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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

JARNAIL SINGH BHINDRANWALE:

A CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY AND HIS IDEOLOGY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

by

John Paul Cibotti

2017

To: Dean John F. Stack  
Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs

This thesis, written by John Paul Cibotti, and entitled Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale: A Charismatic Authority and His Ideology, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Erik Larson

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Steven M. Vose, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 22, 2017

The thesis of John Paul Cibotti is approved.

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Dean John F. Stack  
Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
And Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### A CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY AND HIS IDEOLOGY

by

John Paul Cibotti

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Steven M. Vose, Major Professor

Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's militant and masculinist discourses were embraced by Punjabi Sikhs because of his presence as a charismatic authority, a concept first developed by sociologist Max Weber to understand the conditions surrounding and personal qualities of a figure which attracts followers. The rebellion he led in Punjab resulted from his radical exploitation of issues concerning the Sikh community. Religion was wielded as a tool, legitimizing Sikh violence as commanded by the Gurus. Radical interpretations of Sikh scripture and folklore were initially preached to rural, less educated crowds. While his sermons brought out their frustrations with the government, his charisma allowed him to manipulate young men, his largest demographic of supporters, into embracing violence. This study analyzes Bhindranwale from the perspective of the people that supported him. By identifying multiple social factors through which to understand Bhindranwale's reign, this study exhibits his importance in understanding Sikhism in Modern India.

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*We must come to the inevitable conclusion that the guerilla fighter is a social reformer, that he takes up arms responding to the angry protest of the people against their oppressors, and that he fights in order to change the social system that keeps all his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery.*

- *Che Guevara*

## INTRODUCTION

### Central Issue

In Punjab during the 1940's there was talk of Khalistan, or a separate Sikh state. Only a few decades later, the central figure of this study, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947-1984), combined his interpretation of Sikh values with Punjab's socio-political conditions to rebel against the Indian government. I argue that his success is due to his—as of yet—unofficial status as a charismatic authority; a glimpse at my justification for this argument are as follows: Bhindranwale was regarded by his following as an extremely pious and holy man who defied the government at will. He denounced the political and economic conditions in Punjab, and through his own exegesis of Sikh scripture, rationalized violence by highlighting identity markers for Sikh men. His speaking style and style of dress distinguished him from his peers, while his actions differed from those of politicians and other holy men in Punjab. As such, central foci of this study include: 1) The identity conflicts within Sikh history, which rationalized the militant and masculinist nature of Bhindranwale's philosophy, 2) political and economic developments in Punjab which Bhindranwale incorporated into his discourse, 3) the qualification of Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority, and 4) his sustained charisma, which remains so long after his death.

Because most of Bhindranwale's rhetoric drew from the pasts of Punjab and Sikhism, Sikh history and philosophy must first be explained. A history of Punjab's formation is also necessary. The people of Punjab (mostly Sikhs) believed they had been shortchanged after the Partition of India and Pakistan. It is here that Bhindranwale enters the political picture in Punjab. I illustrate how the conditions in Punjab provided an opening

for Bhindranwale's charisma, coupled with his masculinist and militant doctrine. The final part of this study centers on the posthumous reception of his teachings. There are many who still follow (and oppose) Bhindranwale in Punjab. This study will further progress the understanding of separatist Sikhs, first by objectively summarizing their recent history, then providing a comprehensive explanation for their fight for Khalistan. Finally, I analyze Bhindranwale's status among today's separatists.

### **Preliminary Considerations**

Before leaping into the various theories I apply to Bhindranwale, I should first show the nexus between them. When discussing a revolutionary religious militant, as I argue Bhindranwale was, it is important to consider the synergistic momentum induced by the simultaneous interplay of all theories. I combine my hypotheses of 1) Identity frustrations evident in the historiography of the Sikhs, 2) The psychological and religious elements behind Sikh hypermasculinity, 3) His use of dualisms and anachronisms, and 4) Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority. As the research will show, each consideration I apply played an integral role in Bhindranwale's success among the people.

First, I must show that the very existence of Sikhism had become increasingly predicated on the fact that Sikhs are willing to fight for that existence, physically and otherwise. Enter masculinity: the image of the Sikh male during their many wars evolved from piety to militancy. Baba Deep Singh held his own head in battle, Har Gobind instituted the dual swords of *Miri-piri*, and Guru Gobind Singh envisioned Khalsa Sikhs as "protectors of the faith," so to speak. (Singh 2016a, 1-34).



The development of the Sikh male is effectively a ‘snowball’ tradition of fathers instilling masculine ideals into their sons, with a stronger connection to militancy forming over generations. Psychological studies on aggression in young males identify typical conditions that create this behavior: Young men in many cultures are conditioned to express only a single emotion, anger, outwardly. Alienation limits the autonomy of a young male, causing *frustrations*; frustrations, according to the studies, ferment in the young male, growing to anger.

