Chapter 4

Ethnic conflict in India

A case study of Punjab

Gurharpal Singh

INTRODUCTION

The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi on 21 May 1991 dramatically highlighted the increasing levels of ethnic violence in India. Twice within seven years a member of the Gandhi 'dynasty' had fallen victim to assassins aggrieved at the Indian state's ethnic policies. Paradoxically, Rajiv Gandhi's death and the sympathy vote it generated for the successful Congress-I party in the national elections (June 1991) helped to disarticulate, for the time being at least, an even greater ethnic threat to the Indian political system: that posed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu revivalist party and its commitment to create a Hindu state. Violent ethnic conflicts which once occupied a peripheral space in Indian politics (Kashmir, Punjab, Assam, Nagaland) have increasingly become embedded in its core. In the short and medium term the future of Indian democracy seems to be largely contingent on its ability to resolve these conflicts.

This chapter examines the prospects for the Indian state to arrive at such a conclusion by undertaking a detailed evaluation of its ethnic conflict management policies in the north-western state of Punjab. Along with Kashmir, the Punjab represents one of the most pressing problems confronting the Indian state. The last seven years have seen a formidable array of initiatives in an attempt to solve the Punjab question. Consequently a case study of Punjab provides valuable lessons for ethnic conflict management in south Asia. The rest of this chapter is divided into five sections: section one outlines the framework within which ethnic conflict has been regulated by the Indian state since 1947; section two examines the causes of ethnic conflict in Punjab; section three evaluates the post-1984 political initiatives that have been attempted to solve the Punjab question; section four reflects on the immediate short-term implications of these initiative failures; and finally, in light of the previous sections, the conclusion advances new proposals that might provide the basis for a constructive re-evaluation of the Punjab question.

THE INDIAN STATE AND ETHNIC CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SINCE 1947

India is the most ethnically diverse society in the world. The complex stratification of caste unique to it is also overlaid with equally complex identities of language, religion and regionalism that straddle imprecise geographical boundaries (Phadnis 1990). Yet comparatively, the intensity of ethnic conflict since 1947 has been relatively low. More remarkably, this diversity has co-existed with the model of a third world democracy. Explanations of this achievement in the main fall into two schools of thought: the instrumentalist and the primordialist (Taylor and Yapp 1979).

Instrumentalists maintain that ethnic identities in India are not immutable but have been shaped and reshaped on a regular basis. In his seminal work on nationality formation in north India, Brass (1974) identified the critical role of ethnic elites in influencing the nature of ethnic identities. The relative autonomy of ethnic elites – as opposed to simply manipulative tendencies – Brass argued, was further enhanced by the character of the Indian state established after independence. Shaped in the image of the Indian National Congress (INC) the new state embodied two key principles: a commitment to secularism and democracy. Whereas the former was viewed as symbolic of India's modernism and indicative of its determination to reject religiously based separatism, the latter introduced corrosive political participation which, it was hoped in time, would undermine solidified ethnic opposition. Indeed, soon after 1947 four guidelines were established for regulating ethnic conflict. First, no secessionist movements were to be tolerated; where necessary they would be suppressed by force. Second, given the commitment to secularism 'no demand for political recognition of a religious group would be considered'. Third, no 'capricious concessions would be made to the political demands of any

linguistic, regional or other culturally defined group'. Finally, 'no political concessions to cultural groups in conflict would be made unless they had demonstrable support from both sides' (Brass 1987).

These guidelines were firmly followed by the INC under Nehru's premiership (1947–64), during which he created the 'Congress System' – a dominant one-party system in which the INC combined the function of political development with political competition by espousing a centrist ideology, adopting secularist leadership and allowing considerable autonomy at the state level. Naturally the 'Congress System' incorporated elements of both 'domination' and 'dissent' and in some ethnically plural states like Punjab the INC often resembled an intra-consociational coalition, vertically organising and accommodating hostile ethnic groups. Thus when in the early 1950s the demand for the linguistic reorganisation of Indian states became vocal, despite Nehru's reservations, it was conceded as a fulfilment of the INC pre-independence pledge to reorganise Indian states on a 'modern' basis. In contrast, the campaign for a Punjabi-speaking state led by the main Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, was firmly resisted on the grounds that it was a movement for a political recognition of a religious demand. Only after the Akali Dal reframed its proposal in *linguistic* rather than *religious* terms was the *Punjab Suba* (Punjabi-speaking state) conceded in 1966.

