

The two faces of Punjab terror

How a chance encounter put an innocent man on the death list

By Gerald Utting Toronto Star

NEW DELHI — "What happened to me," Krishna Kapoor told The Star, "was just a foretaste of what happened to my poor homeland."

The headlines of the past month have told what happened to Kapoor's homeland, the northwestern Indian state of Punjab; how he has become an exile in his own country has not.

Kapoor is not his real name. But his story is true, and he is not someone produced by the government of India to back up its claims about terrorism in the Punjab.

Kapoor's main worry in talking to me, a conversation arranged by a relative, is that somebody in Toronto will somehow find out who he is and where he now lives.

Demonstrations in Toronto

"I have had a death sentence passed on me by Bhindranwale," he said.

"I never did anything to him but he would have killed me, and I am afraid that some of his followers may still try to carry out his death warrants."

(Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, leader of the extremist Sikh faction in the Golden Temple, was killed in the recent battle with units of the Indian army.)

"And we know that some of his people are living in Toronto, because they have demonstrated against the Indian army going into the Golden Temple in Amritsar in Toronto and Vancouver. So I am worried that one of them will send information about where I am back to the Punjab, and that they will come after me to kill me here in Delhi."

"It all started in 1981 when I had the misfortune to catch a train from Patiala, which was my home, to Delhi. It was to have been a very ordinary trip I can assure you."

"I am just an ordinary Punjabi married man, with three children, in my mid-40s. I have never had bad relations with Sikhs, and I can't think of any really bad problems between Hindus and Sikhs in my home state."

Ceremonial dagger

"So I had no idea of any trouble when I got on the train. There was a nihang in my compartment, a man in his 30s wearing the traditional clothes of a Sikh religious warrior. You see them at the Sikh gurdwaras (temples), which we Hindus often visit to pray at as well as our own temples."

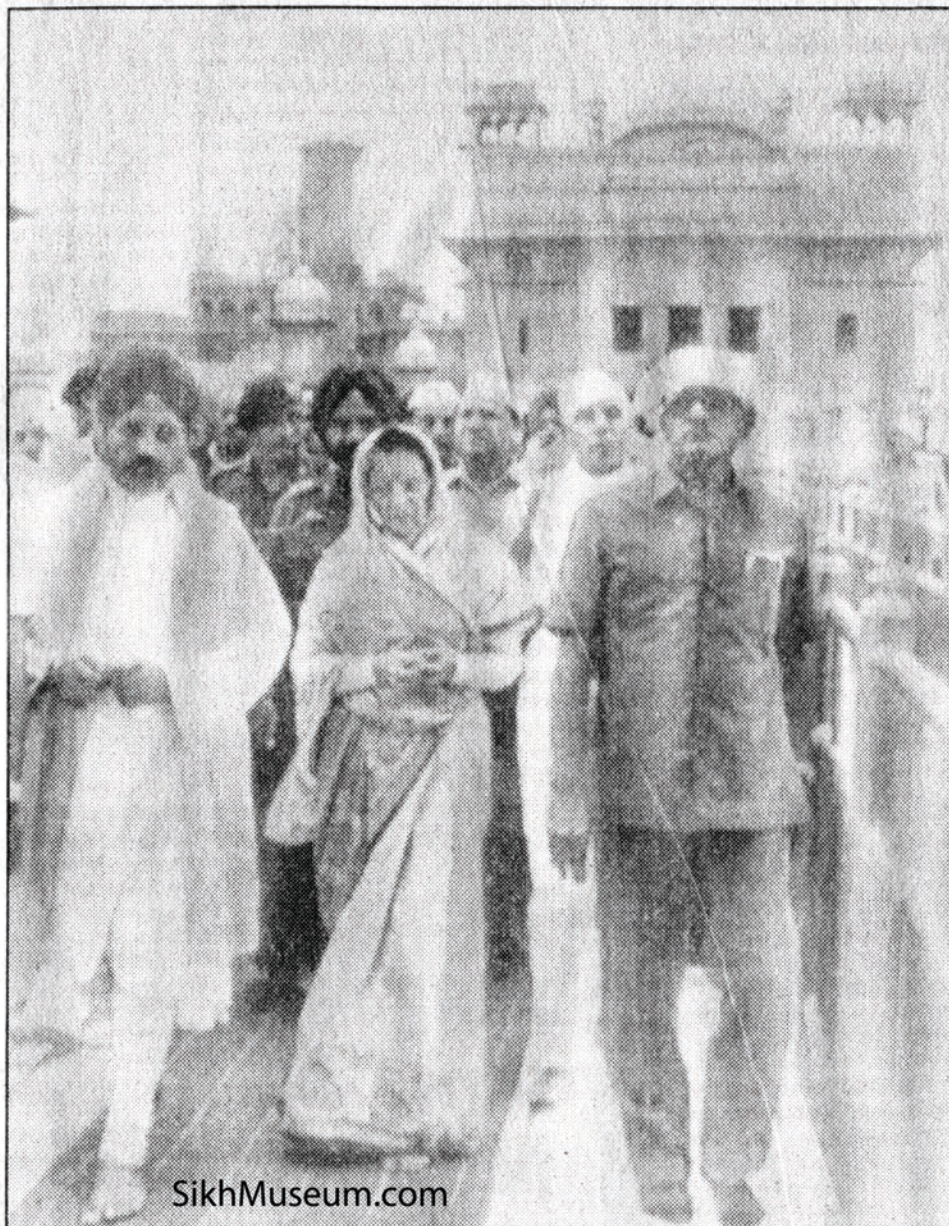
"They are part of Punjabi history, you know, and until recently nobody worried about nihangs. So this man in my compartment dressed in a blue and white turban, a blue and white calf-length tunic and wearing a kirpan (ceremonial dagger) represented no threat to me. I was so wrong."