This would be a prime place to connect psychology to society and politics. Since this study analyzes the social conditions in Punjab as a backdrop to Bhindranwale’s success, I find it beneficial to apply a brief theoretical framework to the Sikh community, with the aim of explaining their course of action in the early 1980’s. Useem (1980) explains the parallels that exist between psychologically frustrated individuals and those who believe they are “relatively deprived” in a social sense, compared to their peers. Relative depravity is a component of what is known as the breakdown model within mass society theory. In a very general sense, this theory claims that individuals who are only loosely connected with a community are more likely to join social movements than citizens who are deeply integrated in society. Relative depravity labels the sentiment of individuals who feel they are receiving less of some object or right than others. According to Useem, “The same psychological mechanism that links frustration to oppression...also links relative deprivation to political protest and violence” (p.364). I agree with this element of mass society theory. Recall, the industrial suppression of Punjab, the fleecing of its water, and the myriad of other social factors left Sikhs feeling deprived of certain benefits other Indian states and religious communities enjoyed. In opposition to the breakdown model and social

mass theory, there exists the solidarity model, which argues that the more involved an individual is in society, the more likely he/she is to join social movements. I agree with this model's concept of "bloc mobilization" (p.357), the idea that if some degree of solidarity exists within a community, there are likely to be large social groups and clubs that a movement can draw from to quickly rise in numbers and legitimacy (Useem 1980, 357, 358, 363, 364). Bhindranwale utilized these concepts to grow his congregation by appealing to the solidarity and depravity of the Sikh community.

I can now return to my analysis of frustration in young men; society's permission of male anger, combined with the hierarchical/traditional influence of the (Sikh) father often leads to an over-emphasis on masculinity (the role as a Sikh father has evolved into a masculine role). Hierarchical ties between 'masculine' fathers and sons can also lead the young male to gravitate to other authoritative figures, should those figures echo his frustrations. Hostility and harsh upbringing by one or both parents has also shown to produce the desire for control or power in young men. The fight for a Sikh-run Punjab appeared to young Punjabi males as a pathway to attain such power. Through secularism and a restricted economy, the masculine identity of Sikh males as fearless providers, powerful sons and traditional fathers seemed to be in question. All young men needed was a purpose (Scheff 2006, 3-5).

Enter religion. A typical path for power would be the political or corporate ladders, and indeed many individuals take such a path (e.g. Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein). However, being ostracized from the greater Indian political economy, Sikhs did not see this as a possibility. Bhindranwale, on the other hand, offered a different route that was not only expedient and plausible, but was *righteous*. Through his dualisms, creating a

sentiment of unfamiliarity between Sikhs and Hindus, and his use of scriptures (particularly those of the most militant Gurus), he gave young, disenfranchised, Sikh males a monumental purpose. His connection of the cosmic/divine plane to the temporal plane of the times served to reify his scriptural analogies (Das 1992, 247-250) (Juergensmeyer 2004b, 5).

The field of charismatic authority can tie all the elements introduced here together. The social factors evident in Punjab were ready to be mobilized, but by the appropriate figure. Bhindranwale appeared, sounding and behaving differently than other Sikhs in power. His sermons seemed more honest, and his martyrdom has only helped his image (Tucker 1968, 754). I argue Bhindranwale is a *revolutionary* type of authority, a category which is often led by religious figures (Epley 2015, 3). Beyond Bhindranwale's charm was the pressure of his congregation on other Sikhs to radicalize. My use of social role is limited; Bhindranwale's support base is best described by *instrumental conformity*. This theory of conformity sees his followers themselves as a sort of authority, pressuring outsiders into Bhindranwale's congregation and sanctioning those who resist (Biddle 1986, 79-82).

To recap, Sikh males understood their identity along militant and masculine lines. Bhindranwale understood the frustrations of the young males of Punjab, and used the extant Sikh scriptures for two purposes: to validate the mental state of many young males, and then channel it into forms of action already instilled in their religion. For these reasons, my work is socio-anthropological; sociological for the link established between religion, masculinity and Indian politics, anthropological for its analysis of the Sikh identity.

## **Literature Review**

Academia is in a shortage of Sikh scholars, limited to those elite few whom have penetrated the inner circle of Punjab's separatist movement at the height of Bhindranwale's reign. I learned very early in my research phase that most of my general descriptions for Bhindranwale's rhetoric have been at least touched on numerous times already. Both a blessing and a curse, I decided to pour this wealth of information into the melting pot, filtering it to retain only that which applies to his charisma. What follows is not a comprehensive list of my sources, instead, I limit this list to the scholars who most influence the foundations of my arguments.

The history of Sikhs is broken up into two parts: early history and modern history. The early history is narrowed to concentrate on the formation of the militant and masculine identity that has plagued Sikhism for centuries. Jetly (2008) and Gill (2012) act as two prominent sources for early Sikh history. Jetly also provides a large percentage of the modern history since her work details the political background leading up to the Khalistan movement. Leaf (1985), Sharma (1986-87) and Singh (1999) also outline the events from the Emergency Rule in 1975 to the introduction of Bhindranwale.

Biddle (1986) provides a comprehensive list and overview of social role theory's many subsects. Social role is an important precursor to my work on militancy and masculinity because it explains the Punjabis' acceptance of Bhindranwale's rhetoric. Biddle analyzes the specialized fields within role theory, exposing their strengths and shortcomings. I finally arrived at instrumental conformity, which looks to the pressure from one's peers to conform or risk being essentially outcast.

