



## TERRORISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION IN PUNJAB

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### INTRODUCTION :

Terrorism in Punjab resulted in the killing of thousands of people. It fractured the social fabric and blunted the sensibilities of the people. These developments made democratic institutions and processes, political parties, and moderate leadership irrelevant. It disturbed the communal harmony in the state. No Assembly elections were held in Punjab from 1987 to 1992 because of terrorism. Thus, it became a great challenge for democracy in Punjab. An effort has been made in this paper to analyze the violation of human rights of the people of Punjab during the period of terrorism.

India has a tradition of respect for human rights which finds a mention in ancient scriptures and epics. During the freedom movement, with vision and foresight, Indian leaders included human rights in their agenda for post-independent India. Promulgation of the constitution by the people of India in 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950 is a watershed in the history of development of the concept of human rights in India. However, in practice there were some constraints which prompted India to maintain a low profile on the question of human rights. The major reasons behind has been terrorism. Punjab has been affected from terrorism for a decade in which human rights violation at large scale was made not only by the terrorists but by the state also on the name of counter terrorism.

I

Terrorism is essentially a social phenomenon. For a social scientist it is a form of social deviance. It provides us an entry point for comprehending the changing relations between and among the citizens on one side and between the state and citizens on the other. It is a phenomenon easier to describe than to define. One man's terrorist may be other man's freedom fighter. It is a pejorative term, and is often described by those who favour it as 'paramilitary action', as 'resistance to occupation' or as part of a 'war of national liberation'<sup>1</sup>. Satya Pal Dang observed that "Terrorism represents an attempt to attain some political objectives by creating terror through violence..."<sup>2</sup>The TADA 1985 describes the terrorist as a person who indulges in wanton killing of persons

or in violence, in the disruption of services or in damaging the property or disrupting means of communication, and endangering the sovereignty and integrity of India.<sup>3</sup>

## II

The emergence and eruption of terrorism in Punjab in the 1980s is a multifaceted development. However, the political factor was the most prominent in shaping the character of Punjab terrorism. The Akali Dal and the Congress party, working at cross purposes since independence, injected an idea into the Sikh psyche that there is a question of survival of the Sikhs, Sikhism and Sikh identity. A separate Sikh state alone will satisfy their requirement. This set the stage for a movement for Khalistan, an independent, sovereign state of the Sikhs. In this background, a microscopic minority of brainwashed fundamentalists, parading under the garb of religion, unleashed a secessionist terrorist movement in Punjab in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

## III

Terrorism in Punjab was started as Sikh-Nirankari clash in 1978. Baba Gurbachan Singh, the spiritual head of Nirankaris, was assassinated by Ranjit Singh on April 24, 1980. Later on a well known Arya Samaji Journalist, Lala Jagat Narain, was murdered on September 9, 1981 by the supporters of Bhindrawale. Bhindrawale was arrested on this charge on September 20, 1981. His arrest led to large scale violence in Punjab.<sup>5</sup>

After the arrest of Bhindrawale, four persons were killed in Jalandhar and several others were injured by a group of motorcycle riders. This started an era of random killings by motorcycle borne militants, which continued for the next three years. An Indian Airlines plane was also hijacked to Lahore by some Sikh extremists on September 29, 1981. The increasing number of incidents of violence, acts of sabotage and killings by the motorcycle borne militants formed the backdrop for the start by the cult of Bhindrawale and the emergence of various other militant groups in Punjab during 1980-81.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of May 1984, the extremists had acquired full control over the situation in Punjab. This situation made the central government to ride Army action on June 4, 1984 for controlling the situation. Cut off Punjab from the rest of the country on June 3, 1984 and made the movement of the people throughout the state impossible by deploying troops everywhere. The supply of water and electricity to the Golden Temple complex was also stopped on the same day. It opened exploratory fire on June 4, 1984. Commanders' strategy and C.S. gas on June 5, 1984, however, proved ineffective. Therefore, the Tanks were used against the militants who had taken position in the Akal Takht on June 6, 1984. The Army action in the Golden Temple complex was over on the same day. A large number of pilgrims, including women and children, died in cross firing. Sant Bhindrawale also died in this action.<sup>7</sup>