With the election of Mrs Indira Gandhi to the INC leadership, the 'Congress System' and the above guidelines were soon undermined. Mrs Gandhi, in her quest for absolute control of the INC, destroyed the 'Congress System' and, after 1971, power became increasingly centralised in New Delhi, reflected above all by the imposition of the Emergency (1975–7) and the reconstruction of the INC as Congress-I (Indira). Following Mrs Gandhi's return to office (1980), the process of centralisation was accelerated. Power within Congress-I flowed from the centre and the personality of Mrs Gandhi and not from the provinces or the party machine. Opposition state governments were regularly destabilised through the arbitrary use of President's Rule. Congress-I state chief ministers held their posts as a matter of loyalty to Mrs Gandhi; and recalcitrant chief ministers were circumvented by the frequent promotion of dissident Congress-I factions. Within this new framework, the principled management of regional and ethnic conflicts was almost abandoned. In fact by flirting with Hindu communalism as a new hegemonising ideology for the Congress-I, Mrs Gandhi first inflamed religious passion among the Sikhs and then, in a dramatic act in June 1984, put them to the sword. In short, argue instrumentalists, explanations for the rise of ethnic conflict in contemporary India are to be found in the policies and the personality of Mrs Gandhi who systematically dismantled the elaborate framework for ethnic conflict management established by her father, Nehru (Brass 1987).

For primordialists, who maintain that ethnic identities are given and follow inexorably from cultural identities, 1947 resulted in the creation of two ethnic states: Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India (Robinson 1974). At the time a fortuitous conjunction between INC secular elites and the social pluralism of Hindu society negated the need for an explicitly confessional Hindu state. The peculiar version of Indian secularism *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal treatment of all religions) implicitly recognised the hegemonic position of the Hindu community (83 per cent) (Vanaik 1990). Consequently, in usurping the secular discourse, the INC leadership was able to institutionalise Hindu ethnic sentiment through the 'Congress System' and effectively marginalised minority ethnic discourses as 'religious', 'communal' and 'obscurantist'. Moreover, such a coalescence was made possible by the long-term logic of Indian nation-building which required a basic ethnic common denominator. Thus, while the rhetoric of principled secularism officially proclaimed India as a multi-cultural society, its actual implementation was compromised, especially in the case of non-Hindu minorities, with a uniform, homogenising cultural policy (Rudolph and Rudolph 1989). Furthermore, at an executive level this implementation was enforced by a highly centralised Westminster-style political system which was at best 'quasi-federal' and gave the centre considerable residual powers, including the right to impose political closure at state level through President's Rule. Only since the mid-1960s – coinciding with the demise of the 'Congress System' – has the disjunction between the INC's professed aims and actual practice become apparent. This development, insist primordialists, has been reflected most dramatically in the rise of the BJP which eschews Congress's 'pseudo-secularism' for a confessional Hindu state (Malik and Vajpeyi 1989).

The divide between instrumentalists and primordialists is not as sharp as the above account may appear to suggest. For example, whereas the primordialists concede that ethnic identities can be materially affected by the process of modernisation, the instrumentalists on the other hand recognise the ethnic constraints on elite autonomy. Perhaps the key area which remains problematic for the study of ethnic conflict in India is how the developmental role of the Indian state – patterned as it has been on the Soviet model of economic development – has materially affected ethnic identities. In the case under consideration the compulsions towards cultural integration at an all-India level have been strongly resisted by a self-conscious ethnic minority in the Punjab which has experienced rapid economic development following the onset of the Green Revolution.

CAUSES OF ETHNIC CONFLICT IN PUNJAB

On 4 June 1984 the Indian Army, in a meticulously co-ordinated Operation Blue Star, invaded the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple. The objective was to eliminate organised secessionist violence that had plagued the state of Punjab since the early 1980s. Its consequences were the deaths of about 1,000 security personnel and Sikh militants, followed four months later by the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi and pogroms against Sikhs in Delhi in which approximately 3,000 people died. Since 1984 almost 17,000 people have died in ethnic-related violence in Punjab. Explanations of the causes of this conflict fall into three categories: (i) regional; (ii) national; and (iii) exogenous (Singh 1987).

Regional: Sikh ethno-nationalism

In the age of 'ethnic revival' it is tempting to explain the conflict in Punjab as a consequence of Sikh ethno-nationalism. Brass (1974) has observed that 'of all the ethnic groups and peoples of north India, the Sikhs come closest to satisfying the definition of a nationality or a nation'. The achievement of a 'cohesive Sikh identity', he adds, has at times the 'appearance of an invincible, solidary, national force'. But these drives towards nationhood, particularly after 1947, were contained by the parameters of linguistic regionalism set by the INC and its alliance with secular

Sikh political elites who successfully divided the community and supported the formation of a *Punjabi Suba*. By the early 1980s, it is argued, the conditions for such an instrumentalist pattern of rule no longer prevailed. Whether by default or design the Akali Dal agitation (1981–4) reopened the Sikh national question, and in the process became a 'freedom movement', a Sikh revolution in the making. Seen in this light, Blue Star was not a security operation, but the clash of two nations, the first 'war for Khalistan' (a separate Sikh state) (Akbar 1985).

The Sikh ethnic revival, it is suggested, is both reactive and modern. It is reactive to four types of discrimination perceived by the Sikh community in India since 1947: constitutional, economic, religious and cultural (Singh 1987). It is modern in the sense that though much of its inspiration derives from historical achievements, its objective is essentially to recreate a unit in which the Sikh community is an effective unit of political power. Since the late 1970s this revival has focused on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) that calls for the self-determination of Sikhs in a genuine federal union of Indian states in which the centre's powers are limited to foreign relations, defence, currency and general communications. In addition it is also underpinned by the alleged discrimination against Punjab in the 'unprincipled' linguistic reorganisation of the state in 1966 which led to the exclusion of the state's capital (Chandigarh) and many Punjabi-speaking areas, and the loss of important hydro-electric and river-water resources (Bhullar *et al.* 1985).

