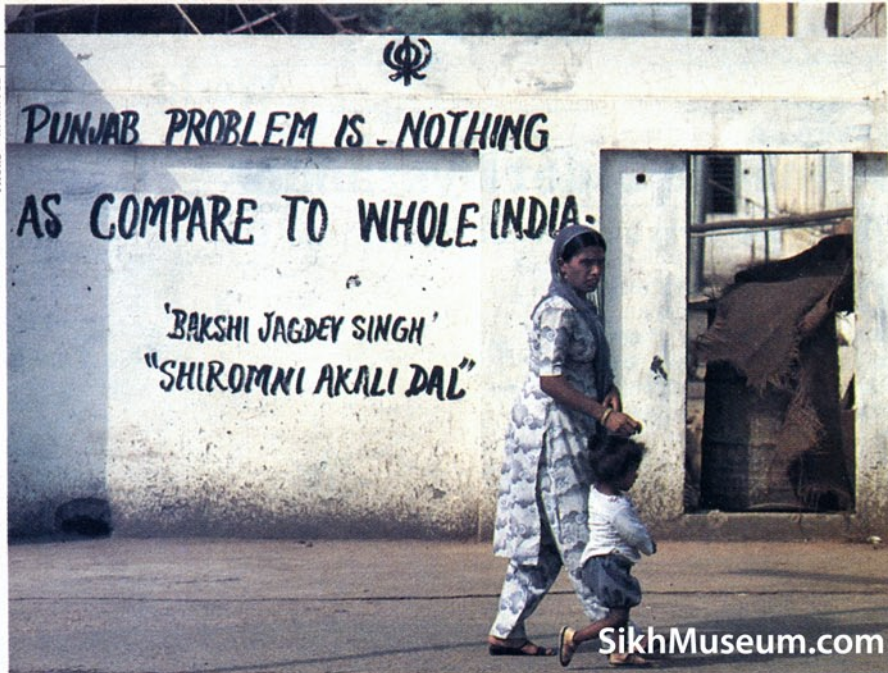




Prime Minister Indira Gandhi



A political slogan by the Sikh party, the Akali Dal, on a wall in New Delhi

INDIA

## The Roots of Violence

*Sikh deaths fit the sad pattern of a troubled land*

**"L**et's face it," said the *Times of India*, "the ship that is India is in serious trouble. If we are lucky, it may drift into some reasonably safe port. If not, it can get wrecked on its way to nowhere. We need not go into history to discover that not all ships make it to port." That somber reflection on the present condition of a country that is still known as the world's largest democracy came as tension in troubled Punjab was beginning to ebb. Three weeks after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent the Indian army to Amritsar to flush Sikh terrorists out of the Golden Temple, she paid a visit to the Sikhs' holiest shrine. All foreigners and journalists were still banned from Punjab, but some curfew restrictions throughout the state were lifted. Most temples were open again for Sikh prayers, though the Golden Temple remained closed and under control of the army. Indian Airlines, the country's domestic carrier, resumed its flights to Amritsar, and buses were running again in most districts. But even as the Sikh heartland returned to a semblance of normality, government officials emphasized that the army would remain in Amritsar in strength for at least two months, and perhaps much longer.

As for the healing process, the deaths of the 600 people killed in the Amritsar clash will take years, perhaps generations, to erase. It is likely to become part of the permanent baggage of antagonism and distrust that afflict India's 746 million people of so many diverse races, religions, tribes, languages and circumstances. Fully 83% of India's population is Hindu; 11% is Muslim, 2.6% is Christian, and the remaining 3.4% is divided among Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and others.

Over the past year there have been riots or incipient rebellions in places as scattered as Assam in the northeast, Kashmir and Punjab in the north, and Maharashtra in the west. Only a month ago rioting broke out between Hindus and Muslims in the shantytowns around Bombay, leaving 258 dead. The Assamese are upset about the influx of refugees from West Bengal and neighboring Bangladesh. Every tribe has its nationalists, every community its zealots. For every insurrection, there are a dozen more waiting to be born.

