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Armed Sikhs defiantly crowd the roof of their holiest shrine before the bloody assault: "Let them come. We will give them battle"

## World

INDIA

# Slaughter at the Golden Temple

*Mrs. Gandhi risks her future in an attack on Sikh extremists*

**T**he elegant marble-floored courtyard of the gilded Golden Temple in Amritsar was strewn with bodies and blood. The once serene and peaceful 72-acre temple complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikh religion, stood scarred and bruised after 36 hours of fierce fighting between militant Sikhs and Indian government troops. In sweltering heat and the dust of the battle's aftermath, black crows and vultures perched on the temple's balustrades in search of grisly carrion. For the first time in the 400-year history of the Golden Temple, the 24-hour prayer vigil had ceased.

The most fanatical leader of Sikh extremists, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, 37, who had provoked the violence, lay among the dead. Just weeks before, he had vowed to defend to the death his supporters' demands for increased religious and political autonomy. "Let them come," he had said. "We will give them battle. If die we must, then we will take many of them with us."

In ordering her troops to storm the temple, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took her biggest political gamble since she declared a national emergency in 1975. Last week's decision could add to the turmoil of a nation already torn by violence.

Some Indian commentators voiced fears for the future of the world's largest democracy. "What happened inside the Golden Temple is a turning point in India's modern history," said the eminent Sikh Historian Khushwant Singh. But Mrs. Gandhi apparently felt she had no choice but to attack. Bhindranwale and his followers had stockpiled guns, rifles, antitank missiles, rocket launchers, hand grenades and mortars inside the temple, in grim contrast to the shrine's jewel-like chambers and cupolas. The defenders' stiff resistance ended in slaughter: 259 Sikhs and 59 soldiers killed, an additional 90 Sikhs and 110 soldiers

wounded. Unofficial figures placed the dead at more than a thousand.

At week's end the violence had not yet subsided, and the Indian army extended its 24-hour curfew in most of the north-western state of Punjab. Several hundred Bhindranwale loyalists who had managed to escape the siege of the temple continued to wage hit-and-run attacks against troops in Amritsar. They also looted shops, set fires and killed civilians. An additional 100 Sikh extremists surfaced in Rajasthan, a state near the Pakistani border, where they called upon Sikh members of the army to rebel. Some of them did defect, while other Sikhs apparently donned army uniforms in an attempt to infiltrate and disrupt the front-line troops that shield India against potential attacks from its bitter enemy, Pakistan. The rebellion was swiftly quashed.

**The besieged temple, rising from an artificial lake in Amritsar**



BLADE-STGMA

Agitation by both moderate and extremist Sikh factions over the past two years had brought violence in Punjab to alarming levels. In the past four months alone, more than 300 people had died in Sikh-inspired violence. At the same time, tensions from last month's rioting among Hindus and Muslims in Bombay had built to such a degree that politicians began questioning Mrs. Gandhi's control over the country. There was speculation that further instability could cause her governing Congress (I) Party to suffer a serious setback in the national elections scheduled to be held by next January.

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Sikh outrage at the assault on the temple echoed throughout India and around the world. Ignoring curfew laws, hundreds of Sikhs rioted in Punjab; they also caused havoc in a number of Indian cities. In New Delhi angry Sikhs demanded Bhindranwale's body for cremation and vowed to keep his legend alive. "If one Bhindranwale dies," Sikhs at a New Delhi demonstration shouted, "a thousand are born." Two militants brandishing swords attacked the Indian consulate in Vancouver, Canada, leaving it a shambles. Security was increased around Indian missions in the U.S., Canada, Britain, West Germany, The Netherlands and Denmark, where there are significant Sikh populations.

The crisis came to a head when, in an effort to press home its demands for religious and regional autonomy, the Sikhs' Akali Dal Party announced that it would begin to block grain shipments to the rest of India from Punjab, which is the nation's breadbasket. The action would have cut off 65% of the country's crucial grain reserves, threatening widespread famine.

Three days before the attack, Mrs. Gandhi made an urgent appeal on national radio and television to all Sikhs to end their agitation. She outlined a framework for a settlement. "Let us sit around the table and find a solution," she pleaded. She had already agreed to most of the Sikh demands for religious autonomy and was willing to amend the constitution to distinguish Sikhs from Hindus. But Mrs. Gandhi felt that if she gave in to the Sikh demand for political autonomy, she would risk a Hindu backlash.

