Gandhi and the other leading Congress politicians to demonstrate against the Akali government's secularism. This campaign reached its climax when many Bhindranwale supporters died while trying to storm a meeting of heretical Nirankaris, reported the London Times.¹³⁹

After three years of rule by the opposition Janata Party, on January 8th 1980, Mrs. Gandhi won a landslide victory in the Indian general elections. The governments of Mr. Desai and Mr. Charan Singh (1977-1979) had not taken any serious action to curb price rises nor did they attempt to educate the public about their causes during the long election campaign.¹⁴⁰ Again in the wake of the general election, state elections were held. Hence, the Congress Party regained power in the Punjab in the 1980, and Bhindranwale lost his "nuisance value." Unfortunately, for Mrs. Gandhi, he refused to be put back into his box.¹⁴¹ His fundamentalism had found its time. The Akalis, to counteract Bhindranwale's strong fundamentalist challenge were forced to adopt more extreme postures. Now in opposition, the Akalis launched a campaign for state autonomy. Thus, a serious miscalculation on Mrs. Gandhi's part, regarding Bhindranwale's political use, eventually cost the country thousands of lives.

Also, the growth of Sikh fundamentalism was ignored by

the Congress leadership, who made no attempt to understand and curb this movement until it was totally out of hand.

Though it may look simplistic, conceptually, fundamentalism in Punjab's context could be described as an amalgam of religious fanaticism, separatism, and terrorism.¹⁴² The Fundamentalists' deep-seated hatred against the Nirankaris culminating in the assassination of Baba Gurbachan Singh, the spiritual head of the Nirankaris; their preference for baptized Sikhs over all others, spirit of intolerance toward all voices of dissent and finally their stance on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, led them to make demands of independence.¹⁴³

Tully and Jacob conclude that it was Indira Gandhi's Congress Party which launched Bhindranwale, and it was her government which allowed him to usurp its role in the Punjab.¹⁴⁴ If she had arrested Bhindranwale after the assassination of Deputy Inspector General of Police Atwal, on April 25, 1983, there would have been no assault on the Akal Takht.¹⁴⁵ Thus, it was Mrs. Gandhi's "indecisiveness" which aided the tragedy of Amritsar.¹⁴⁶

Finally, we may note that Mrs. Gandhi actively encouraged the "darbar" or court around her.¹⁴⁷ This durbar had a stultifying effect on the institutions of India. All power derived from the court in Delhi, but the courtiers often exercised their power independently.¹⁴⁸ Inevitably, the fawners and flatterers rose to the top and the

independent-minded sank to the bottom.¹⁴⁹ Hence, often the truth was hidden from the Prime Minister who made decisions based on false promises.

Harji Malik in states that "the politics of alienation" was in process and actively encouraged by the Congress (I) Party for political reasons.¹⁵⁰ He stated that though we play lip service to our much vaunted "unity in diversity," Indian realpolitik is self-destructive in its intolerance of diversity, encouraged by the "deliberately cultivated bogey that diversity is synonymous with disintegration."¹⁵¹ Hindu fundamentalism, often explained as the "backlash" to Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism, is accepted by the majority community as their "right."¹⁵²

Malik argues that Hindu-Sikh friction in the Punjab was essentially a power struggle between the Akali Dal and the Congress.¹⁵³ Playing the old colonial "divide and rule" game, the Congress strategy was to split the Punjab electorate by encouraging both Hindu and Sikh communalism.¹⁵⁴ Covert government support to splinter and fringe groups amongst the Sikhs and Nirankaris was also part of their plans.¹⁵⁵ Apparently, Malik feels that P.M. "Indira Gandhi and her government did not want a solution. Repeatedly, with the negotiations on the verge of success, the government reneged, on some excuse or the other."¹⁵⁶

Malik states that the Congress party relied on the mass support of religious minorities but, for a variety of socio-

economic reasons this base was gradually eroded. After the 1977 election, a new appraisal, based on the majority Hindu vote as the safest possible vote bank, gradually took over.¹⁵⁷

Malik argues further that another evil promulgated against the Sikhs was a well-planned disinformation campaign. The disinformation campaign described the Sikh sense of identity as a British "creation" claiming that if the British had not laid stress on differences between Sikhs and Hindus, Sikhism would have relapsed back into the Hindu fold.¹⁵⁸ Deliberately put on the defensive, Sikhs were forced to proclaim that they were not secessionists. The disinformation campaign served its dual purpose, it made the entire Sikh community suspect all over the country and increasingly alienated the Sikhs from the national mainstream of the community.¹⁵⁹ However, having created its extreme "Frankenstein" the government lost control of events.¹⁶⁰

It was only with the change in New Delhi's leadership that a metamorphosis in style and approach under the new Prime Minister (Rajiv Gandhi) willing to make adjustments and compromises, that the situation was seemingly resolved.

September 1985 was the first time since the 1920s that the Akali Dal had won a majority on its own in the Punjab. The voters in Punjab elected Sikh leaders who denounced extremism and pledged to work out their problems peacefully. Many politicians predicted that a party led by Sikhs would have a better chance than others to curb the violence in Punjab. Thus Rajiv Gandhi had once again managed to take control and help shape a

potentially dangerous situation and bring the Punjabi leadership under New Delhi's wings.