**M**rs. Gandhi must answer her critics' charges that her military action against the Sikh rebellion was to some degree a political act. Like her 1975 declaration of a state of emergency and her detention of thousands of political opponents, her latest moves have had the effect of reinforcing her position as the head of India's strong central government. The conventional wisdom for the moment is that though she has alienated the Sikhs by the events of the past month, her action has strengthened her popularity among India's Hindu majority. It also has removed whatever doubt there may have been that she will win the election campaign that she must call by January 1985. It will be her fifth race for national leadership. She stoutly denies any suggestion of a political motive behind her latest actions. "Elections come and go," she said recently, "but the unity of the country is much more important." She has used this very criterion to put down unrest ever since she first came to power in 1966.

And yet, given the depth of division and tension in this huge, polyglot country, it is Indira Gandhi's primary accomplish-

ment that, like her father Jawaharlal Nehru, she has managed to preserve the national unity. India remains one of the poorest countries on earth, with an average per capita income of \$230 a year. The annual birth rate, after persistent and sometimes drastic efforts at family planning, is still 2%, adding 15 million a year to the population. Though the constitution calls for free and compulsory education for all children until 15, two-thirds of India's people are illiterate. Despite all this, India's democratic institutions have remained intact since independence from Britain was achieved in 1947. The army has never tried to seize power. Though she demonstrated in 1975 that she could reinforce her will against her enemies by legally invoking a state of emergency, Mrs. Gandhi subsequently showed, in March 1977, that she could pay the price of the emergency's excesses by losing the national elections. Almost three years later her opponents had demonstrated that they were as fractious and bereft of leadership as ever, and she returned to power with a renewed majority. One of the failings of Indian democracy is that it has never developed an effective opposition, in part because of the overshadowing influence of Nehru and later his daughter Indira.

Because Indian democracy has survived against such heavy odds, it is impossible to prove Mrs. Gandhi wrong in her emphasis on a strong central government. But there are many Indians, and foreign experts as well, who argue that such a system has increased the country's internal tensions. For instance, Columbia University Professor Ainslie Embree sees most of India's recent disturbances as a pattern of "attempts by the states to get more autonomy." In the face of these efforts, he adds, "Mrs. Gandhi is digging in her heels. She believes that any threat to the autonomy of the center is a threat to her personally."

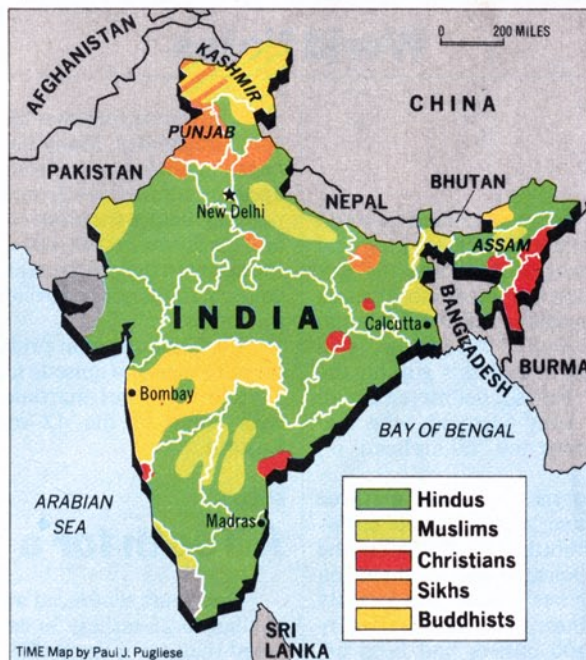
Others criticize her penchant for choosing, as the chief ministers of many



