

Sikhs

Profile

Sikhs are a religious minority in the north-western state of Punjab, where they form a majority. They are also scattered around different parts of India and the world. They number over 14 million, with another 3 or 4 million living outside India. Of the 14 million living in India, over 60 per cent are concentrated in their home state of Punjab. There are other significant Sikh concentration in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal and Delhi. Sizeable Sikh populations can be found in North-America, Europe and Australia. The Sikh religion dates back to end of the fifteenth century and was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539).

Historical context

The Sikh religion dates back to end of the fifteenth century and was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Dissatisfied with the teachings of Hinduism as well as Islam, he formulated an egalitarian doctrine which transcended both, and became a powerful force for change in subsequent centuries. A crucial element of this new religion was the creation of the community of the Khalsa, or Company of the Pure in 1699 during the period of the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind 1675-1708. As part of their religious injunctions they are obliged to wear the symbols called the five Ks, taken from the words kesh (uncut hair), kangha (comb), kirpan (sword), kara (steel bangle) and kaccha (breeches). Sikh men are most easily identifiable through their wearing of the turban. The creation of this community marked a change of emphasis which led Sikhism away from its traditional peaceful course into a more warlike stance, and although not all Sikhs adopted the baptismal tokens, bearded and turbaned members of the Khalsa came to be recognized as guardians of Sikh orthodoxy.

For the next 150 years the Sikh Khalsa remained involved in conflict with the invading Afghans and the Muslim governors of Lahore. In 1746 the city of Amritsar was sacked, the Golden Temple defiled, and Sikh forces massacred by one such governor. Another massacre, this time perpetrated by the Afghans, took place in 1762. In the ensuing strife and consequent power vacuum emerged Ranjit Singh. After capturing Lahore in 1799 he ruled as the Maharajah of Punjab until his death in 1839. Some Sikh states maintained a separate existence under British rule, but elsewhere in the Punjab the Sikh Khalsa remained independent. Factional infighting gave the British a chance to intervene, and after two Anglo-Sikh wars in the mid-nineteenth century the British gained control of the whole of the Punjab, and the Khalsa army was disbanded.

Sikhs played a leading role in the Indian army at the time of British colonization, and also used the opportunity provided by British citizenship to emigrate to other parts of the then British empire. Elected provincial governments began to exercise more powers in India during the years leading up to independence. As independence approached, Sikhs put forward proposals for alterations to Punjab's boundaries to exclude the largely Hindu and Muslim areas to the south-east and west or, alternatively, for increased Sikh representation in Parliament to protect their interests. These proposals were largely ignored, and the predominantly Muslim unionist party retained control over the province. During the

1940s there were increasing demands made by Muslims for a separate Muslim state after independence. Muslims urged the Sikhs to join them in the new state, but there were too few cultural and religious links between them to make this feasible. Afraid of their numbers being split between India and Pakistan, Sikh leaders in 1946 called for the creation of their own independent state of Sikhistan or Khalistan, without success. The situation deteriorated rapidly, with outbursts of violence and bloodshed in riots between Muslims on the one hand, and Sikhs and Hindus on the other.

With independence and partition the larger, western, portion of Punjab was allocated to Pakistan, now a Muslim state. In the holocaust that followed, hundreds of thousands of Punjabis were killed, and millions fled from one part of the province to the other. The Sikh community was split down the middle, and over 40 per cent were forced to leave Pakistan for India, abandoning homes, lands and sacred shrines. The majority of Sikh refugees settled in the Indian part of Punjab, although many moved to Delhi and other neighbouring regions. In 1966 the new Sikh-majority state of Punjab was created, but various complex issues remained unresolved. Firstly, the capital city of Chandigarh also doubled as the capital of the neighbouring state of Haryana. Then the water supply from the Punjab rivers was divided between them in what Sikhs saw as an unfair manner. As in 1947, many religious and linguistic groups found themselves on the wrong side of the boundary after the division, with Punjabi Hindus constituting the majority of the urban population in Punjab and a sizeable Sikh minority remaining in Haryana. Nor were the majority Sikhs politically united. The Akali Dal represented for the most part the Jat Sikh farmers, but the state Congress Party attracted many Sikh voters in addition to Hindus. Punjab was now declared a unilingual Punjabi state with safeguards for the Hindu minority.