To understand Sikh militancy as the militants themselves view it, I look at the works of Juergensmeyer (1988, 2003, 2004) who has been covering religious violence (especially that of the Sikhs) for decades. Juergensmeyer has written extensively on the Khalistan movement. Much of his work connects the religious element to action; how leaders apply the divine realm to current events through analogies and interpretations. I use Juergensmeyer in tandem with Das (1992), who offers a multifaceted explanation of the militant discourse components. This pairing, I feel, successfully captures Bhindranwale's message through a religious lens. Juergensmeyer's work on masculinity in South Asia in particular enabled me to connect Sikhism to psychological studies on masculinity.

I employ Weber's (1922, 1978) charismatic authority theory to explain Bhindranwale's ascent and legacy among Punjabi Sikhs. The additional researchers I draw from include Conger (1993), Epley (2015), Fagen (1965), and Tucker (1968). They expand Weber's theory by applying it to a variety of historical events. They also provide thorough analyses of Weber's theory, as different aspects of it correspond to their arguments. Historical figures such as Hitler, Castro and Lenin are among the later scholars' favorites to analyze. In this same fashion, I filter my combination of Weber's work and its later developments, resulting in a compiled list of typical requirements for a charismatic authority, which I attempt to show Bhindranwale fulfills.

Scheff (2006) concentrates on psychological processes as a means to explain violence committed by young men. Though geared to individual men becoming violent, Scheff's essay brings to light universal themes which appear in a male's formative years. From societal pressure, a boy learns what modes of expression are acceptable, burying unacceptable emotions. Parental neglect and rejection from peers leads to a desire for

control, or power and repressed shame, respectively. Over time that shame evolves into anger. At this point, I include Juergensmeyer's concept of frustrations and masculine hierarchy among young Sikh men.

Sandhu (1999) is certainly the main source of Bhindranwale's discourses. Though he was not ideologically unbiased, I am indebted to Sandhu for his transcription of forty-four complete speeches and three interviews of Bhindranwale's, from 1982-1984. Bhindranwale's words naturally form the bulk of my evidence. Sandhu graciously retained his slang terms for items and people, along with their translations. The high number of epithets he used while speaking is impressive.

My analysis of the Khalistan movement after Bhindranwale's martyrdom is confined to the role he continues to play in the movement. This is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak; I venture past historical analyses and look to the present. Axel (2005) explains the uses of *gurdwaras* (Sikh places of worship) and the relevance of martyrs in the diaspora—Sikhs outside the borders of Punjab are far more open about their separatist views than those living in the Indian state. Axel's stress on the importance of the internet in spreading Bhindranwale's images and beliefs is paramount for an understanding of Bhindranwale's charisma transfer, which is actually not a transfer at all, it is merely a new medium through which to support him, hence why I label it "sustained". Apart from their own websites, Sikh separatists rely on popular media outlets to promote their cause. The unvetted information on the internet becomes my source of information. Scouring the endless Sikh fundamentalist websites and social media pages, a picture of Bhindranwale's legacy becomes clear. By investigating the outlets of pro-Khalistan media, I can address

Weber's hypothesis for charismatic transference and sustained charisma, concluding my argument for Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority.

The works of other acclaimed Sikh studies scholars such as Mahmood (1996), Khushwant Singh (1999), Oberoi (1992) and Arvind Mandair (2011) were also consulted. Outside the realm of Sikh studies, I consult literature on Indian politics, government documents, sociological and psychological studies. My use of concepts and theories from multiple disciplines was not premeditated, but proved necessary to illustrate Punjab's underlying social, religious and political unrest as a toxic environment. Studies on other Indian revolts and young Middle Eastern Muslims are referenced to identify similarities in Punjab's course of events to those of other settings.

## **Methods**

The direction of this thesis contains two major shifts. The first shift moves from Sikhism's history to its prominence in Punjab. The second shift takes the attention from Punjab and places it on Bhindranwale. At the outset, my first priority was to understand why the central government of India stormed the Golden Temple, the holiest Sikh place of worship, from June 3<sup>rd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup>, 1984. I set out with rather straightforward questions: what were the Sikhs fighting for? What was the root of the problem? Finally, why did they place their support in Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale?

To answer these questions, the popularity of Bhindranwale among members of the Sikh community was forced to take a backseat in the initial months of my research. I realized early on that any attempt at a comprehensive study of Bhindranwale would ultimately need to begin with an understanding of Punjab's history in India. With this in

mind, I chronicled the historical ties of the Sikh faith to Punjab—from its inception by the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, to the Sikh empire under Ranjit Singh, to the partition of Punjab and Pakistan in 1947. Alongside this history, the simultaneous proliferation of religious groups and government legislation in Punjab proved to be equally important. It was here that I began to piece together the grievances Sikhs had with the central government.

Bhindranwale could now be placed in a setting in which one could analyze his rhetoric and his support base's rationale. It is from this setting that he emerged in my argument as a charismatic authority. What was then necessary was a list of criteria from which to qualify Bhindranwale as such. Max Weber's work, along with that of many later scholars, were used to compile a list of applicable requisites for Bhindranwale to fulfill. After laying out the criteria, it was necessary to provide examples of Bhindranwale's rhetoric and actions as proof of his charisma.

