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After the Amritsar raid, Sikhs riot in the streets of New Delhi: An attack at dawn left a holy man-turned-terrorist dead and inflamed some of

# The Golden Temple Shoot-Out

Troops crush Sikh separatists, but the crisis poses a threat to India's political stability.

The darkness of night had faded. Like a shroud, the heat of June began to settle over the Golden Temple of Amritsar. Inside the holiest shrine of India's 14 million Sikhs,\* 500 extremists said their prayers and checked their weapons. Their leader was Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a fiery preacher and terrorist in a turban; their demand was to carve an independent Sikh nation out of the Punjab, and they meant to have it or die. Outside, hundreds of Indian commandos drew closer. Just before sunup they made their attack. Running, crawling, seeking whatever cover they could find, they tried to dislodge the defenders without destroying the temple's inner sanctuary. But they felt compelled to attack the Akal Takht, the Sikh Vatican. Seven tanks bombarded the three-story structure—and in the smoking ruins, the government forces found Bhindranwale's bloody corpse.

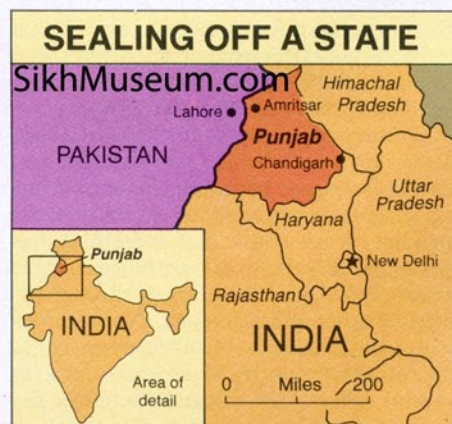
The spasm of violence took 420 lives, 350 among the Sikhs and 70 soldiers. With that quick, costly blow, the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi hoped to

break the drive of the radical Sikhs to form a separate state—Khalistan, the Nation of the Pure. Most Indians supported the attack, and even many Sikhs, who constitute fewer than 2 percent of India's 750 million population, reluctantly accepted the necessity for military action. But the Army imposed only a sullen peace on the Punjab, the cultural center of Sikhism. And in New Delhi, Jammu and Srinagar, Sikh militants took to the streets in riots that left 11 dead, further inflaming the religious and ethnic

hatreds that have weakened India ever since independence.

The showdown at the Golden Temple was a convulsion worthy of Kipling. It had been building for years. The Akali Dal, the Sikh regional party, has long pressed the Indian government to grant it greater autonomy in the Punjab. And frustration has driven hotter heads among the Sikhs to terror. Three years ago a group of assassins gunned down newspaper editor Jagat Narain, a leader of the Hindus in the Punjab. Bhindranwale, the obscure leader of a group of armed Sikh fundamentalists, was arrested after the shooting. The police quickly freed him after his followers went on a killing spree in protest, and Bhindranwale's reputation was made. Members of Gandhi's predominantly Hindu Congress (I) Party had previously used him for their own purposes. Hoping that he would split the moderate Akali Dal with his unacceptable secessionist demands, they covertly provided him with support.

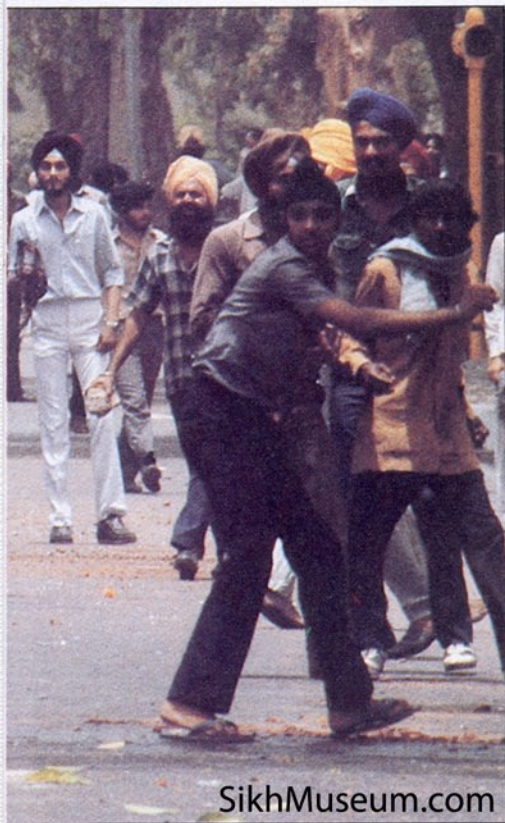
But with the killing of the editor, it was clear that the plan had succeeded too well. Brandishing a silver arrow as a symbol of religious authority, Bhindranwale quickly augmented his armed band with unem-