Regional: modernisation

A large body of literature which recognises the importance of the ethnic cleavage between Sikhs and Hindus nevertheless isolates the modernising impact of the Green Revolution in Punjab as the critical variable in the rise of ethnic conflict in the state (Singh 1987). The Green Revolution, it is argued, accelerated the emergence of mass society through urbanisation, consumerism, mass literacy, modern communications and the disintegration of face-to-face village communities. Rapid social change outpaced familiar political practices and the ability of institutions to regulate it. In consequence ethnic identities became firmer emblems of social and political competition. For example, Sikh capitalist farmers, who had been the main beneficiaries of the

Green Revolution, challenged the traditional ascendancy of Hindu mercantile capital in the state by articulating their interests through the ASR which was posited as a new developmental order based on decentralisation, ethnic and religious pluralism and the use of ethical incentives to promote development – in contrast to Congress-I's rigid regime of quasi-monopoly party government, industrial domination of agriculture and a socialist distributionist philosophy (Leaf 1985). In short, this perspective maintains that the 'Punjab crisis has not, fundamentally, been a clash between Sikhs and Hindus, nor between Sikhs and Indira Gandhi. . . . It has been a clash between two visions of the future of India's proper political and social constitution' (Leaf 1985).

National: Congress-I

A third set of explanations is provided by the instrumentalist school which emphasises the primacy of Congress-I's role in creating the Punjab conflict. As outlined above, the essential argument is that Congress-I under Mrs Gandhi reversed the guidelines for ethnic conflict management established by Nehru so that by the late 1970s the Congress had negated its political development role and pursued political competition without restraint. When out of office (1977–80), Congress-I actively encouraged Sikh militants in order to destabilise the moderate Akali Dal government. Subsequently, upon return to national power (1980), Mrs Gandhi arbitrarily imposed President's Rule and dismissed the Akali Dal ministry. Further, she persisted with clandestine support for Sikh militants to check moderate Akalis (organised under the Akali Dal but highly factionalised) and the ruling faction within the new Congress-I state government (elected after six months of President's Rule). When in response to these manoeuvres the Akali Dal launched an agitational campaign that gradually assumed the guise of 'Sikh revolution' around the ASR and economic and territorial demands, Mrs Gandhi held several discussions with moderate Akali leaders (1981–3) but made no serious effort to differentiate between their principled and non-principled demands. Ironically, the demands which Mrs Gandhi was prepared to concede were *religious* rather than economic or territorial. In short, according to this perspective, 1984 was not an isolated event but the culmination of

ideological and organisational decay that had begun in the Congress with the assumption of leadership by Mrs Gandhi (Brass 1987).

National: modernisation

A fourth set of explanations veer towards a primordialist interpretation by applying the modernisation thesis to India. The Punjab crisis, it maintains, cannot be attributed simply to either Mrs Gandhi or Congress-I but is a reflection of contemporary India, its 'new self', revealing more clearly the contradictions which underlay the consociational 'Congress System', between the INC secular elites and their communal, albeit highly pluralised, Hindu constituency (Vanaik 1990). The modernising process, far from being restricted to Punjab, is evident in wider Indian society through equivalent indicators of urbanisation, mass communications and the disintegration of local communities. This development, it is suggested, has triggered the delayed emergence of a vibrant Hindu ethnicity that has eroded Congress's management of a traditional (religious) following and modern (secular) leadership. Consequently, though Mrs Gandhi and her party made a special contribution to the enfeeblement of the Indian state, their options were limited by the compulsions of competitive politics, especially the politics of opposition parties who were equally unwilling to concede Sikh demands either for reasons of religious sentiment or pragmatic politics. And if the Punjab question ultimately led to disaster, it was because Mrs Gandhi and her party followed the same rules of the game as those pursued by their principal political rivals (Singh 1987).

Exogenous

Finally, there are exogenous explanations which look outside Punjab and India. Although they are often associated with the extreme fringes of Indian politics, the *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation*, published after Operation Blue Star, also drew attention to the 'influence of external forces with a deep-rooted interest in the disintegration of India' (GOI 1984). Implicitly it alleged the involvement of Pakistan; explicitly it listed Sikh militant organisations based in Europe and North America.

Today over a million Sikhs reside outside India, in particular in Europe and North America. The Sikh diaspora has been at the forefront of the ethnic agitation, providing both material and intellectual support for militant groups waging an armed campaign for Khalistan (Barrier and Dusenbery 1989). Arguably, though the latter's interests intersect with those of Pakistan in extending ethnic wars/terrorism in India's peripheral states, this conjunction has often been exaggerated in order to deflect criticism from actual policy failures.