The next phase of my research was dedicated to Bhindranwale's philosophies and interpretations of scripture; it was this rhetoric which gave his charisma direction. I explored his use of masculinist and militant ideals, interpreted from the teachings of the Gurus. Equally important were his stances on Indian politics and the Sikh acceptance of martyrdom. Bhindranwale's martyrdom forced me to think about his status in the Sikh community after his death. I perused the internet for his images, videos and audio files to understand what was left of his charisma among today's Sikhs, both in Punjab and abroad. What I found was that Bhindranwale's charisma was not dissolved and technically not transferred; it was alive and well, still with Bhindranwale, only available for Sikhs to support through a new medium.



## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 highlights important developments in masculinity and militancy in early Sikh history up to the twentieth century; this includes legendary accounts of the Gurus, Sikh battles, and the racism of the British. I then jump ahead to Punjab in the twentieth century, focusing on the religious landscape of the time. Next, I cover the formation of Punjab as a state in India and separate from Pakistan. The chapter concludes with the legislation and economic policies Punjab witnessed under Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Chapter 2 begins the study of Bhindranwale. The opening section describes his early adult life as a preacher. Here, I track the evolution of his rhetoric, which was first concerned with Sikh traditions, later growing into a message of violence.

Chapter 3 introduces Bhindranwale as a charismatic leader among Punjabi Sikhs. The histories of Punjab and the Sikh religion of the previous chapter are meant to lead up to Bhindranwale's ascendance from the masses as a revolutionary. There are many trains of thought at work in this chapter—Sikh identity issues, male psychology, religious interpretations, etc. Thus, a preliminary breakdown is first necessary. I then outline the criteria I use to qualify Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority. The remainder of the chapter is used to show that Bhindranwale meets all criteria and is in fact a charismatic authority.

In Chapter 4, I use the hypothesis of Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority to justify the positive Sikh reception of his philosophy. Radical ideas of militancy, dominant men and scriptural anachronisms were not only tolerated by Sikhs, they were rallied around and used to unify a large group of militants. Most troublesome was his aspiration for martyrdom, which many other Sikhs shared. The last section in Chapter 4 focuses on the

posthumous reception of his teachings, as there are many who still agree with Bhindranwale in Punjab and the diaspora. I argue the continuance of Bhindranwale's charisma into the field of information technology (the internet), more specifically into the images, videos and audio clips which remain of him. Though sounding odd, advances in technology and media sharing have immortalized Bhindranwale. A brief historical overview of diaspora Sikhs will help clarify their rationale for revering him as they do.

My final chapter summarizes the major questions I set out to answer in this study, namely, the reasons for Bhindranwale's success over other separatist factions, and what happened to his charisma after his martyrdom. I also discuss the limitations of my methods and capabilities, such as the need for a more in depth investigation into Punjab's social context in which Bhindranwale found himself. I concede that I might also have benefitted from conducting interviews if I could have found subjects that lived in Punjab during Bhindranwale's rebellion. This chapter concludes with what I understand my contribution to academia to be, the qualification of Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority, and the endurance of his charisma after his death, sustained through the medium of internet and information technology.

### **Research Structure and Social Relevance**

The cornerstone of this study is Bhindranwale's charisma; I cautiously boast that my small contribution to academia is my analysis of Bhindranwale's charismatic authority. To my knowledge this type of analysis has not previously been done. My historical analysis of Punjab and my breakdown of Bhindranwale's ideology *need* his charisma to explain why his rhetoric was so easily palatable for Punjabi Sikhs. For this reason, I have structured my

research for the concepts of militancy, masculinity, and the rest around the concept of a charismatic Sikh leader. I sought to understand Bhindranwale's rebellion from the perspective of the Punjabi Sikhs during his time as a preacher as much as on Bhindranwale's personality. By learning the issues and concerns of Punjabi society, the appeal of Bhindranwale's ideology becomes clear, even before considering his charisma.

Studies of such galvanizing figures as Bhindranwale provide a blueprint of how and why a society in unrest can lead to rebellion. This is still of value today in India, as the quarrels over secular legislation and religious rights continue. It should be noted that Western theories of social movements and leadership have not yet been applied to Indian society or figures; my application of such theories would be one of the first to do so. Study of Bhindranwale, in particular, gives the added benefit of preventing the Indian government from rewriting history, a tactic it has employed in the past. By the same token, studying Bhindranwale also combats the vast misinformation stream about him being spread by today's separatists. My research employs Tucker's (1968) addition to Weber's concept of charisma, which I call "sustained charisma." Sustained charisma occurs when the charisma of a leader is not dissolved upon his or her death, it does not transfer to another successor, and does not routinize and become a part of a new establishment.

## CHAPTER 1: SIKH AND PUNJAB HISTORY

This chapter outlines two general concepts: first, the foundations of Sikh militancy and masculinity issues, including the labels given to Sikhs by the British and the formation of the Khalsa by the tenth Guru. Second, the twentieth century of Punjab's religious circles, along with political and economic developments. Other highlights in the chapter are the 1947 Partition of India into Punjab and Pakistan and the emergence of Indira Gandhi. The partition left Sikhs with no sovereign state to call their own and no Sikh authority outside of Punjab to take advisement from. Almost thirty years later, Indira Gandhi would oppress Punjab to the point of becoming a villain to Sikh leaders like Bhindranwale.