Conclusion

In concluding, we have to take a middle path and note that the Congress government was certainly not beyond blame, but the claim of harassment of all Sikhs, and a well-planned disinformation campaign is not supported by what we know as the facts.

In the Punjab it appears that Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress leaders miscalculated the usefulness of Bhindranwale in causing a schism in the Akali Dal. Moreover, once Bhindranwale had made his position clear, Mrs. Gandhi failed to take the necessary action against him until Operation Blue Star. Operation Blue Star was the ultimate signal of the failure of the government's earlier policies with respect to Punjab regionalism, and in its turn, it produced a Sikh backlash, which was followed by Hindu reprisals as the drama of political errors played out its awful logic. After 1985, with Rajiv at the helm, moderate Sikh demands were satisfied with the signing of the accord, and a measure of control has returned back into the hands of both, the Punjabi government and the Centre in New Delhi.

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Conclusion

In concluding this thesis we find that the theme of Indian politics has been one of "unity in diversity." This diversity, portrayed abundantly in the introduction, shows sharp distinctions between various tribes, religious, ethnic and cultural groups. Today with the help of the Indian government's educational and cultural programs and the improvement in mass communication and media exposure, these groups must reside in closer proximity to each other.

Previously, under the British Raj most groups lived with little knowledge of others, hence differences flared up only upon occasional contact. The British policy of divide and rule always worked well in the Raj.

Governmental programs and educational facilities in independent India not only aided the backward schedule castes and tribes but also the Punjabis who had lost their homeland in the 1947 partition. Perhaps a feeling of guilt pervaded governmental consciousness that extraordinary measures were needed to aid those disadvantaged groups. Yet, when problems arose, the government's lack of swift action to tackle the issues and its support of partisan politics over national issues only exacerbated the disgruntled minorities, who took actions into their own

hands.

Neither the Sikh problem nor the North East Indian issue are totally resolved today, and India is only now beginning to recover from Mrs. Gandhi's assassination and the void in leadership that created. Though her son Rajiv has stepped in and shown promise, the problems of ethnicity are ever present.

In 1947 India promised to maintain a democratic form of government, and has kept this promise (except for a short period during which Emergency Rule was invoked). In a democracy "all men are created equal" and this equality was extended to the previously disadvantaged groups. Freedom of speech, as far as possible is also maintained so that the various groups and their grievances can be aired publicly. Hence, the Central Government tries to maintain some kind of balance in its dealings with its opponents. However, being a democracy, special electorates such as those previously maintained in the Punjab which caused the Sikhs to feel disadvantaged had to be abolished. Given such conditions, a new Punjabi state was created in 1966 with the Sikhs constituting a fifty-five percent majority.

In delving into the problem of regionalism in the two case studies, we find that the "power" factor appears as the common denominator in both the case studies. The loss of power felt by the Sikhs in losing control of their temples, special electorates, river water and a sense of identity

developed into a feeling of hopelessness. Similarly in the North-East, the illegal migration, loss of jobs, land, and eventually what they perceived as an electoral majority brought on feelings of powerlessness. Therefore, when the Indian government did little to allay these fears, or by their actions making them worse, both minorities decided to take action into their own hands.

The two case studies support the view that when the leadership in New Delhi is slow to respond, and acts in a calculating and manipulative manner, fostering partisan rather than national interests in its dealings with regional issues, trouble ensues. This has been abundantly illustrated in both the case studies.

In North East India, rising expectations were blunted and the root cause appeared to point to the increasing tide of "foreigners" appropriating greater portions of land and jobs. New Delhi was extremely slow to respond to these regional problems because of the Congress Party's dependence on minority votes which included these foreigners. Thus the center's apathy toward swiftly resolving these issues brought on years of civil strife, Naga insurgency, Metei chauvinism and Mizo rebellion in these regions.

Similarly, in the Punjab, New Delhi's inertia towards dealing with the problems of parcelling the river waters and the control of Sikh temples only helped to aggravate the situation. However, the center's early encouragement of

Jarnail Singh Bhindrandwale for its own partisan purposes, and their failure to curb his increasing demands eventually led to Operation Bluestar and the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Yet, when the leadership in New Delhi is serious about addressing these problems and decides to tackle the issues at hand we find that the situation shows marked improvements.

With Rajiv Gandhi at the helm, accords were reached in both Assam and the Punjab in 1985. New elections based on a pre-1985 electorate was promised in Assam and the center worked toward decreasing civil strife in this region. A caretaker government was to be in control before new elections were undertaken. In addition, certain unspecified legislative and administrative safeguards were promised by the central government to protect the cultural, social, and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

In Punjab, an accord with the moderates concluded months of uncertainty and mayhem in this region. New Delhi's concessions concerning Chandigarh made it the sole capital of Punjab. The central government agreed to pay compensation to families for all those killed in Sikh related disturbances since 1982. Rajiv Gandhi also promised to withdraw the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in Punjab which permitted search and arrest without a warrant.

Thus, we find that regionalism is a serious problem in India which can be contained when the leadership in New Delhi is responsive and quick to act, however, if the center is manipulative and slow to respond, regional outbursts can become a tedious and protracted problem. Hence, the key to the problem lies in the hands of the central leadership in New Delhi and their approach to dealing with the regions.

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