POLITICAL INITIATIVES SINCE 1984

Since June 1984 the Punjab has become a graveyard for political initiatives. The most recent of these was dramatically thwarted by the postponement of Punjab Legislative Assembly (PLA) elections on the eve of polling (21 June 1991). This section examines why the various initiatives have failed to provide a critical breakthrough. A related issue is whether the experience of the last seven years suggests that the Indian state is reverting to the Nehruvian guidelines or following Mrs Gandhi's policy, or developing a third perspective.

Even by the normal turbulent standards of Punjab politics, the years since 1984 have been quite exceptional: they have witnessed quasi-militarisation, endemic terrorism, and an ill-fated attempt to restore the democratic process. A systematic evaluation of these developments remains outside the scope of this chapter. Instead we shall review the political initiatives undertaken to resolve the Punjab question and the responses they have generated among the Sikh community. In the main these fall into four chronological phases: (i) following Operation Blue Star the attempt at a 'Political Solution' associated with the Rajiv–Longowal Accord and the Akali Dal government of Barnala (September 1985 to May 1987); (ii) the ruthless 'Anti-terrorist Solution' identified with the policies of state governor S. S. Ray and the Punjab police chief Julio Rebeiro (May 1987 to November 1989); (iii) the search for a 'Principled Solution' associated with the minority National Front government at the centre of V. P. Singh (December 1989 to October 1990); and (iv), the 'Unprincipled Solution' attempted by the successor to the latter, the minority Janata Dal (S) government (October 1990 to June 1991).

Political solution: the Rajiv–Longowal Accord and the Barnala ministry

Mrs Gandhi's assassination, the election of Rajiv Gandhi as Congress-I leader, and the latter's landslide victory in the December 1984 national elections, were accompanied by a widespread expectation that the new leadership would mark a fundamental breach with the Indira era by re-establishing Nehruvian values. Initially Rajiv Gandhi did not disappoint. He moved decisively to usher in a new regional policy of 'rule by accord' (Nugent 1990). In Punjab the territorial, economic and religious demands that had fuelled the Sikh agitation before 1984, and were held to be non-negotiable by Mrs Gandhi, were recognised in the Rajiv–Longowal Accord. For the moderate Akali Dal (Longowal) (AD(L)) the accord provided a return to democratic politics. For Rajiv it represented a dynamic breakthrough, a befitting start to his 'clean' premiership. Although the accord was open to potentially conflicting interpretations, and suffered an immediate setback with the assassination of Longowal in August 1985, at this juncture there was sufficient commitment among both parties to pursue a political solution.

Longowal was succeeded by Barnala whose ability to transform the 'Political Solution' into an enduring settlement depended upon marginalising Sikh militants by delivering on the accord. In the initial stages he had a promising start by winning overwhelming support for his stance in the PLA elections (September 1985) in which the AD(L) obtained 80 per cent of all Sikhs polled and secured seventy-three seats in the 117-seat assembly. With militants marginalised and a majority Sikh government, most informed observers felt that a rapid implementation of the accord would lead to the return of normalcy in state politics without the regular central intervention that had become the hallmark of Mrs Gandhi's administrations.

However, within five months the 'Political Solution' was in ruins. By early 1986 Rajiv's reforming zeal came to a strategic halt as the Congress-I government at the centre reverted to interference in the AD(L) government for short-term political gains (Nugent 1990). Whereas the centre increasingly viewed the AD(L) administration in terms of *containing* militant terrorism, its *capacity* to do so was undermined by the reluctance of the

centre to implement provisions of the accord. The transfer of Chandigarh, scheduled for 26 January 1986, was first delayed, then postponed, and eventually suspended for an indefinite period. Other provisions in the accord (see Table 4.1) were either nullified or produced outcomes hostile to Sikh interests. The ultimate reversal of policy was marked by the appointment of a highly partisan Congress-I state governor and the imposition of President's Rule in Punjab in May 1987. Officially this step was justified on the grounds of prevailing 'chaos and anarchy' in Punjab. According to opposition parties, however, the measure was taken to improve Congress-I's weak position in the impending Legislative assembly elections in the adjoining state of Harayana which was directly affected by the provisions of the accord (Singh 1991).

ANTI-TERRORIST SOLUTION

President's Rule signalled a distinct change in the centre's policy. Henceforth, political solutions were to take second place to executive measures to re-establish law and order. First, the new administration which was directly accountable to New Delhi, was instructed to pursue a ruthless anti-terrorist policy with the aim of eradicating terrorism. Second, the security apparatus in the state was reorganised. In addition to the central reserve police force, the border security force and the regular use of the army, the Punjab police force was strengthened with the creation of new senior posts and mass recruitment at constable level. Third, anti-terrorist legislation - National Security Act (1980), Punjab Disturbed Areas Ordinance (1983), Terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act (1984), and Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (1985) - was rigorously enforced with official approval for police encounters ('shoot to kill') where known terrorists were apprehended. Fourth, counter-insurgency was given a high priority with employment of irregular hit squads intended to infiltrate and liquidate terrorist groups. The new mood of determination was aptly summarised by Rebeiro himself: to give a befitting reply to 'bullets with bullets'.