### **Militant and Masculine Origins in Sikhism**

The timeline of Sikh battles begins with Guru Har Gobind (1595-1644) against the Mughals, who not only fought with Sikhs but also attempted (forced) conversions (Gill 2012, 20). The first event, however, that many mark as the beginning of this Sikh identity change was the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606), who refused to remove pages from the *Adi Granth* (the Sikh holy book) which contained references to Muslims and Hindus. Because of his refusal, the fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir (1569-1627), had Arjan tortured and killed. His son and the sixth of the ten Gurus, Har gobind, is of considerable mention; it was he that began the tradition of Sikhs carrying two swords, symbolizing *miri-piri*, or the temporal and spiritual leadership of the Guru. Under Har Gobind many battles with Mughals were fought. Sikhs viewed this militarization as a means to maintain "... balance between temporal and spiritual concerns (Singh, 2014)."

Thus, the first hardline justification for Sikh ideals in political and social affairs was made. Following the direction of Har Gobind was the tenth and final living Guru, Gobind Singh, who formed the Khalsa, which is the initiated and more devotional group within the Sikh community<sup>1</sup>. The events leading up to the formation of the Khalsa are summarized succinctly by historian Louis E. Fenech (cited in Gill 2012, 20):

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, led to the militarization of the Sikh community in 1606, while the martyrdom of his grandson, the ninth Sikh Master, Guru Tegh Bahadur, in 1675 was the event which precipitated the creation of the Khalsa, the elite, militant order formed in 1699 by the tenth and last Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708).

Additionally, Gobind Singh's four sons all died in battle or by torture from the Mughals. These many martyrs served as examples of the bravery Sikhs were to possess (Gill 2012, 20). There even exists a Sikh form of martial arts known as *Gatka*. This martial art is connected with the first Guru himself, being one of the many arts he was a master of. Most of the subsequent Gurus also participated in forms of self-defense. Gobind Singh was no exception, and even has his own writings in a revered book known as the *Dasam Granth* (Tenth Book), which contains many verses reflecting the *miri-piri* sentiment. It should not be surprising that many more wars were fought with enemies of India, from the British to the Pakistanis, with Sikhs at the forefront of the fighting.

Sikhs pride their faith on its attempted equality of genders. However, many studies have surfaced to show that daily (and occasionally, the extreme) activities of Sikhs are dominated by males.<sup>2</sup> The formation of the Khalsa was militant in nature, but it also catered

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<sup>1</sup> The word Khalsa derives from Urdu, Persian and ultimately the Arabic word *khalis*, meaning 'pure, belonging to'.

<sup>2</sup> The roles of women in gurudwaras are limited (Bains 2012). Academia also neglects female Sikh scholars' writings in textbooks (Jakobsh 2006).

primarily to men. The five K's of the Khalsa are visible symbols to be worn by members to indicate their identity as Sikhs. However, it is the turban and beard in particular that make the Sikh image masculine.

Images of the tenth Guru can be found in many Punjabi homes and temples. The images serve as the masculine objective "...all Sikh boys should strive to achieve..." (Gill 2012, 23). In the media, such as in Bollywood<sup>3</sup> movies, Sikh men are often portrayed as aggressive and strong characters. Indeed, Bhindranwale capitalized on all aspects of Sikh masculinity. He carried a silver spear to emulate Guru Gobind Singh. Sikh males who cut their hair were criticized publicly. Men were also chastised for allowing Sikh women to be harmed by Hindu police. This masculine identity will resurface with the emergence of Bhindranwale.

### **Punjab Modern History**

Sikhs only comprise about two percent of the population of India. In spite of such small numbers, Punjab (the North Indian state where most Sikhs reside) is one of the most prosperous states in India according to Jetly (2008, 62). Sikhs had their own empire in Punjab from the years 1799-1849 under the command of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This empire came well after the fall of the Mughal Empire. Ranjit Singh captured Lahore and unified the twelve Sikh Misls, or sovereign Sikh states. Ranjit Singh's death was followed by inner quarrels between Sikh leaders. The British seized the opportunity to attack the weakened Sikh Empire and thus started the Anglo-Sikh Wars. Because the Sikh faith

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<sup>3</sup> Bollywood refers to the Hindi language film industry.

seemed to produce such strong willed men who were skilled in combat, the British labeled the Sikhs (among others) a *martial race*. This label denoted Sikhs as having an inherent fighting spirit and masculine qualities. Streets explains that soldiers belonging to a *martial race* “were expected [by the British] to dissociate themselves from so-called feminine traits such as cowardliness...” (2004, 10). Army employment allowed Sikh farmers to purchase land and raise their social status. The British, however, implored all Sikhs enlisting to become members of the Khalsa, whose membership had begun to decline. The Khalsa was praised by the British, who viewed it as a militant organization. Thus, entry into the Khalsa became a sort of boot camp to prepare new recruits. British Evangelists had reworked the Christian philosophy into a more masculine doctrine to prevent British soldiers from feeling inferior to those in the Sikh army. In sum, the British first convinced Sikhs that their faith was *martial* in nature; they then celebrated that nature by enlisting Sikhs into the army. Over time the line between British propaganda and Sikh teaching became blurred (Mandair 2014, 70-71).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the formation of many Sikh-inspired spinoff groups in Punjab, such as the Nirankaris, who accepted other Gurus outside of the traditional ten; the Radha Soamis, who composed a doctrine of mixed Hindu and Sikh teachings; the Namdharis, who advocated austerity. The Namdharis were the first group to officially oppose the British and also the first to become politically motivated. Ram Singh, who became the leader of the movement in 1862, instituted many of the austere and anti-government regulations the group adopted. Singh forbade the purchase of foreign goods, enrolling in government schools, use of the postal service, and many other activities. There were also Christian missionaries, who inspired the formation of the Singh Sabha movement—the Sabha