On Sunday the government ordered a 24-hour curfew, and told all journalists and photographers to leave Punjab. (Authorities later confiscated the film of those who had refused to comply.) Roads across the state borders and the airports were closed, trains and buses stopped running, and telephone and telegraph wires were cut. The usually thriving Punjab came to a halt, cut off from the rest of the world. About 4,000 government troops surrounded the Golden Temple and ordered out the 3,000 Sikhs who live there, as well as the crowds that enter daily for worship. Many heeded the warnings, but 1,000 extremists defiantly remained inside the temple.

Bhindranwale held out in what is described as "the throne of the timeless" in the temple's basement. His loyal followers took up positions they had been fortifying for months with sandbags, steel armor and bricks. When army troops fi-

nally stormed the defenses Tuesday evening, they met heavy resistance from rockets and machine-gun fire. Pinned down by a far superior, better-armed force than they anticipated, army troops called for reinforcements of tanks and artillery. After six hours, the machine guns fell silent and army sharpshooters closed in, backed up by troops with bayonets. When army troops finally stormed the basement, they found the bullet-riddled bodies of Bhindranwale and his two top lieutenants.

Bhindranwale's death was in the proud, warring tradition of Sikhism. The religion was founded in the 15th century as a monotheistic synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. Sikhs believe in having a direct, personal relationship with God, rejecting Hindu idolatry and the caste system. True Sikhs do not smoke, and the men do not cut their beards or hair, believing that spiritual power flows through long hair. India's 15 million Sikhs are known for being ambitious, hardworking and hospitable.

Their *gurdwaras*, or holy places, throughout India offer free lodging and food for any traveler who happens by.

Industrious and ambitious, the Sikhs have turned Punjab, one of the few areas in which they form a majority, into a model of agricultural efficiency, thereby helping make India self-sufficient in wheat. Sikh politicians are demanding economic improvements from the central government, such as higher wheat prices and more investment in Punjab. Some Sikhs want a form of regional autonomy that would give to Punjab authority in all areas of state government except currency, railways, communications and defense. Others want

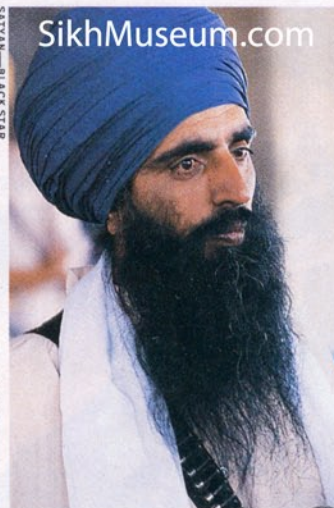
the city of Chandigarh, which is also the capital of the neighboring Hindu state of Haryana, to be designated exclusively as Punjab's political capital.

The defiant and charismatic Bhindranwale, known to his followers as "the guiding light," emerged in 1978 as the most radical of the Sikh leaders. He possessed a mythic sense of his own destiny and claimed from an early age that he was fated to lead the Sikhs in their struggle for autonomy. Gradually distancing himself from the more moderate Akali Dal, Bhindranwale began in 1981 to use holy places as sanctuaries and military training grounds for Sikh fundamentalists rallying around him. The tall, lean leader always wore a sword as well as a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver on a gun belt with silver bullets. He preached that Sikhs were a religious group apart from Hindus and Muslims, with a divine destiny to rule themselves and escape the corrupt influences of Hindu and Western values.

By ordering the assault on the temple, Mrs. Gandhi has placated critics who accused her of dangerous inaction on Sikh terrorism. But she has seriously harmed her standing with moderate Sikhs who did not support Bhindranwale's fanaticism although they revered the Golden Temple as a shrine of peace. "I don't understand why Mrs. Gandhi gave the order," said Historian Singh. "We had been given assurances that there would never be an armed intervention, but they have gone back on their word. No serious Sikh can entertain thoughts of talking to Mrs. Gandhi now." Only through cautious maneuvering and concessions to moderate Sikhs, it seems, can Mrs. Gandhi hope to heal the wounds left by last week's attack and preserve, indeed strengthen, her country's unity. —By Laura López. Reported by Dean Brellis/New Delhi



Prime Minister Indira Gandhi



Sikh Militant Bhindranwale

One of Bhindranwale's bodyguards lies wounded inside the temple