However, instead of containing terrorism, vigorous anti-terrorism exacerbated the Punjab crisis. The terrorist and state-terrorist killing rate rose sharply from 1,246 (1986) to 3,074 (1988). Police encounters, moreover, politically disarmed the

Table 4.1 Rajiv-Longowal Accord (1985)

Issue	*Agreement*	*Implementation up to 1988*
Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR)	Referred to Sarkaria Commission	October 1987: Commission report rejects ASR approach to centre–state relations
Transfer of Chandigarh	To be transferred to Punjab by January 1986. Punjab to compensate Haryana with equivalent territory for a new capital. Other territorial disputes to be settled by a commission	Three commissions (Matthew, Venkatar Amiah and Desai) fail to provide an agreement. Strong opposition in Haryana July 1986: Union government suspends the transfer for an indefinite period
Sharing of Ravi-Beas waters	A tribunal headed by a Supreme Court judge to adjudicate. July 1985: consumption as baseline	May 1987: Eradi tribunal reduces Punjab's July 1985 level while doubling Haryana's share
November 1984 Anti-Sikh Delhi riots	Referred to Mishra Commission	February 1987: absolves Congress-I of responsibility; places guilt on Delhi police
Army deserters	To be rehabilitated and given gainful employment	August 1985: of 2,606 deserters, 900 had been rehabilitated
Political detainees	Release of political detainees and withdrawal of special powers	Limited releases: May 1988, 59th constitutional amendment - provision for emergency powers
Religious autonomy	Enactment of an all-India Sikh Gurdwaras Act	Not enacted; May 1988: Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Ordinance

policy as frequent deaths of innocent individuals touched a raw nerve in the violent culture of rural Punjab. Increasingly the anti-terrorist machinery resembled a non-accountable police state whose regular pronouncements that the end of terrorism

was imminent were treated with incredulity by professional observers. In the event even Rebeiro confessed failure. Terrorism in Punjab, he admitted, could not be eliminated by anti-terrorism. Above all, it required a 'political solution'.

More seriously the anti-terrorist solution had a profound impact on the course of Sikh politics. In a short space of two years the moderates in the AD(L) were sidelined by the emergence of a more radical leadership under Akali Dal (Mann) (AD(M)) which forged close links with armed militant groups. Rejecting the Rajiv–Longowal Accord and exploiting the mass sentiment against the anti-terrorist policy, the AD(M) quickly established control over the institutions and structures of Sikh politics. The centre's deliberate actions to disarm this development by dividing Sikh militants spectacularly backfired, culminating in another security operation (Black Thunder) on the Golden Temple (May 1988). Bereft of policy the centre adopted the 59th Constitutional Amendment which extended the period of President's Rule for three years and included a provision for the declaration of a state of emergency in Punjab (Singh 1991).

Seeking a 'principled solution': the National Front government

Rajiv Gandhi's decision to hold national parliamentary elections in November 1989 was accompanied by an announcement that elections would also be held in the thirteen constituencies in Punjab. This event was the first test of public opinion since September 1985, and the result transformed the Punjab problem. Armed militant groups who had boycotted the 1985 poll now participated under AD(M). The result produced a landslide victory for AD(M) which won eight seats, and two of its (non-party)-supported candidates were also successful. In contrast, the Congress-I obtained two seats while the Janata Dal could secure only one. The magnitude of AD(M)'s victory was reflected in the total rout of Sikh moderates of the AD(L) (and associated factions) who between them polled only 6.1 per cent of the total vote (Singh 1991).

AD(M)'s victory presented several difficulties for the new National Front minority government at the centre. First, the latter was now confronted with increased ethnic consolidation among Sikhs reinforced by the 'anti-terrorist' policy and articulated by the AD(M) in terms of the ASR as its minimalist

demand. Second, the National Front government, because of its minority status – it depended on the BJP and Communist parties to survive in the central parliament – was unable to promise even the implementation of the Rajiv–Longowal Accord. Third, the capacity of the new government to impose a unilateral solution was limited by the lack of political support for its coalition partners in Punjab and the determination of Congress-I to use the Punjab issue to undermine the National Front itself. In this context the search for a 'principled solution' was largely reduced to symbolic actions – prime ministerial visits to the Golden Temple, replacement of administrative personnel, repeal of the notorious 59th Amendment, a new inquiry into the Delhi riots and moral pressure on the AD(M) leadership to de-escalate its demands. When the latter, however, refused to compromise, the centre faced with the Punjab legislative assembly elections (10 May 1990, following the repeal of the 59th Amendment), responded by extending President's Rule by six months. The official explanation for this decision was that free and fair elections could not be held until peace was restored; the unofficial, that the AD(M) and militants would have won and created a 'Latvian scenario'.