movement was one centered on Sikh teachings and literacy among Sikhs, though it also had the objective of combating the Christians from proselytizing. In addition to these movements were many others, such as the Bengali intellectuals, Brahma Samaj, the neo-Vedic Arya Samaj (by 1875), Europeans such as the Theosophists, etc. Punjab's religious landscape at the time begins to illustrate a slow build-up of tensions between ideological groups. Even within the Sikh community, variations in ritual and doctrine existed. Oberoi (1992, 366, 378) writes that many villages collectively identified as Sikh, yet worshipped Hindu gods, read Hindu texts like the Vedas, and praised idols other than the ten Gurus. The local gods and idols which rural Sikhs worshipped loosely mirror the admiration many held for Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale quickly became the local spiritual figure for the rural people, discussed in chapter 2.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there arose a movement out of Gujarat known as the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. This movement is of considerable importance to Punjab and Sikh history. Saraswati believed in the teachings of the Vedas,<sup>4</sup> and believed Hinduism to have been hijacked by priests and that it therefore had a great deal of useless ritual and tradition added to it. Hinduism had become decadent and strayed far off course, according to Saraswati. Saraswati did not find mass support for his ideology until he reached Lahore, in Punjab. His support was widespread due to the large Vaishya caste (comparable to the middle class of Western societies) who always sought mobility to a higher caste. The Arya Samaj did believe Brahmins were important, but did not believe that birth into the Brahmin caste (or out of it) could stop one from gaining the knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> The Vedas are the earliest books of Hinduism, though modern Hinduism finds little use for them in comparison to texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana.



of the Vedas (Singh 2014, 236). To the Vaishya caste living in Punjab, this sounded like the best method to advance their status. The people of the Khatri caste, one of the largest in Punjab, enjoyed the idea that the Arya Samaj promoted of a monotheistic Vedic authority, which could hold its ground against Christian and Muslim influences (Barrier 1967, 364).

Sikhs initially supported the Samaj. Many Sikhs participated in their events, services, etc. Saraswati regularly spoke highly of Sikhs and the Gurus. Before coming to Punjab, however, Saraswati wrote a book entitled *Satyarth Prakash*, in which he slanders Sikh gurus and their followers, using derogatory terms to describe every aspect of the Sikh religion. Concern for his words from the book grew, though Saraswati assured the Sikhs that over time his opinions had changed. Saraswati died in 1883. During this time, a second edition of the *Satyarth Prakash* was in production. The death of Saraswati, combined with new extreme leaders of the Arya Samaj, led to an even more slanderous and hostile book (Singh 1982, 326). The new leaders of the Samaj continued with their hate-speech and rhetoric until Sikhs finally separated from them. The overall ideology of the Arya Samaj regards both Hinduism (even the use of the name Hinduism) and Sikhism as invalid, and in fact claimed Sikhism to be no more than a sect of Hinduism. Hindus by and large remained in the Arya Samaj, though overall the percentage of Hindus which supported the group was small, compared to the total number of Hindus in India. They believed the movement still preached the Vedas, which were truly the core of Aryahood. Many also found it easier than their current practices in different ways. Sikhs became completely disenchanted with the movement. For the majority of the Sikh population, the Arya Samaj

was not a group they could look to for guidance. The death of Gobind Singh marked the last major figure to lead them until Bhindranwale's arrival in the late 1970's.

### **Punjab beyond Religious Groups**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century many Sikhs migrated to other parts of the world and found considerable hardships in most places. Oppression and xenophobia were common. In San Francisco a periodical called *Ghadr* (Revolution) had begun to circulate. In a short time, the publication had spread to multiple countries and eventually to Punjab. The message of the publication was simple, to announce Ghadr's opposition to the British Government. As support in the U.S. amassed, the leaders began coordinating terrorist trips to Punjab. The mission was to disrupt British rule. The plans were usually foiled by police and support for the group was not on as large of a scale as its leaders had originally hoped. On the other hand, it marked a significant step into Punjab politics through extreme actions for Sikhs. Jawaharlal Nehru<sup>5</sup> became India's prime minister in the first years after British rule in India ended. Nehru initially advocated state autonomy for provinces within India. The Indian Constitution also recognized fourteen 'major' languages (of which Punjabi is one), which were to be safeguarded. Indeed, the country had been divided into "...linguistic states to preserve the identity of the larger linguistic groups (Sandhu 1999, 5)." However when it came to the formation of an autonomous Punjabi-speaking state, Nehru expressed fervent

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<sup>5</sup> For reference, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi belong to the Indian National Congress (INC), a secular party and one of the two most prominent in India, the other being the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu-nationalist party. The BJP falls under the umbrella of the Sangh Parivar, an organization of Hindu-nationalist parties, of which the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishva Hindu Prashad (VHP) are members. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is the third major political party, though not as prominent as the INC or BJP. The BSP represents the party of lower caste citizens.

