

## World

INDIA

# City of Death

*Hindus and Sikhs do battle*

**F**or India's 15 million Sikhs, the city of Amritsar is a sacred place, and its holiest sanctuary is the Golden Temple, a resplendent 72-acre compound that is known to the faithful as the City of Joy. These days it more closely resembles a city of death. Inside the temple compound, fierce Sikh warriors wield submachine guns, guarding against encroachment by government security forces. Outside, the security men keep a nervous vigil, all too aware that the bodies of murdered comrades often turn up in the warren of tiny streets around the shrine.

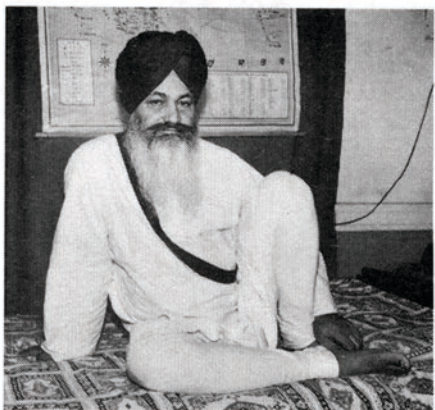
Thus has Amritsar, in the northwestern state of Punjab, become the center of a bitter feud between Sikhs and Hindus. Distinguished by their traditional beards and turbans, the Sikhs follow their own casteless, monotheistic religion, and over the past 15 months those in the Punjab have mounted a determined drive for greater autonomy from New Delhi. The more the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has resisted, the more savage the Sikh campaign has become. Last month six men hijacked a night bus at gunpoint, herded eleven Hindu men into a field and, with cold-blooded efficiency, shot six of them dead (five escaped). Hours later, terrorists randomly opened fire in an express train, killing two officials.

These outbursts prompted New Delhi to impose President's rule, effectively removing power from local authorities. More than 3,000 government troops in Amritsar were then licensed to shoot on sight, arrest without warrants and even penetrate traditionally off-limits Sikh sanctuaries (a step they have yet to take). But the violence has not abated. Two weeks ago, 17 were killed and 133 wounded when terrorists derailed a crowded train. Since the bloodshed began last year, more than 150 people have been killed, and 150,000 Sikhs have been arrested.

Located on the Pakistani border, Punjab is one of India's most strategic states. It is also the wealthiest agricultural region, supplying the nation with 80% of its wheat. Yet when it comes to industrial development, claim the Sikhs, the government consistently slights them. Sikh moderates would be appeased by an increase in state power; a small radical minority, however, is determined to fight for an entirely separate state called Khalistan. So far, more than 100,000 Sikhs, known as the *Akali Dal* (Action Party) "Sacrifice Squad," have sworn to lay down their lives in the present struggle.

Gandhi has declared that she is ready and willing to negotiate with the dissidents. But the two most powerful Sikh leaders, both hiding out within the Golden Temple, scoff at such claims. While de-

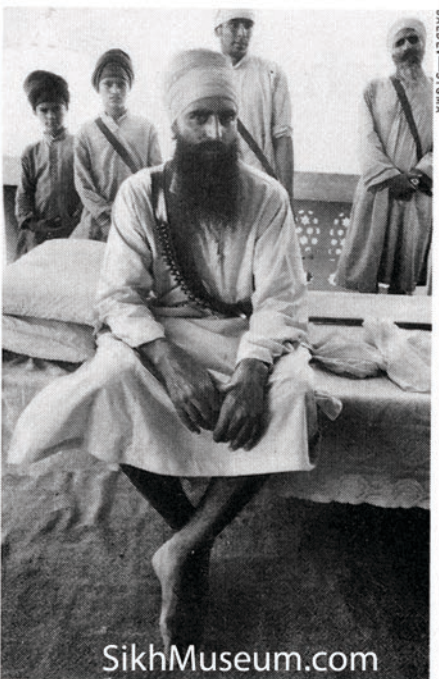
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**Disenchanted moderate: Sant Longowal**

ploring the recent terrorism, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, 51, the moderate president of the *Akali*, remains convinced that the government has been increasing tension rather than soothing it. "If anyone is to blame for the terrorists' presence," he told TIME, "it is the central government." His more fanatical colleague, Militant Fundamentalist Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, 36, voices a common suspicion that Gandhi is exploiting the friction in order to buoy her popularity before the next election.

The violence has shattered centuries of friendship between Sikhs and Hindus, and it is spreading. Three bombs have already exploded in Delhi, and last week, in Punjab's neighboring state of Haryana, Hindu mobs began storming Sikh-owned shops. With neither side giving way, tensions seem sure to mount. In the ominous words of senior *Akali* Leader Prakash Singh Badal, "The central government has already taken the Punjab problem to the point of no return."



**Disgruntled militant: Sant Bhindranwale**

*The violence has begun to spread.*