states, weak underlings whom she can dominate. Says one of India's leading intellectuals: "She has deliberately watered down the role of the chief ministers. They are dummies in the lap of Mrs. Gandhi's ventriloquism." Thus, weak state governments have enabled corruption and political chicanery to flourish, thereby alienating minority groups and exacerbating grievances. The cost of gaining political office is also on the rise. In Maharashtra, a candidate for a state assembly seat must now spend at least \$20,000 to get elected, even though the legal ceiling is \$1,000. Says N.A. Palkhivala, a former Ambassador to the U.S.: "In modern India, Machiavelli would have remained unemployed because of his political naiveté." As for the rulers of the central government, declares Minoo Masani, a member of India's Constituent Assembly in 1947-48, "I am not very optimistic that the 'new class' in Delhi, to borrow the phrase of Milovan Djilas, is prepared to disgorge the power it has arrogated to itself."

Such criticism might suggest that Mrs. Gandhi will face a close race in the forthcoming elections, but few believe that. The economy is relatively healthy, the inflation rate only about 10%, and the country's fabled "monsoon politics" are once again running in the Prime Minister's favor. The Sikhs may grumble that their heartland has become "the Ulster of India," but the majority of the electorate appears to be on her side.

**M**rs. Gandhi's problems with India's 15 million Sikhs have clearly been worsened by the attack on the Golden Temple. The fighting caused a coalescence of Sikh moderates and extremists, vastly complicating the task of future negotiations. It also caused fissures within the Indian army, in which the tall and warlike Sikhs have always played a disproportionately large role. According



to an official spokesman last week, the interrogation of Sikh prisoners indicated that 17 retired Indian army officers above the rank of colonel had been involved in extremist activities. Of these, two officers had collected large sums of money from people throughout Punjab, even inside the temple, and used the funds to buy arms. One of the fund collectors was said to have escaped to Europe, while the whereabouts of the other was not known.

Mrs. Gandhi can probably no longer negotiate with most of the moderate leaders of the Akali Dal, the Sikh political party. A few, in fact, are now regarded as cowards by the enraged Sikh community. She will have to await the emergence of a suitable Sikh leader, possibly retired Lieut. General Jagjit Singh Aurora, a hero of the 1971 Bangladesh war. In the past the Sikhs have sought the exclusive use of Chandigarh, the Le Corbusier-designed city that since the creation of the predominantly Hindu state of Haryana out of the heavily Sikh Punjab in 1966

has served as the capital of both states. Mrs. Gandhi is prepared to let the Sikhs have Chandigarh to themselves and build a new capital for Haryana, but has asked that, in return, Punjab should allow two of its largely Hindu districts to be transferred to Haryana. So far the Sikhs have refused.

In the aftermath of the storming of the Golden Temple, Mrs. Gandhi described her decision as a "painful" one. But then, as she has done during previous crises, she tried to shift the blame to external sources, charging that Pakistan and perhaps the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had played a part in inspiring the Sikh separatist movement. Pakistan's President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq angrily denied those charges. "There is no truth to the allegations," Zia told *TIME*. "To the contrary, Pakistan has gone out of its way to normalize its relations with India." He added that the Indians were only looking for "scapegoats." Indeed, the Indians offered no proof to support the charges except for two bodies purported to be those of Pakistanis and a few assault rifles bearing Chinese letters. In the classic "checkerboard diplomacy" of the region, India is the enemy of Pakistan, which is the friend of China, which, at least until recently, was the enemy of India.

In recent days Mrs. Gandhi has explained her strategy before she decided to send the army into the temple. She had wanted to give "the maximum time" to the Sikhs to settle the matter, she said. "We had clear information about the accumulation of arms, and about giving shelter to criminals and murderers." She told an interviewer, "We do not believe in war, but we have been attacked, we have had to defend ourselves." Then, as if clinching the argument, she added, "Mahatma Gandhi, in his time, accepted that necessity."

—By William E. Smith.

Reported by Dean Brellis and K.K. Sharma/  
New Delhi

Clockwise from top left, peasants carry a victim of the 1983 Assam massacre; Hindus burn a bus in Chandigarh in April; Golden Temple under siege.

