

PUNJAB

Harvest Of Hatred

IT WAS once an island of harmony and prosperity. Today, the state of the green revolution is stained with the blood spilled in communal violence. Using beef and tobacco as lethal missiles, unidentified miscreants with political backing have succeeded in sowing the seeds of hatred among Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab. The communal tragedy, now entering its fourth tense week, began on April 26 when two bleeding cow heads were found in front of a temple in Amritsar. So far, two persons have died, 500 have been arrested and property worth Rs 2 crore has been razed and destroyed. The streets of Amritsar, Patiala, Nabha and other towns have been emptied by curfew orders. The echoes of the storm were even heard in Delhi when north Delhi gurudwaras and south Delhi temples were defiled.

Predictably, in a country notorious for its tinderbox society, communities have lost no time in taking sides, led by some of the more zealous sections of the media. In Punjab, the Akali-controlled daily *Akali Patrika* played up the attacks on the gurudwaras. On the other side of the barricade, the Hindu-dominated *Punjab Kesari* splashed the story of desecrated temples on its front pages. While the rash of violence has settled for the moment, intelligence sources warn that fanatic elements in both communities are preparing for war. Said a senior Punjab police official: "With over five lakh legal and illegal arms in the state, the ferocity of the communal violence can be predicted. If we don't restore confidence, violence can erupt any day."

Accusations: As social, religious and academic opinion-makers put their heads together to find a solution, the political parties held each other responsible for the situation. Says Lal Krishna Advani, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) general secretary: "Group rivalries within the ruling party have created this situation. Darbara Singh is responsible for acts of omission and Zail Singh for acts of commission." Adds Balwant Singh, Akali Dal ideologue and former finance minister: "By not taking action against extremist groups and ignoring the genuine demands of the Sikh community, Mrs Gandhi has encouraged them

to use violent methods."

The slide towards the politics of violence and separatism began soon after the Akalis lost to the Congress(I) in the June 1980 assembly elections. Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh and Union Home Minister Zail Singh used various Sikh groups as pawns in a private war, and this led to the proliferation of extremist Sikh organisations and rifts in the Congress(I). Says a Sikh scholar of Guru Nanak Dev



Amritsar shop destroyed in the violence: continuing conflict

University: "It is a fight to grab the leadership of the Sikh masses. While the Congress(I) has failed to win them over, it has encouraged the fragmentation of Sikh-dominated parties by deliberately ignoring their insignificant but sensitive demands like the ban on the sale of tobacco which was raised as early as May last year."

This studied neglect has led to the birth of many Sikh groupings in the last few months, each more chauvinist than the other. Among them are:

▶ a faction of the Akali Dal led by Jagdev Singh Talwandi which broke away from its

parent in April 1981 and is reportedly backed by Darbara Singh;

▶ the Dal Khalsa, which earned a new lease of life;

▶ the Malkhani Sikh Jatha which led the attack on the Nirankari Samagam in Amritsar in 1979 and is flexing its muscles again;

▶ the Bhindranwale group, which is gaining influence; and

▶ bands led by a dozen Nihang Sikhs which supported agitations launched during the present Congress(I) regime.

Agitations: These groupings adopted eye-catching extremist positions and indecisiveness on the part of both the Central and state Governments added fuel to the fire. Between April 1981 and May 1982, over a dozen agitations were launched by Sikh organisations including the Akalis, and the Government sat back and watched. Dal Khalsa leaders were allowed to make anti-national statements. The powers-that-be initially refused to talk to moderate Akali leaders. In May 1981, the Union Home Ministry sent a detailed note on the growing communal tension along with a list of the trouble-makers but the state police—plagued by the community virus—failed to arrest even one.

Even Mrs Gandhi brushed aside warnings of the deteriorating law and order situation received from her own party. Former All India Congress Committee(I) general secretary Kalpnath Rai, in charge of Punjab, wrote to her on April 8, 1981, saying: "I would say that Punjab is on fire today and we must make all efforts to save it. Any delay on our part to tackle this issue or complacency will do great harm to the country as well as to Punjab. Unless it is countered on the political level, it will create more complications and we may face a situation worse than that prevailing in the north-eastern region."

FOR OVER a year, the Central Government tried to pour oil on troubled waters by involving moderate Sikh leaders in dialogues. Mrs Gandhi three times invited Akali leaders to Delhi but didn't concede even one of their 45 demands, including one to give "holy city status" for Amritsar. Similarly, her government sat tight on the Punjab Government's proposal to ban the Dal Khalsa, reportedly due to Zail Singh's intervention. It was only in the wake of last fortnight's incidents that the Dal Khalsa was banned and meat and tobacco shops shifted from the neighbour-

hood of the Golden Temple.