"Then the ticket collector came through the train. India is a poor country and many people try to travel free, so the railway guards are always checking... unfortunately for me in this case."

"The nihang did not have a ticket. The ticket collector said that he would have to get off the train if he didn't pay. The nihang told him: 'I have never bought a ticket in my life. Nihangs do not buy tickets, we are not paying money, we are religious people.'"

"There was a heated argument. Now at that stage the terrorism was only just beginning and I did not in any way associate the nihang with such business."

"I made the mistake of trying to cool things down by pointing out that it was only reasonable that he should pay be-



SikhMuseum.com

Shrine visit: Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi leaves the Sikhs' Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab state yesterday, her first visit to the sacred shrine since Sikh militants began agitation for greater political autonomy in 1982.

cause everyone else had to pay, including Hindu priests.

"The nihang drew his dagger and started waving it. Still I thought it was just temperament and tried to calm both sides down. Then he stabbed me in the stomach."

The passengers and guards wrestled with the Sikh "warrior" and subdued and dragged him off at the next station, where police arrested him. Kapoor was rushed to hospital. He was in hospital for 25 days, off work for six weeks.

Naturally, he testified at the nihang's trial for attempted murder. The Sikh "warrior" was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

But that was not the end of it.

"I continued at my job in Patiala. I had medical trouble of course, but gradually I started to forget the incident, except in my nightmares."

"Meanwhile, terrorism became a day-time nightmare in my state."

"The former chief priest of the Akal Takht, part of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, was assassinated across the street from that city's police headquarters."

"Newspaper editors were killed. One was killed despite the fact that he had his own armed guards with him and was accompanied by a jeep full of police."

"Terrorists started stopping buses and killing Hindu men on them. Groups of policemen were ambushed. Trains were attacked and government officials were shot."

"But I didn't think it had anything to do with me. I was horrified like every one else in the Punjab and blamed the politicians on both sides for the mess. The press talked about a reign of terror but in my home everything was calm as usual."