After the extension of President's Rule, the National Front government followed a three-fold strategy with the aim of holding PLA elections in November 1990. First, a new anti-terrorist 'action plan' was implemented on the assumption there were only 173 'hardcore' terrorists operating in the state. Second, efforts were made to placate popular discontent about the security forces by another change of state governor. Third, a renewed attempt was made to establish an anti-AD(M)/militant coalition by encouraging other parties and Sikh moderates (AD(L)) and Akali Dal (Badal) (AD(B)) to form a united front. But once again these measures failed to provide the critical breakthrough. In fact the militants became more emboldened within the AD(M) and launched an assassination campaign against AD(L) and AD(B) members. By September the centre's strategy was in disarray. In that month alone about 600 people died in terrorist and anti-terrorist violence, bringing the total for the year to about 3,500. Politically, the anti-AD(M)/militant bloc remained weak with the prospect of AD(M) victory at the polls even more certain than in May. Confronted with the repeat of earlier events, the centre once more extended President's Rule by

six months. Exuding a sense of failure, V. P. Singh acknowledged that the centre's policy could have been ill-founded. 'One thing I will regret all my life', he said on the eve of the constitutional bill to extend President's Rule, 'is not holding elections [for the PLA] within six months of the government taking office' (*Financial Times*, 2 October 1990).

'Unprincipled solution': Janata Dal (Secular) government

With the resignation of the National Front government over the temple/mosque controversy and the formation of a breakaway Janata Dal (S) minority government supported by Congress-I, the Punjab problem was put on the 'back burner'. In the ensuing impasse the militants intensified their activities in a series of atrocities which led to widespread concern that the 'centre's writ did not run in Punjab'. The new government reacted to these developments by sending troops of the 9th division of the Indian army to the border districts of the state and replacing the governor with a former chief of army staff. At the same time the new prime minister, Chandra Shekhar, offered to discuss the Punjab question with Sikh leaders, including militants.

In the first round of discussions between the new government and AD(M), the latter presented a memorandum that emphasised the need for Sikhs to have 'the right of self-determination in order to preserve their religious, political and cultural identity'. Indeed, the circumspect language of the Rajiv–Longowal Accord was forsaken for a wholesale denial of Sikh integration into the Indian union. The relationship between Sikhs and the Indian union, the memorandum maintained, could only be determined after elections to the PLA under United Nations supervision (*The Tribune*, 2 January 1991).

Perhaps recognising the incompatibility of this demand with what his minority government (of sixty MPs) was able to deliver, in early 1991 Shekhar authorised clandestine negotiations with minor militant groups who were prepared to pursue regional power through PLA elections. Against the backdrop of the collapse of the Janata Dal (S) government, another extension of President's Rule in Punjab and the calling of national elections (March and April 1991), a new deal was brokered in which Shekhar as the outgoing prime minister authorised elections in Punjab in return for guarantees that the minor militant groups

('democratic militants') would desist from using the elections as a referendum on Khalistan. Publicly, this understanding was legitimised as a way of bringing the militants into the national mainstream and preventing an 'open revolt in Punjab'. Privately, however, there was an unspoken agreement that the success of 'democratic militants' might outmanoeuvre the 'armed militants' and the seemingly intransigent AD(M) leadership as well as enabling the beleaguered Janata Dal (S) to secure a few additional parliamentary seats from Punjab.

The notification for PLA and parliamentary elections certainly had the desired effect. Factional and strategic differences between 'democratic militants' and 'armed militants', between factions in the AD(M), and between the latter and the traditional moderates in AD(L) and AD(B), were openly exposed. Congress-I's decision to boycott the poll (with a threat to revoke it if elected at the centre) further heightened these divisions as the election became a contest *between* Sikh political groups. While the campaign progressed the 'armed militants', who opposed the poll, intensified their activities, killing twenty-four state and parliamentary candidates. Yet despite escalating violence the state administration and the Election Commission insisted that elections be held. But as the results of the national election became available, with a clear indication that Congress-I would form the next government at the centre, the Chief Election Commissioner, after talks with the new Congress-I leadership, postponed the Punjab elections (until 25 September 1991) on the eve of polling. Formally, he justified his action by insisting that the increasing level of violence had impelled him to make this unprecedented decision; informally, it was generally assumed that 'the Chief Election Commissioner had bent backwards to please his new masters' (*Indian Express*, 23 June 1991).

To conclude this section we need to note some general points on the character of centre-led initiatives. Evidently the optimistic assessments of the ability of Rajiv Gandhi to restore the Nehruvian guidelines were misplaced. His failure to reform Congress-I led to a rapid U-turn in early 1986 in which he reverted to the policies of his mother – of increasing centralisation of power in New Delhi, open accommodation of Hindu sentiment, and a frequent resort to force. Instead of treating the Punjab problem as *sui generis*, it was intimately connected in Congress-I calculations with the maintenance of political power

in north-west and north India, the 'Hindi Belt', which provides 42 per cent of all parliamentary seats. Thus the imposition of President's Rule (May 1987) for political gain in the predominantly Hindu state of Haryana fatally disarmed the moderate Sikh leadership and emboldened the AD(M) and militants to launch a strategic movement for the capture of Sikh political institutions. Subsequently, in the absence of an effective political solution, the security apparatus provided the main instrument for suppressing ethnic strife.