A reading of significant events of the last two years confirms that the Congress(I) allowed the situation to get out of hand:

■ April 24, 1980: Nirankari chief Gurbachan Singh is shot dead in New Delhi; only six of the 16 suspects have been arrested so far;

■ March 13, 1981: Balbir Singh Sandhu, secretary-general of the National Council of Khalistan, wraps himself in chains and leads a procession in Anandpur Saheb to highlight the plight of the Sikhs in India; no arrests;

■ September 9, 1981: Jullundur newspaper owner Lala Jagat Narain is murdered; only two of the seven suspects have been arrested;

■ September 29, 1981: Indian Airlines plane is hijacked by Dal Khalsa activists to Pakistan;

■ March 16, 1982: Dal Khalsa leaders hold a press conference and declare that they will throw cow heads in front of temples; no arrests are made or preventive measures taken;

■ April 26, 1982: cow heads are found in front of temples; culprits still at large.

Explosive Bundle: The most recent incident occurred at 3 a.m. on April 26 when the pujari of a Shiva temple, situated in a congested Amritsar street, found two cow heads wrapped in a cloth. Before he could inform his followers, the police reached the spot and took away the offending bundle. The civic authorities took time to get the



Zail Singh and Darbara Singh: at cross purposes

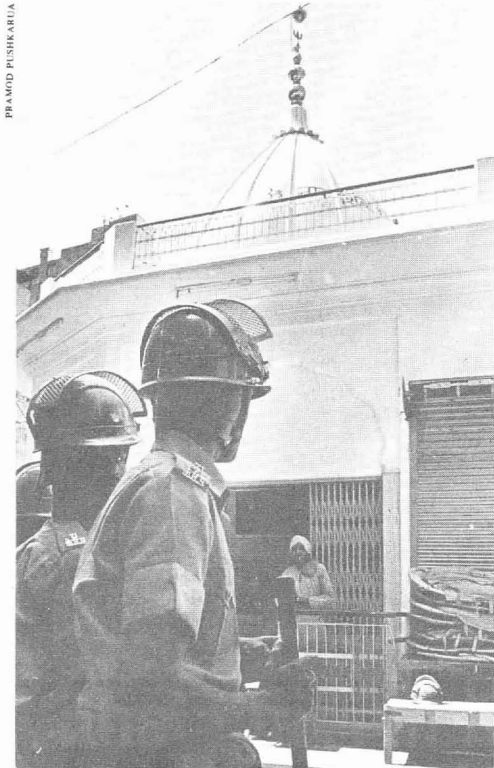


situation in hand, and group of young men, brandishing lathis and swords, gathered around the Golden Temple and the whole area was strewn with bricks, stones and lathis.

With the failure of the district administration to control the situation, Darbara Singh sent Punjab Assembly Speaker Brij Bhushan Mehra, Finance Minister Kewal Krishna and Education Minister Harcharan Singh Ajnala to help the local police. Meanwhile, the entire city was put under curfew. The situation was defused when Union Industry Minister Narain Dutt Tiwari and Zail Singh flew to the riot-torn city and led a 2,000-strong peace march in the disturbed areas. But before it could be contained, the communal violence had spread to Kapurthala, Patiala and Nabha within 48 hours. Curfew was relaxed after two weeks.

Strong Reaction: The Government's seeming apathy forced the Hindus to unite and there are reports that Rashtriya Swyamsewak Sangh leaders were inviting them to strike back and frustrate the ruling party's peace moves. The feeling among the Hindus is so strong that Raghunandan Lal Bhatia, a Congress(I) Lok Sabha member, was beaten up when he went to Hindu-dominated areas of Amritsar to pacify them. Union Industry Minister Narain Dutt Tiwari, who rushed to Amritsar after the incidents, was given a hostile reception by some non-Sikh leaders. It was also alleged that the Congress(I) itself had engineered the

The Shiva temple where the trouble began (left) and tense crowds outside the Golden Temple



PRAMOD PUSHKARUA

whole thing to influence voters in neighbouring Haryana and postpone elections to the two Punjab Assembly seats.

The Akalis have maintained a stolid silence on the problem, preferring also to stay away from the meeting of the state and district level peace committees. This, of course, has not helped, and neither has the tendency on the part of the police to exploit the situation in down-to-earth material terms: they were accused of looting property during the riots. In fact, state Publicity and Information Minister Joginder Paul Pandey forced the police officers of Nabha to return gold ornaments to their owners.