"Then one day I got a letter. On one side it said, you have worked against the cause of the Sikh Khalsa Panth (meaning, the Sikh national community) and this will not be good for you. You will have to

pay for your actions, no matter how much you try to hide yourself."

"On the back of the letter was imprinted a map of Khalistan — the separatists' name for an independent Sikh state — and the official seal of Khalistan. It was signed by Bhindranwale himself."

"I read this letter with utter horror, I can assure you, because I knew what it was. It was a death sentence. Hundreds of other people had received such letters and had been assassinated despite the fact that they had armed guards surrounding them."

"I had no money to pay for guards. I had no weapons. I was helpless. If the police could not protect themselves, how could they protect me?"

'Abandoned my life'

"I got this letter last October, the same month the central government placed the Punjab under its direct rule. That meant the Punjabi government had not been able to deal with Bhindranwale's assassins."

"At first I just stopped going out to public places. Then I realized that they knew where I lived and it was just a matter of time before they came to my home to kill me."

"There was only one thing to do. I abandoned my life in the Punjab and fled to Delhi, where I now hide out under an assumed name. I don't feel safe here either, because they have assassinated people in Delhi also."

"Now that Bhindranwale has been killed and the bulk of his followers are dead, in prison or in hiding, can I go back home and see my family?"

"The unity of India may have been saved but what about me? It doesn't take an army to kill one small teacher, just a small group of fanatics. I am a marked man now, condemned to death by Bhindranwale himself, and those of his followers who survive will perhaps think he was a martyr and that it is their life's mission to execute people like me."

What kind of people executed the missions of murder?

NEW DELHI — The storming of the Sikh's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, and the ensuing crackdown has claimed the lives of nearly 1,000 followers of the Sikh extremist leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. More than 4,000 have been arrested.

Estimates of the number enlisted in the radical leader's "death squads" range from 15,000 to an extreme of 60,000. That leaves thousands of angry young men who bathed in Amritsar's "pool of nectar" and took the Bhindranwale oath to kill or die still at large to carry out their dead leader's mission of murder.

What kind of people were the killers who executed the extremist leader's death warrants?

One magazine published what it said was an account based on police interrogations of half a dozen killers, but warned readers that the confessions had been obtained by the police through "third degree" methods.

No common background links them. Some have little or no education, but one was a senior high school graduate.

Several had records of petty crime when they drifted into the orbit of the various factions operating out of the Golden Temple and some other gurdwaras.

They told police that regular conferences were held in which it was decided who should be slain, then they were given hit lists and sent out to kill the victims.

One, Jasbir Singh, known as Pappu, confessed to an amazing list of killings. He is said to have started off by stealing wire and iron bars with his friends Beant, Basant and Inder.

Killed smoker

Then in 1978, his sister told him Beant and Basant had "molested" her.

Pappu, his brother-in-law and Inder strangled Beant and dumped his body in a canal. Then they killed Basant with swords and put him in the canal, too. Over the next four years he confessed to committing several more murders.

He murdered one man in a maize field with a sword because of an argument and then, on a train, killed a man who was smoking, which is against the Sikh religion.

Last year, Pappu, who was said to be living in a hostel in the Golden Temple compound, decided another man, Khala Singh, was a "tobacco eater and police informer." With two other men he tortured Khala and finally strangled him. The body was taken out and dumped.

Later, Pappu and two other men went to a nearby village and attacked some other Sikhs, killing one and wounding four with home-made pistols.

Next, he took part in a bank robbery, killing the bank's guard.

Last December, a man named Santokh Singh who had slept with a woman in the temple complex was strangled by a group of men. Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the Akali Dal leader now under detention by the Indian government, is said to have ordered the interrogation of the suspected group to find out who did it.

Pappu and two others were grabbed by a group of 50 of Longowal's faction and allegedly tortured. But they insisted they were innocent of this killing.

They were made to tape statements that they had killed another man. Pappu and his men then fled from the protection of the sprawling temple complex and were finally arrested by police.

— Utting