

Bhindranwale: voice of rage leaves India a time bomb

BY JOHN GRAY

"Only sheep and goats are afraid. I am the son of a lion.

"I am not afraid to go out. I am not sitting here out of fear. I am only sitting here because the agitation is going on in Punjab.

"For as long as it is going on, I am bound to live here because I have made a prayer. I have made a vow." —Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

NOBODY, least of all the shrewd Indira Gandhi, could have been surprised that militant Sikhs in India and abroad would view the death last week of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as nothing less than the murder of a saint.

Even moderate Sikhs fear that Prime Minister Gandhi has created a martyr.

Certainly, Mr. Bhindranwale would not have been surprised. After all, he had been preparing for his martyrdom for some time.

India is a land whose history has been written in blood, so violence is not remarkable. What made Mr. Bhindranwale so special was that he had become the voice of a rage which may yet threaten the very integrity of India.

In the past two years literally hundreds of Indians, both Sikh and Hindu, have died in a campaign of wanton terrorism throughout Punjab, where Sikhs are marginally in the majority. Terror begat revenge, and that begat further revenge.

To the Sikhs who visited the Golden Temple, the holiest of Sikh shrines, Mr. Bhindranwale held out the vision of violence to which they had been or would be victim. Hindus were slaughtering Sikhs. Hindus were enslaving Sikhs. The Sikhs must be liberated from their oppressors.

The holy man would read out a list of the enemies of the Sikhs. His sermons were sold on cassettes in the dusty streets surrounding the Golden Temple. If and when those on the hit list happened later to get hit, Mr. Bhindranwale was not stricken with grief.

Mr. Bhindranwale urged his followers to buy revolvers and told them not to bother with licences. When he said that, it was probably accompanied by that sardonic expression, mainly the laughter of his eyes, which said he knew you understood what he meant.

That expression flickered frequently across his face when I met him last November and he talked of the wave of violence in Punjab and the struggle between militant Sikhs and the Government of Mrs. Gandhi in New Delhi.

It was, by any measure, a bizarre interview. My guide was an official of Akali Dal, the Sikh political party, and he led the way through the rabbit warren of dark corridors and narrow passageways in the Golden Temple complex where Mr. Bhindranwale had taken asylum several months before.

Our destination was the flat roof over-

looking the Golden Temple and, at every landing on the way up, the passage was barred by one or two Sikh guards armed with anything from a Sten gun to a bolt-action Lee Enfield left over from the days of the British Raj. The presence of the guide was comforting.

On the roof in the bright morning sun, Mr. Bhindranwale was reading scriptures. Around the perimeter of the roof, as the sun glinted off a nearby temple, armed Sikh guards surveyed the crowd of silent worshippers seated at the feet of the holy man. The silhouette of the worshippers against the cloudless blue sky was set off by the turbanned heads bowed in prayer and a dozen rifle barrels protruding from the crowd of seated figures.

The fame of Mr. Bhindranwale did not begin in the Golden Temple. He took up residence in the temple only after he had become a charismatic figure in the Punjab countryside, travelling from village to village to revile Sikhs who had strayed from the path of fundamentalism and to rescue those willing to be rescued.

It was from those days that he earned his reputation throughout India as the Khomai of the Sikhs. That reputation grew as he pushed more moderate Sikhs aside or drew them into more revolutionary militancy.

He was tall and handsome, imposing in a royal blue turban and a dazzling white robe. He carried the traditional Sikh kirpan, a curved dagger. And slung over one shoulder was a cartridge belt, and around his waist in a shiny brown leather holster was a .38 calibre revolver.

The charisma palpably had not waned. As we stood and talked, the worshippers crowded around to hear the interview, the



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Bhindranwale had a bodyguard in the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

translated questions and the hoarse reply. They watched one face and then the other, and when Mr. Bhindranwale permitted himself that sardonic expression, the

mocking laughter of the eyes, they laughed with delight.

A few departing worshippers touched him on the arm as they left, others laid money on the ground and tugged gently at the hem of his robe to signal what they had done. He did not stoop for that; an aide picked up the money.

He talked easily, if a bit disdainfully, of the political demands of the militant Sikhs. The intent crowd of worshippers around us were silent when the questions turned to violence.

But Mr. Bhindranwale was not eager to talk to an outsider about violence. There were questions about an attack on a bus a few weeks before; six Hindus were lined up beside the bus and slaughtered for no reason other than that they were Hindu.

With his arms crossed, Mr. Bhindranwale listened to the question impassively. Violence, he said, and threw back his head. The central Government invited violence. Ask the Government. The crowd nodded. There was just the flicker of sardonic laughter in the eyes, and a brief smile, and the crowd laughed.

Measured against the encircling guns and the mounting toll of the slaughter in Punjab, the laughter was not pleasant.

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Sikhs in front of New Delhi temple shout anti-Government slogans.