An Air India jumbo jet, Kanishka, was exploded during the flight from New York to London over the Atlantic near Ireland in 1986, as a result of sabotage by them. An Indian Airlines plane was hijacked from Chandigarh in the same year. The retired Chief of the Army Staff, General A. S. Vaidya, was shot dead in Poona on August 10, 1986.<sup>8</sup> The number of the terrorist incidents went up to 2,116 in 1990 and the number of persons killed in these incidents increased to 2,467 and the number of policemen killed went up to 493—an increase of more than three times from the previous year. The terrorists were specially targeted police officers and government officials, including the judicial officers. School teachers were also targeted for the first time. There was also an increase in the use of explosives. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were used in 149 terrorist incidents in 1990. There were 34 cases in the damaging of the railway track in 1990. Altogether 2,841 persons were killed during 1990.<sup>9</sup>

For more than a decade, Punjab has been a sordid tale of detention without trial, brutal torture, ruthless killings, fake details of which had later on come out. A vicious cycle of violence and vengeance was set in motion by the arbitrary and iniquitous steps taken by the government. Police killing sparked off retaliatory killings against them and provoked the desperate rashness of the youth. People in the Punjab countryside became sore about police atrocities and murders of scores of young men, identified as well as unidentified, in police encounters. It is this undercurrent that promoted terrorism and it was only after the objective of snatching political power was achieved, that concerted efforts were made to control or stem the wave of terrorism in the state through counter terrorism, which further dehumanized the administration, specially the police administration and political entities in the state. Getting aside of the known and documented violations of human rights, involving torture and murder of innocent people, extortions by the so-called terrorists and state terrorism let loose by the police administration. Jaswant Singh Khalra, a Human Rights activist, had brought up the matter of disposal of 25,000 "unclaimed" deadbodies in the cremation grounds of TaranTaran and Amritsar. Khalra had stated that when confronted, A.S. Sandhu, the then S.S.P. of TaranTaran, had reportedly replied: "you are talking of 25,000 dead bodies, what difference it would make if the number rises 25,001"? Khalra's body also joined with the 25,000.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, during terrorism the situation in Punjab was one could walk in, but could not walk out. People at large experienced:<sup>11</sup>

1. Unlawful lifting of young men from their houses without warrants, having no recourse to the court of law;
2. Fourth degree in human torture of the innocent and unlawful disposal of their bodies in case they die, or become human vegetable;
3. Intentional and random elimination of individuals through false encounters;
4. Cremation of thousands of young men after their death through torture as unidentified; and
5. Extortion of money from innocent families, etc. The irony is that all these was done and allowed to be done in the name of controlling terrorism.

#### IV

Assembly elections were held in Punjab in 1992. Although major regional political party, the SAD (B) boycotted those elections and polling percentage was very low but democratic process was reestablished by these elections in the state. The state government headed by the then Chief Minister Beant Singh succeeded to check the terrorism. It may be stated that the security forces which had earlier lost all hope, now virtually acquired complete control on the situation. This created confidence in the people. They came out openly against the militants and removed the fear of militancy from their minds. As a consequence, the state became free from terrorism and the normalcy was established in the state before the 1997 elections to Punjab Assembly.

Many causes were responsible for the eclipse of the militancy in the state. The militants lost sympathy of the people as they had become criminals. The Sikh youth had now realized that they were fighting a futile battle and would not be able to achieve anything. Apart from being fed up with leading a fugitive life, the heavy hands of the security forces, the government's apathy to talk to militants, pressure from their relations to shun the path of violence were the other factors which forced the militants to think in terms of surrendering and joining the mainstream. In short, above all was possible because of the cooperation received from the people.

**V**

Thus, Punjab has experienced one of the most lethal terrorist violence which has left not only thousands of innocent people killed, injured and uprooted. The terrorist activities in Punjab had far reaching social, economic and political implications.

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