Nor did the election of a National Front government at the centre lead to a radically new departure. Constrained by its coalition partners and external supporters, especially the BJP, the relationship between the government's regional policy and accommodation of the dominant ethnic sentiment was clear in its handling of Punjab and Kashmir. In Punjab, the National Front was willing to bargain regional *political power* with Sikh moderates (AD(L) and AD(B)) and their allies - in a united front against AD(M) and militants - for a de-escalation of *ethnic demands* implicit in the ASR and the Rajiv-Longowal Accord. The Janata Dal (S) government pursued the same formula but with 'democratic militants' as the key player.

Hyper-instrumentalism from the centre has failed to generate a parallel legitimising instrumentalism among the contemporary Sikh political leadership. Its most overt exercise has driven all leading Sikh political groups into the ethnic shell of primordialism. Although they are now fractured - into 'democratic' and 'armed militants', a highly factionalised AD(M), and marginalised moderates (AD(L) and AD(B)) - nonetheless they are increasingly entrapped in the rhetoric of Sikh self-determination which has now emerged as a minimalist goal. Thus, whereas the experience of the last seven years has led even the moderates to insist that the 'Sikh struggle' has gone beyond the framework established by the Rajiv-Longowal Accord, the 'democratic militants' justify their actions in terms of the 'AK47 and the ballot box'. It was in recognition of this growing ethnic consolidation that Shekhar proposed PLA elections with a view to accentuating the disjunction between *political power* and *ethnic demands*. Paradoxically, the postponement of elections in June is likely to reinforce the latter.

Overall, perhaps the key lesson of the various initiatives is that the Punjab crisis has not been accompanied by a radical innovation in the process of ethnic conflict management by the Indian state. Rather, the half-hearted attempt by Rajiv Gandhi to emulate his grandfather soon collapsed into the familiar policies of his mother. Where there has been a change is in the new form of overt instrumentalism practised by the two non-Congress governments at the centre after 1989, the willingness to offer political power at the regional level for compromised ethnic demands. In this respect the change follows the pattern established in other south Asian states beset by intractable ethnic conflicts, in particular Sri Lanka and its handling of the Tamil question. It reflects also the new situation where the official policy of multi-culturalism and multi-ethnicity is readily compromised in deference to the claims of Hindu ethnic sentiment that is forcefully articulated by the BJP. As the record of Congress-I and the National Front governments of Punjab has illustrated, the pursuit of power at the centre is intimately connected with the position that minority ethnic demands be delegitimised. Ironically, in this context, the one Nehruvian guideline on which all national parties concur, and indeed now emphasise, is that secessionist movements, especially led by minority ethnic groups in India's peripheral states, should be suppressed by force whatever the consequences.

CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVE POLICY INITIATIVES AND THE PUNJAB PROBLEM

Reviewing the Indian state's policy on Punjab since 1984, the above account appears to suggest that this conflict is increasingly irresolvable. The traditional transactional role of the Indian state seems to be frustrated by the rise of primordialist ethnic demands, both in Punjab and the rest of India. While this analysis seems to be valid, it tends to overlooks the limited opportunities for a realistic solution that still exist. V. P. Singh was the first to admit that during his tenure as prime minister that the centre's policy was badly counselled, in particular by the CPI(M) leadership and its jaundiced position on Punjab. Likewise, the demand for Sikh self-determination has within it many shades of grey and, as Longowal demonstrated in 1985, the ASR is quite malleable depending on the political conjecture. Anyway, endemic factionalism among the latter will always erode political cohesion (Pettigrew 1975). There is, therefore, some room for manoeuvre

but any new initiative needs to be realistic and framed with a short implementation period.

Unrealistic initiatives, on the other hand, abound. A partition of Punjab, however much desired by Sikhs or Hindus, is unlikely to be peaceful or 'civilised' (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 September 1990). Similarly, expectations that Congress-I can re-create a new party machine in the form of a new 'congress-system', are largely misplaced. Rather the demise of the 'congress-system' and the search by its consociational 'pillars' for autonomy may produce new national and regional consociational orders but only after efforts at hegemonic assertion through communal or secular ideologies have been exhausted. Equally, though the movement towards a new federalism in the Indian union has gained strength – and is supported by some national parties – it is unlikely to accommodate the ASR's demand for Sikh self-determination which has as its essence a claim for hegemonic control. An accommodation of this kind can only be possible if a new, largely Sikh, state is created (which would require further reduction of existing territorial boundaries and/or transfer of the Hindu population), or if the Hindu minority in Punjab (which has a relatively higher demographic growth rate) is willing to accept hegemonic control. The latter prospect is extremely unlikely because the Punjabi Hindu political leadership, whether in the INC/Congress-I or BJP, has, since 1947, argued for cultural and religious integration of Sikhs into 'mainstream' Hindu society. In fact, it was a reluctant convert to a *Punjabi Suba* after having campaigned for two decades that the demand be denied by the simple procedure of Punjabi Hindus declaring Hindi – not Punjabi – as their mother-tongue during the decennial census. The option of Sikh hegemonic control is unlikely to be accepted because of the inherently second-class status implicit in it for the minority community (O'Leary 1989), especially as Punjabi Hindus see themselves as the frontier 'sword arm' of India and have been historically adept at drawing on a powerful pan-Hindu constituency.