Sikh intellectuals have come out openly against the tide of Sikh extremism. Said Jathedar Jeevan Singh Umrangal, former Akali Dal vice-president: "By these actions these elements have not only dishonoured the temples but have also spoiled the sanctity of Sikh shrines by taking shelter there after committing the crime." Dr Gopal Singh, member of the high-powered committee on minorities, asserted: "Nothing will destroy the Sikhs as a social and religious force in this country and abroad more than these mad, adventurous acts on the part of certain frustrated individuals who have no social or political base in the community or in the country and who have always been activated by a sinister desire to serve foreign masters." In a Delhi seminar, top Punjab leaders like I.K. Gujral, former information minister, and Harkrishan Singh Surjeet of the Communist Party of India-Marxist appealed for the isolation of these elements to preserve Hindu-Sikh unity.

Stagnating Schemes: The two-year-old malaise has left its marks on Punjab's economy and administration. Although work on development projects started during 1980 continued undisturbed, no new decisions could be taken. Over a dozen industrial proposals, including one concerning a heavy vehicle unit, are stagnating and various other irrigation, power and educational schemes are gathering dust. The state Government could not spend over Rs 60 crore of the planned outlay because the officials had their hands full with the communal problem.

The civil servants are a demoralised lot; said a senior Indian Administrative Service official based in Punjab: "Each one of us is now suspect in the eyes of the people. We were supposed to push through the Government's decisions but we have become the target of attack depending upon the community we belong to." Communal hatred, an unsteady administration and an increasingly nervous populace: the fanatics who are holding Punjab to ransom can congratulate themselves on a job well done.

—PRABHU CHAWLA

DAL KHALSA

Extreme Measures

THE COW heads were the last straw. As tension soared in the major cities of Punjab, and communalists emerged from their lairs, the Union Government, in a swift but belated fire-fighting action, issued two notifications last fortnight, banning the Dal Khalsa and the National Council of Khalistan (NCK). The pair of extremist Sikh organisations had owned up to desecrating Hindu shrines in Amritsar and had been responsible for over 200 Hindu-Sikh communal incidents in which 20 people were killed and property worth Rs 5 crore damaged. Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh had long been demanding a ban on these organisations—a move as stubbornly opposed by the Centre on the plea that such a ban would give recognition to people who were basically communal fanatics without any mass base.

Even as Darbara Singh and Zail Singh continued with their inelegant sparring, it was becoming frighteningly clear that an

organisation that the Congress(I) itself had built up as a rival to the Akalis had been transformed into a monster. The Dal Khalsa was launched on August 6, 1978 in Chandigarh when Zail Singh was the leader of the Opposition to the Akali government and Darbara Singh was the Pradesh Congress Committee(I) chief.

Active Set-up: The avowed objective was to establish a sovereign Sikh state of Khalistan and fight against anti-Sikh discrimination, the political objective was to eat into the Sikh base of the Akalis. A five-member executive council was in charge: Harsimran Singh as Mukh Panch (chief), Gajinder Singh, Satnam Singh, Jaswant Singh and Manmohan Singh. At the same time, the NCK came into being with Jagjit Singh Chauhan, a former Akali Dal office-bearer, as president and Balbir Singh Sandhu as general secretary.

The Dal Khalsa was a compact set-up and had an active roster of just 560 die-hard members at the time of the ban. The NCK was more elitist and was dominated by rich and experienced politicians culled from various parties, and operated with the help of generous funds from abroad. Over 80 per cent of the Dal's members are in the 20-30 age group, mostly from the rural areas. Over 60 per cent are not even graduates, and the majority are unmarried and live in gurudwaras all over the state. Both the Dal and the NCK had branch offices in Mohali and Ferozepur.

The Sikh chauvinists soon went to work to embarrass the Akalis. They put up far-fetched demands: the installation of a radio transmitter in Amritsar, a ban on the sale of tobacco and liquor in Amritsar, a ban on Nirankari Samagams, more autonomy for Punjab. However, the Dal made little headway during the Akali regime and it was only when the Hindu-dominated Congress(I) came to power in the assembly elections in June 1980 that the extremists got a new lease of life.

Crying Havoc: The Dal kicked off in earnest in September 1980 with an agitation for the removal of tobacco shops from Amritsar. The agitation turned violent, and when the Dal realised that its demands were not being met, it cried havoc and unleashed violence in Punjab; one of its victims was Jullundur newspaper proprietor Lala Jagat Narain. The Dal also tried to sabotage the railways and in September 1981 five Dal activists hijacked an Indian Airlines plane to Pakistan. Says Balwant Singh, a former finance minister and Akali Dal leader. "These



Chauhan and Dhillon: escalating extremism