Between 1966 and 1984 these conflicts continued to remain unresolved, which led to rising frustration amongst the Sikhs. Relations between Sikh political leaders became strained, and there were disputes between Punjab and neighbouring states, especially Haryana. These were exacerbated by Indira Gandhi's domination of the Indian political scene and her tendency to centralize power rather than grant greater autonomy to many of the country's regions, including Punjab. During the same period Punjab had undergone a remarkable agricultural and economic boom, primarily as a result of the introduction of green revolution wheat farming. Despite this economic prosperity, many Sikhs saw the contribution of Punjab to the national economy as not being sufficiently recognized. At the same time the immigration of Hindus to Punjab affected the perception of Sikhs in terms of fears of becoming a numerical minority in their own province. The influx of Hindus also meant that a significant number of young Sikhs from Rajput families were left without work in an increasingly mobile and urbanized economy at a time when military recruitment was on the decline.

The rise of an extremist Sikh movement led by the charismatic preacher Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale attracted much support from within the Sikh community, and resulted in calls for an independent state of Khalistan to protect the rights and identity of the Sikhs. This movement took a violent turn and eventually led to the controversial 'Operation Bluestar' of June 1984, which saw the Indian army storm the Golden Temple, holiest of Sikh shrines, to flush out suspected terrorists sheltering in the premises. The army action caused great resentment among Sikhs generally at what was seen as the defilement of Sikh holy places and an insult to the entire community on the part of the Indian state. The ultimate act in this political tragedy was the assassination of Indira Gandhi in October 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards, which resulted in a wave of Hindu violence being unleashed against the Sikh community-in a number of cases with the acquiescence of the police and allegedly with the political support of Congress Party politicians throughout the country. There was massive destruction of Sikh property and at least 2,150 Sikhs, mainly males, were killed in Delhi and over 600 in other parts of India. The army took over after three days, but the killings created deep and lasting bitterness and resentment among Sikhs, not only in India but also abroad.

Following the installation of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister of India in 1984, an agreement was signed

(the Punjab Accord) with the leader of the Akali Dal under which Chandigarh was made the exclusive capital of the state of Punjab and the issue of the river water was to be decided by a commission. It was also agreed that Sikhs' control of their religious affairs was to be expedited and fresh investments were promised for Punjab. These measures did not go far enough for many Sikhs, and shortly after the signing of the accord the leader of the Akali Dal was assassinated. In the elections that followed, the Akali Dal was voted into power under a moderate leader, but the rise of extremism in the state continued. Eventually the government was sacked and the state placed under President's rule, with the police, and increasingly, the army being given a free hand in fighting the growing terrorist and secessionist movement. After a long period of President's rule, during which abuses of human rights were widespread, the rule of law appeared to have been restored, reflected through the state elections of 1989 (although they were boycotted by many people). The Congress government that was voted into power attempted to restore normality in the state through a combination of extreme measures in dealing with the terrorists and restoring the faith of people in a democratic system of government.

The roots of the problems that gave rise to the terrorist movement in the state have yet to be resolved, however. Demands for an investigation into the Delhi massacres have not been heeded by the central government. Moreover, the Sikh community's faith in the ability of the Indian state to protect its identity, culture and religion has been shaken by the events of the last decade. Extremism remains a problem, as was evidenced by the assassination of the chief minister of the state in 1995, but the number of people involved in the secessionist movement for an independent state of Khalistan has shrunk dramatically.

Though the Khalistan movement has lost momentum in the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the country-wide anti-Sikh riots in 1984 have left a lot of bitterness between the two communities - Hindus and Sikhs-and have left a deep sense of injustice in their wake. Various commissions have been set up since 1984 to investigate the riots by the government but there has been no move to punish the perpetrators of the violence or even to prosecute cases against them. The Marwah Commission set up in November 1984 under the chairmanship of Ved Marwah, Additional Commissioner of Police, Delhi, enquired into the specific role of the police during the riots. However, the report of the Commission was left inconclusive following a direction of the government to hand over proceedings and papers to a new Commission set up in May 1985 under Justice Ranganath Misra, a sitting judge of the Supreme Court of India. The Misra Commission refused to identify any perpetrator of the riots and was heavily criticised for being more of a cover-up and an eye-wash. Following this criticism, the government was forced to set up a Committee in February 1987 comprising of Justice Dalip Kapur and Mrs Kusum Mittal (retired Secretary of UP) for purposes of looking into the role of the police during the riots. Seventy-two police officers were specifically identified by the Committee for connivance with the rioters and/or gross negligence of their duties and thirty officers were referred to for immediate dismissal. The government however has failed to take any step towards dismissal of a single police officer till date.