DEBRA FREEMAN—NEWSWEEK

\*A 15th-century offshoot of Hinduism and Islam, Sikhism frowns on the caste system and stresses monotheism, individual morality and martial valor.





PHOTOS BY PABLO BARTHOLOMEW—GAMMA-LIAISON

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### India's lingering religious and ethnic hatreds

ployed youths eager for a cause. The self-proclaimed holy man whipped his followers into a such a lather of zealotry that bands of terrorists began roaming throughout the lush Punjabi countryside, randomly attacking Hindus, including women and children. As the Hindus retaliated in kind, the body count rose to more than 400, and business and agriculture slowed.

**Daggers:** To avoid a second arrest he and his private army took refuge in the Golden Temple. He shared the place with Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the moderate leader of the Akali Dal. It might have been wiser for the government to have ejected the extremists earlier, before their defenses were complete. But Gandhi settled on a strategy of letting the crisis fester until she could be sure that the rest of the country would support an attack on a religious shrine. For a time, she even seemed conciliatory. She ordered the release of Sikh political prisoners, granted the traditionally martial Sikhs the right to carry daggers on domestic Indian Airlines flights and pledged to refer other, more substantive, demands to special tribunals. Clearly, however, Bhindranwale had no intention of being appeased; his goal was to provoke so much violence that the majority of Sikhs would be forced to close ranks and support his struggle for an independent state. The crisis might have boiled over two

weeks ago when terrorists inside the temple engaged local paramilitary forces in a series of gun battles. But even then, Gandhi refused to order a siege.

What finally triggered the attack was the call by both Bhindranwale and more moderate Sikhs for an economic blockade of the Punjab. Among other things, they asked the Sikhs to block roads and disrupt train service, gestures that would have cut vital grain shipments from the region. Faced with the threat of food shortages throughout the rest of India, Gandhi went on national television and radio. "Don't shed blood," she pleaded with the separatists. "Shed hatred." Finally she began to use a sterner tone. "No government can allow violence and terrorism any premise in the settlement of issues," she said. "Make no mistake about this." Even as she was broadcasting her hourlong appeal, the Indian Army was sealing off the Punjab: not a bicycle, not a bullock cart, no trains, buses or cars moved. The government imposed an around-the-clock curfew. No citizens were allowed to cross the border and all foreigners, including reporters, were expelled under the Foreigners Act.

**Taut Nerves:** The government's greatest fear was that a careless assault would enrage moderate and extremist Sikhs alike, increasing separatist pressures rather than curbing them. The attack was planned with great caution. To underscore the secular loyalty and strength of the Army, Gandhi put an Indian Muslim in charge of the special commando unit assigned to confront Bhindranwale; but she also took care to include four Sikhs among the top six military commanders leading the operation. Sikhs make up a good segment of the Indian officer corps. From

New Delhi, a crack commando unit of 500 soldiers trained in antiterrorist operations flew to Amritsar. As nerves drew taut, 5,000 troops ringed the temple complex, blocking all supply and escape routes. Another 5,000 enforced the curfew in the city. Sharpshooters were posted at vantage points overlooking the Golden Temple. The Army cut off food, water and electricity to the temple and settled in for a prolonged siege.