In contrast, realistic solutions should not only extend the narrow limits of contemporary Indian statecraft in managing ethnic conflict but also draw valuable lessons from the failed initiatives. Essential among these ought to be four considerations.

First, there is a need to build an India-wide consensus on

Punjab so that the issue can be delinked from the pursuit of power at the centre and treated as *sui generis*. On past performance the Congress-I and the BJP will be reluctant to relinquish the 'ethnic card'. This obstinancy, however, might waver in the face of rising disaffection, the difficulties of coalition building in New Delhi, and growing vocal opposition of the Indian army to the job of doing the politicians' dirty work in Punjab (*India Today*, 30 April 1991). In the absence of a national consensus any partisan solution will ultimately invite a partisan response.

Second, a new solution if it is to endure must address the 'psychic humiliation' of Sikhs since 1984, the question of self-determination, and include a rapidly enforceable package of concessions along the lines of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord. A new accord is likely to be favourably received if it includes the territorial, economic and religious demands. Symbolic measures, for example, a formal resolution in the national parliament recanting the 1984 army action, would also be appropriate. Above all, it needs to reverse the post-1947 pattern of agreement–non-implementation–negation that has characterised the centre's dealing with the Sikh political leadership. This could be achieved by constitutional guarantees that would give it the seal of a 'historic' settlement. Formulated in these terms, such a package is likely to prove attractive to most Sikh political groups (with the exception of 'armed militants') who might, as a *quid pro quo*, redefine self-determination more equivocally. As for Hindu minority fears of hegemonic control, these could be assuaged by political realism that highlights the difficulties of sustaining majoritarian Sikh rule, the relatively favourable experience since 1966, the logic of such an action for Sikhs outside Punjab, and the ultimate ability of the centre to employ its residual powers.

Third, a realistic solution would also need systematically to dismantle the powerful security-judicial apparatus that has come into being since 1984. Not only has this apparatus failed to contain ethnic conflict in the absence of an effective political policy, it has contributed significantly to its intensification (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 January 1991). The leadership of the security personnel has actively opposed political initiatives, often citing the possibility of a backlash from any future Sikh state government. Although this fear could be

assuaged by a general amnesty for political offenders that might be traded for any victimisation against the security personnel, the repeal of anti-terrorist legislation ('black laws') will prove difficult, especially as some of these measures have all-India implications. Regionally specific legislation, on the other hand, (e.g. special courts) could be quickly repealed while the enforcement of more general legislation could be more closely supervised with the possibility of greater accountability of the security and judicial machinery.

Finally, in dealing with Sikhs the centre needs to overcome a major unspoken assumption that has guided its policy since 1947: namely, that underlying all Sikh demands is a primordialist drive towards a Sikh state. This orientation is essentially ahistorical, overlooks the reactive character of modern Sikh ethno-nationalism, and overestimates the potential for state-building in the unpromising plain of Punjab (Pettigrew 1991). Paradoxically, this bias in policy formation has engendered Sikh primordialism instead of undermining it. The partition of Punjab in 1947 was opposed most strongly by the Sikh community. Equally, a separate Sikh state today will have the most negative consequences for Sikhs themselves. But if the movement towards such a state becomes irreversible, it will be because the framework of the Indian union established in 1947 has failed to provide the political, cultural and religious guarantees promised to the Sikhs at independence by the INC's leadership rather than as a historical realisation of an inevitable process.

POSTSCRIPT

The return of a minority Congress-I government at the centre under the leadership of the septuagenarian Rao raised high expectations that his neo-Nehruvian 'consensus politics' would provide a principled reappraisal of the Punjab problem. Instead his rhetorical mist has disguised a familiar policy of hyper-instrumentalism. The Punjab legislative assembly elections (scheduled for September 1991) were first delayed and then postponed until February 1992. In the event they were held despite a unanimous boycott by leading Sikh (moderate and militant) organisations and required a security umbrella of 250,000 military and paramilitary personnel. Although the result

produced a landslide for Congress-I, the turnout was only 24 per cent (Singh 1992). The restoration of the 'democratic' process under these conditions almost precipitated a total breakdown of law and order in March and April. Since then the main function of the new administration has been to provide legitimacy for the ruthless anti-terrorist activities of the security forces. Surprisingly, the latter did achieve some degree of success but the alienation of most Sikh political groups from the state's political process continues.

NOTE

1 Article 356 of the Indian constitution empowers the centre to take over the administration of a state and declare President's Rule (direct rule from New Delhi). Currently, the length of President's Rule is limited to a period of one year (two successive terms of six months) after which any subsequent extensions require a constitutional amendment. Although envisaged as a residual power of last resort, Article 356 had been used sixty-five times by March 1982. The frequency with which this article has been applied in undermining state governments is often determined less by constitutional considerations than the political calculations of the party in power at the centre.