The late 1980s and the whole of the 1990s saw several commissions being set up by the government without any substantive movement forward or any concrete steps towards restoring justice being taken. The Jain-Banerjee Committee consisting of Justice M.L. Jain, a retired Delhi High Court and A.K. Banerjee, a retired chief of police, recommended registration of cases against various politicians including Mr Sajjan Kumar, a local Congress politician, for being key perpetrators in the riots but no case was registered by the police. In December 1987, Mr Brahmanand Gupta, one of the co-accused along with Sajjan Kumar, obtained a stay from the High Court against the functioning of the committee. The government decided not to oppose the stay and the Delhi High Court subsequently quashed the appointment of the committee in 1989. Meanwhile, the Ahuja Committee, set up to arrive at the total number of Sikhs killed in Delhi indicated a figure of 2,733 as the number reached by it. A new committee, the Potti Rosha Committee, was appointed by the non-Congress V.P. Singh government in March 1990, to follow up on the findings of the Jain-Banerjee Committee. The Committee

recommended for registration of criminal cases against Sajjan Kumar based on the affidavits of victims of the violence. It ran out of its term and a new Committee was again set up. The Jain-Aggarwal Committee set up in December 1990 comprising of Justice J.D. Jain, retired Judge of the Delhi High Court and Mr D.K. Aggarwal, retired police chief of Uttar Pradesh, recommended registration of cases against some prominent Congress leaders for instigating and taking part in the riots. They included political heavyweights in the Congress Party like H.K.L. Bhagat, Sajjan Kumar, Dharamdas Shastri, and Jagdish Tytler. The cases recommended by both committees were again duly not registered by the police.

Current issues

The political stalemate has continued through out 1990s and 2000-2006. It prevented any action being taken against the perpetrators of the riots. The Narula Committee appointed by the Bharatiya Janata Party government in Delhi recommended the registration of cases against the accused and pressed the Congress Government at the Centre to expedite the matter. The Congress Government at the Centre kept delaying its decision for two years. It finally stated that the matter did not fall within its purview and sent the case to the Lt. Governor of Delhi. A charge-sheet was finally filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in December 1994 against the three key accused-Jagdish Tytler, Sajjan Kumar and H.K.L. Bhagat-all three heavy-weight Congressmen. The Justice Nanavati Commission was set up following a unanimous resolution passed in the Upper House of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha after the new Congress Government was elected to office under the Prime Ministership of Dr Manmohan Singh, an eminent Sikh himself. The commission submitted its report in February 2004 and blamed the three Congress leaders-Jagdish Tytler, Sajjan Kumar and H.K.L. Bhagat-for their role in instigating the mobs to violence. The Commission also blamed the then police commissioner S.C. Tandon for being directly responsible for the occurrence of the riots and failing to take effective measures. There were some protests against the Nanavati Report as it failed to explicitly mention the role of Tytler and the other Congressmen in specific instances during the riots.

It needs to be mentioned that despite repeated recommendations by several Committees set up in the last two decades, there has been no move by the government to prosecute the political leaders involved directly in instigating the mobs to violence or for their role in the rioting. Similarly, there has been complete silence on the part of the government when it came down to taking action against the policemen indicted for their role and complicity during the riots. Though the Nanavati Commission Report eventually led to the resignation of Jagdish Tytler as a minister from the Union Cabinet, it has left a lot of questions unanswered. Again, though Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh has given a personal apology to the country's Sikhs for the 1984 riots few days soon after the Nanavati report was tabled in Parliament in 2004, it is seen as a case of too little too late. The repeated instances of non-action by the Congress Government has left a feeling of justice not only being delayed but also denied over the last two decades to the Sikh victims of the riots in 1984 and the Sikh community at large. The anti-Sikh riots in 1984 and the acts of cover-up and silence for two whole decades clearly bring out the fact that the role of the Indian state towards its citizens who happen to be victimised for being ethnic minorities need be redefined.

The Sikh nationalist advance charges of continuing neglect and discrimination during the period 2005-2007. Notwithstanding the fact that a Sikh currently occupies the highest political office in the country-the office of Prime Minister-relatively few Sikhs are represented within the higher echelons of the government and the civil service. There also has been a growing concern over the preservation of Sikh identity; the Sikh traditional costume of Turban and long shirt has been confused with the Middle-East men with affiliations to the terrorist group, Al-Qaeda. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, Sikhs (mostly in the United States and Europe) were targeted and made victims of hate-crimes. In the aftermath of 9/11, a Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi was mistakenly gunned down in the United States. During

the period 2005-2006 Sikh population in Europe and North-America has therefore focused on the propagation of their faith and to eradicate misunderstanding in the western minds about Sikhs being associates of Osama Bin Laden.