opposition. He opposed the idea out of fear of a Sikh secession over time. In the event of (another) war with Pakistan, Nehru and the Center (Congress) expressed uncertainty over an autonomous Sikh-state's reaction; the Sikhs could potentially side with Pakistan. The Center also felt the request was nothing more than Sikh communalism (Oberoi 1987, 38). India's judicial system had also officially banned the All India Sikh Students' Federation, citing a certain phrase in Sikh prayer, "*Raj Karega Khalsa* (the pure shall rule)"; the courts felt this too would lead to a call for Khalistan, or a separate Sikh state (Sandhu, 1999, 6).

During the time of the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan, Muslims and Hindus had been taking steps toward expanding their influence in Punjabi government under the guidance of Muslims and Hindus from outside Punjab. Sikhs did not have Sikhs elsewhere from an older, more experienced community to look to for counsel. This added to the tension between Sikhs and other religious communities. The first demand for a sovereign Sikh-state came in 1922, from a group which gradually progressed from a group of volunteer coordinators to the first Sikh political party (Oberoi 2008, 151), the Akali Dal:

Whereas the Sikhs being attached to the Punjab by intimate bonds of holy shrines, property, language, traditions and history claim it as their homeland and holy land which the British took over as a "trust" from the last Sikh ruler during his minority and whereas the entity of the Sikhs is being threatened on account of the persistent demand of Pakistan by the Muslims on the one hand and of danger of absorption by the Hindus on the other, the executive committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal demands for the preservation and protection of the religious, cultural and economic and political rights of the Sikh nation, the creation of a Sikh state which would include a substantial majority of the Sikh population and their sacred shrines and historical gurudwaras with permission for the transfer and exchange of population and property. (Oberoi 1987, 37)

In the years to come, Sikhs would again find themselves at odds with the Hindus living in Punjab. Later tension arises at the Sikh push for Punjabi to become the *lingua franca* of the newly formed state of Punjab, a fight Sikhs eventually won, despite losing

land to other states like Haryana. Not long after the formation of the Akali Dal there also arose the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). This committee was focused on gaining control over the Gurudwaras across India. After the SGPC gained control of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht, however, there was violent resistance from *mahants*, or the (mostly Hindu) administrators of the gurudwaras at the time who did not wish to relinquish their control of the gurudwaras. The mahants even employed private militias to incite the confrontations (Mandair 2011, 65). Hindus and Sikhs began feeling a division of communities in Punjab.

### **1947 Partition of Punjab**

In the 1940's, riots between Hindus and Muslims erupted after opposition to the Muslim demand for a separate Pakistan was expressed. Sikhs were dragged into the mix as well. Ironically, Sikhs suffered the highest casualties. Sikh political groups, such as the Akali Dal, proved themselves useless against the violence, as the Akali Dal were supporters of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent style of protest, often referred to as *satyagraha* (political pacifism) (Singh 2002, 39). The Akalis adopted an inter-party strategy of "accommodation" and an intra-party strategy of "defusion" (Sharma, 1986-7, 635-636).<sup>6</sup> The objective of these strategies was cooperation with other parties in Punjab's state government who represented other groups, while eliminating potential rivals from within the Akali party itself.

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<sup>6</sup> The Congress Party (Central government) adopted the opposite inter and intra-party strategies.

This period of violence, sparked by the insistence for a partition and fueled by religious differences, marked the first appearance of a request for a separate Sikh state known as Khalistan. Jetly (2008) explains that the crux of the argument for a separate Sikh state revolves around two key components: language and religion. Sikhs had wanted a separate state since the days of British rule in which Sikhs were promised a certain percentage of representation in government. Prior to the partition, Sikhs were promised 33 percent representation in the Punjab Legislative Council, a percentage they did not receive. Another issue was the small and sparse population of Sikhs in the area, making a clear border for a Sikh state impossible. As such, Sikhs had no alternative but to agree to the 1947 partition of Punjab, in which Pakistan would become its own state outside of India's rule (2008, 62). The partition raised the percentage of Sikhs from roughly 30 percent in the larger Punjab, to over 50 percent in the newly formed and significantly smaller Punjab (Oberoi 2008, 152).

The 1950's saw Sikhs getting acclimated to their home in the new Punjab. In the 1960's Punjabis began protesting economic and political oppression. Groups such as the Maoist Naxalites were formed. The Naxalites were comprised mostly of young men plotting to overthrow the Indian government. Though the Indian government destroyed the movement, the ethos of rebellion continued to permeate Punjab. The 1960's was also the decade of the 'Green Revolution' for Punjab. The term refers to advancements in agricultural methods which made some (but not nearly all) farmers wealthy. This sudden leap in economic development caused some, like the Naxalites, to denounce the capitalist (western) influence. Others, like the Sikh farmers, accepted the capitalist methods and social norms more easily. Sikhs began drinking, smoking and watching pornographic

movies, acts which the more fundamentalist members of society attributed to Punjab's modernization (Singh and Purewal 2013, 134-137).