The defenders had stashed away enough supplies to last several weeks, including a generator to provide electricity. Shuhbeg Singh, a renegade former Indian Army general skilled in guerrilla warfare, had assem-



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### Indian police fire at protesters: Bloody showdown

bled an extensive arsenal to be used in any confrontation with the government. Among the weapons he purchased—chiefly from Pakistan—were five medium machine guns, 20 to 25 light machine guns, thousands of rifles, 50 sten submachine guns, antitank missiles, rocket launchers and Israeli-made bulletproof vests. The terrorists built sandbag bunkers along the marble walls of the temple and set up mortars and machine guns on top of the clock and water



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### Bhindranwale (center) with his bodyguards at the Golden Temple: A silver-arrow crusade



## INTERNATIONAL

towers. Then they hunkered down for a siege.

From New Delhi, a central command task force composed of Gandhi and her top advisers, including the home and defense ministers and the security chief, ordered the Army not to harm the Harmandir Sahib, the sanctuary that houses the most sacred writings of the Sikhs. Over loudspeakers, Army officers begged the terrorists to give up quietly and without bloodshed. Several hundred Sikhs eventually came out carrying white flags. Longowal and a number of other moderates from the Akali Dal also left with their followers. But Bhindranwale and his band of 500 stayed put for a fight to the death.

"We went in not in anger but in sadness," said Lt. Gen. K. Sunderji. "We went in with prayers on our lips and reverence." The Golden Temple was set in the middle of an artificial lake. It could be approached only by a narrow causeway that deprived the troops of cover. As they scrambled over the marble bridge, they were sitting ducks. Fifteen soldiers fell dead as snipers picked them off one by one. "We've never come under such heavy fire," said one Army commander.

One government soldier who did manage to crawl his way across the causeway was picked up by Bhindranwale's men. The terrorists tied him up with sticks of dynamite, then forced him out into the full view of his comrades in arms. The terrorists lit the fuse and the soldier was blown to bits. That gruesome sight drove the soldiers into a frenzy. Braving the exposed causeway, the government commandos attacked in waves.



Sikhs wounded at the Akal Thakt: A deadly cannon burst

## THE SIKHS' TEMPLE OF DOOM



The fight proved to be a mismatch. Seven tanks clanked into the compound and pounded the Akal Takht, Bhindranwale's last redoubt. The raiders found his body in the basement of the ruined building. There were two bullet holes in his head. Beside him lay his right-hand man, Amrik Singh, who had a leg wound and a bullet hole in his skull. Powder burns singed the head wounds on both men. The burns suggested that they had carried out a suicide pact: Amrik Singh apparently shot Bhindranwale, then took his own life.

Meanwhile, simultaneous attacks were taking place at more than 40 other Sikh temples throughout the Punjab. The assaults were successful. But to the extent that Bhindranwale's goal had been to force the Sikhs into a new awareness of their separate

cultural and religious identity, he had amply succeeded. "You can't begin to understand our reactions," insisted one Sikh, "unless you think in terms of the Vatican being besieged and overrun by Storm Troopers."

Such a feeling is bound to create a thirst for vengeance. Sikh farmers may now withhold shipments of grain, and unless some new moderate leader comes forward, other Sikhs seem certain to renew the terrorist campaign. Even Gandhi

blamed the Akali Dal for failing to counter the terrorist threat. But the scapegoating did nothing to help moderate Punjabi Sikhs develop an effective spokesman for their political, religious and economic claims. As a result, their grievances may deepen.

**Riots:** The affair did offer some short-term gains for Gandhi, who must hold general elections by January. In failing to attack while the terrorists were arming themselves, she undoubtedly increased the ultimate bloodshed. But by waiting until the situation was plainly intolerable, she ensured that almost all of India would back her. She needs that popular support not only to win elections but to restore order in many other troubled regions of India.

Fierce rioting between Hindus and Muslims led to more than 200 deaths in the squalid slums of Bombay last month. And in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, where some 5,000 people died in Hindu-Muslim riots last year, it is still tense. Clearly these atavistic lurches are a threat to the central Indian government, and only the central government can bring them under control. Over the longer run, however, populations are seldom won over by military presence alone. If the Punjab—the breadbasket of the world's most populous democracy—becomes a center of sectarian violence and government repression, other areas of India may follow. And if they do, ethnic hatred could once again threaten the country's future.

HARRY ANDERSON with PATRICIA J. SETHI and SUDIP MAZUMDAR in New Delhi and bureau reports