



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Sikh Punjab 1984–93

Executive Summary

Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, there have been numerous campaigns to create a Sikh independent state. In 1966, Punjab's borders were reorganized to create the Punjabi Suba, a Sikh-majority Punjabi-speaking state, but this concession by the Hindu ruling political party proved unsuccessful in containing growing popular support for an autonomous Sikh state. Shortly afterward, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) laid out Sikh Shiromani Akali Dal's political demands, including autonomy from the central government and the integration of additional Punjabi-speaking regions that were not integrated in the 1966 reorganization.¹

Increasing frustrations with the central government's resistance to ASR demands fueled support for the Khalistan movement, which aimed to create a sovereign Sikh state in Punjab. The movement gained traction in the early 1980s following the rise of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as a leader of Sikh secessionism. Outbursts of insurgent violence aimed at civilians increased until Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Blue Star. This operation was meant to flush out Bhindranwale and his supporters from the Akal Takht temple, the most sacred Sikh religious site. The operation resulted in significant civilian casualties, the desecration of the temple, and the death of Bhindranwale. In apparent retaliation for Blue Star, Gandhi was assassinated on October 31, 1984, by two of her Sikh bodyguards.²

The violence and anti-Sikh riots that followed Gandhi's assassination resulted in the death of more than 2,700 Sikhs and increased support for the separatist movement in Punjab and abroad. In 1985, following the election of Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister, the government attempted to ease hostilities through the Rajiv-Longowal accord, which established an independent party to resolve disputes related to the ASR demands. This agreement resulted in a brief decrease in militant deaths. The prospect of peace was short-lived, however, as the newly formed five-member Panthic Committee passed a resolution on April 29, 1986, for the formation of Khalistan. Hostilities increased when the government imposed the president's rule in 1987 and launched multiple operations to eliminate the Sikh insurgents through counterinsurgency operations.³

Tensions between the insurgents and the government waned in 1992 when the presidential rule was lifted. Congress won the 1991 general elections and was determined to secure control in Punjab's 1992 state elections. The government launched Operation Rakshak II in November 1991 and deployed approximately 250,000 troops to secure the state and its borders and crush the remaining militants. Election turnout was approximately 21.6 percent, or one-third of the usual turnout in the state. Congress won a significant majority of seats in the state assembly, and Beant Singh, a Congress-affiliated Sikh, became the chief minister of Punjab. The end of hostilities was declared in March 1993 through the successful campaigns to target the leadership of various insurgent groups.⁴

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. Postcolonial nation building sought to integrate the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious pluralism under one national identity. The 1991 census accounted for a Hindu majority of approximately 82 percent of the total population, followed by ethnic minorities Muslim (12.12 percent), Christians (2.34 percent), Sikhs (1.94 percent), Buddhists (0.76 percent), and Jains (0.4 percent). Moreover, India's constitution recognizes Hindi, English, and 14 regional languages as official.⁵

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. India is a mature and stable democracy, and democracy is almost universally seen as the source of legitimacy of governance. Scholar of Indian democracy Philip Oldenburg states, "Indian citizens show strong support for democracy. In the 2007 *State of Democracy in South Asia* report, ninety-two percent of a large survey sample believe democracy to be suitable for India; 'strong democrats' outweigh 'non-democrats' by forty-one to fifteen percent (with forty-three percent as 'weak democrats')." According to Indian scholar and politician Yogendra Yadav, "The idea of democracy has, above all, come to supply the only valid criterion for claims to legitimate rule and, correspondingly, the moral basis of political obligation."⁷

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes. Considering that the conflict aimed to create an independent Sikh state in Punjab, hostilities were isolated within the state's borders. Moreover, the 1991 census estimated Punjab's population to be approximately 2.39 percent of the country's population, or approximately 20 million, so, despite estimated casualties ranging between 10,000 and 25,000, the government was able to maintain the security of more than 85 percent of the total population of India.⁸

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. The Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence Directorate supported the insurgents by providing military training, weapons, aid, and men. At least four of the major Sikh insurgent groups, Babbar Khalsa International, Khalistan Commando Force, Khalistan Zindabad Force, and International Sikh Youth Federation counted on support from the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate. Moreover, field intelligence units were set up in the Pakistan-India border region, and training camps for young Sikh insurgents were established in Lahore and Karachi.⁹

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The establishment of the Indian Armed Forces predates British independence. Since then, various branches of the country's security forces have been established and utilized in conflicts and territorial disputes in the region. In 1990, approximately 2.6 percent of the country's gross national product was allocated to sustain these forces.¹⁰

Outcome

Government victory. The desire for an independent Sikh state augmented ethno-religious and political tensions between separatist Sikhs, Punjabi Hindus, and the central government. Failed policies and militancy campaigns provoked large-scale violence in Punjab, resulting in a decade-long confrontation that had a significant humanitarian and political impact. The fragmentation of Sikh militant groups advocating for the establishment of Khalistan hindered the insurgents' abilities to resist government forces, making foreign support integral to the insurgency. Ultimately, the government's violent suppression campaigns and counterinsurgency efforts left the Sikh separatists vulnerable, resulting in the reduction of the Khalistan movement to a nuisance level.¹¹ This case is an outlier in that the insurgents had cross-border sanctuary and still lost, but this case supports the Five Factors Theory.

SIKH PUNJAB 1984–93	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

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3. Kataria, "Rise and Fall," 548–51; Rajshree Jetly, "The Khalistan Movement in India: The Interplay of Politics and State Power," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 67–69; Isra Sarwar et al., "Crisis of Identity in 20th Century: The Case of the Sikhs in India," *Perennial Journal of History* 3, no. 2 (July-December 2022): 293–95, <https://doi.org/10.52700/pjh.v3i2.123>; Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, "Violence and the Culture of Sikh Separatism," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 17, no. 1 (1994): 12–14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24510822>; and Simrat Dhillon, "The Sikh Diaspora and the Quest for Khalistan: A Search for Statehood or for Self-Preservation?" (research paper, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2007), 2–7; Hein Kiessling, "Insurgency in Punjab," in *Faith, Unity, Discipline: The Inter-Service-Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 153–58, <https://books.google.com/books?id=DWojDgAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&ots=RgktxDWcFM&dq=isi%20funding%20khalistan%20&lr&pg=PA154#>.

4. Webb, “Khalistan and Kashmir,” 128–29; Gurharpal Singh, “Punjab Since 1984: Disorder, Order, and Legitimacy,” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 4 (April 1996): 413–15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645407>; Philip Hultquist, “Countering Khalistan: Understanding India’s Counter-Rebellion Strategies During the Punjab Crisis,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 116; and Hamish Telford, “Counter-Insurgency in India: Observations from Punjab and Kashmir,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 21, no. 1 (2001): 7–9, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/4293>.
5. James Heitzman and Robert L. Worden, eds., *India: A Country Study*, Department of the Army Pamphlet 550-21, 5th ed. (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1996), 182; and CIA, *The World Factbook*, 1990 (CIA, 1990), 142, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/THE%20WORLD%20FACTBOOK%201990%5B15815916%5D.pdf>.
6. Philip Oldenburg, “India’s Democracy: Illusion or Reality?,” *Association for Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2007): 5–11, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/indias-democracy-illusion-or-reality/>. Oldenburg writes, “In Pakistan ‘non-democrats’ (forty-one percent) outweigh ‘strong democrats’ (ten percent), with ‘weak democrats’ at forty-nine percent.”
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11. Jetly, “Khalistan Movement,” 72–73.



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