Since the partition, river waters from Punjab were already being taken by the Indian government for other states. In 1955, and again in 1960 under the Indus Waters Treaty, an agreement on the use of Punjab river water, was drawn up and used to extract water for other states in India. In 1966, however, the Punjab Reorganization Act added two amendments to the law for the further funneling of waters from Punjab<sup>7</sup>. Though the government finally agreed to divide the states along linguistic lines, making Punjabi the official language, State officials remained unsatisfied, arguing that the central government was unconstitutionally usurping water from Punjab. They demanded the Supreme Court be consulted on the matter. The government found loopholes to circumvent the demand for a Supreme Court hearing and the best Punjab could get was a tribunal, which did not have authority to override a document such as the Act (Punjab Reorganization Act, 1966, Act 31).

Atop the dispute over river water was Article 25 of the Constitution of India, which classified Sikhs, Buddhists and others as Hindus. Again, the Sikh community felt shortchanged, now not only politically, but religiously. The river water, coupled with the struggle for political power in Punjab between Congress and the Sikh-led Akali Dal, were two major issues that kept the desire for a separate state alive.

Punjabi citizens also felt there were other injustices occurring—the central government set price ceilings on agriculture, limiting the price Punjabi farmers could

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<sup>7</sup> The Act also shrank Punjab's borders, transferring land ownership to other states.

charge for their produce. It weakened Punjabi industrial growth by promoting growth in other states (Juergensmeyer 1988, 67). Perhaps the most frightening measure taken by the government was sterilization of both its male and female citizens (specifically those in the working-class and low-caste). Connelly (2006) explains the Indian government, with Western influence, attempted to control population through various (ill-prepared) methods in the decade leading up to Indira Gandhi becoming prime minister in 1966. The metaphor India used to describe their attempts at population control was “waging war (653).” Of all Indian states impacted by sterilization, Punjab had the highest rate of citizens sterilized. By 1965, over 60,000 were sterilized, and Punjab officials went on to say that the state was “on a war footing (653).”

Hindus in the early 1980’s began gaining meaningful sway in government, and secularism was pushed in Punjab as the new norm. Traditionalist Sikhs viewed secularism as a threat to Sikhism (Juergensmeyer 1988, 67). Sikhs from the years between the Partition of Punjab to the Reorganization Act (1947-1966) claimed they had been unfairly run out of the job market if they had visible signs of Sikh faith on their persons, such as turbans or beards. It is now fairly easy to understand the process of fusion that religion and politics underwent in the minds of Sikhs in Punjab; every issue raised in Punjab had some measure of religious motive behind it.

### **Effects of Indira Gandhi**

Ultimately, the Akali Dal proved to be an un-unified group and support from Sikhs was not strong. Reminiscent of 1951, when the Indian government placed Punjab under

President's Rule, Indira Gandhi imposed Emergency Rule on June 26, 1975.<sup>8</sup> This 19 month ruling had initially been utilized to avert criminal charges on Gandhi. She was linked to misuse of government property during the upcoming election. These charges would have invalidated her campaign. Gandhi claimed that the declaration of Emergency Rule was necessary to stop corruption. Under the Emergency Rule, however, it soon became clear that the government became endowed with additional powers, such as the arrest of people who might commit a crime in the future. Naturally, many people who were politically opposed Gandhi were arrested. The Emergency provided cover for horrific methods of mass sterilization for birth control as well. Gandhi was defeated in the upcoming election (Leaf 1985, 481-483). The Janata Coalition replaced Gandhi, and in Punjab there was a rather close relationship between the Akali Dal and the Jan Sangh (Janata party's Punjab division). The Janata Party was, however, unable to successfully organize around issues like the rising cost of fuel, and Gandhi regained power in January 1980. The Jan Sangh and Akali Dal maintained relations in Punjab, partially restricting the power of the central government. The resistance to the central government by both a Sikh party and Hindu party (Akali Dal and Jan Sangh, respectively) is the reason many insiders and scholars claim Indira's son, Sanjay, employed Bhindranwale. Sanjay's objective was to divide the parties and carve a path for the central government to take control of Punjab. This theory loses some credibility because Indira Gandhi's declaration of President's Rule in February 1980 essentially disbanded all Punjab powers at the time. Clearly Gandhi did not need assistance taking control. Based on this empirical evidence I do not accept the Gandhi-Bhindranwale

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<sup>8</sup> In 1951, Punjab was one of nine states which had governments deemed "unfavorable" to central policies (Jetly 2008, 63). The imposition of President's Rule essentially removed all power from the Akali Dal, at least temporarily.



partnership theory wholly, though I admit the probability that Gandhi believed Bhindranwale was unknowingly doing her “dirty work” by creating a chaotic political environment in Punjab for her.

Gandhi’s interests during her second term were equally as diametrically opposed to those of Punjab as her first, possibly more so. As previously mentioned, fuel prices rose just before she regained office. Agricultural input prices in Punjab rose between 20-30%, while she instituted support prices (subsidies and/or price ceilings) for Punjabi farmers of only 5-10%. The farmers, who were mostly Sikhs of the Jat caste, took the brunt of the losses. In 1980 hailstorms swept across Punjab resulting in a poor wheat harvest. Gandhi not only refused to raise the price the government would pay for wheat, but she imposed “food zones” on the farmers. In fact, the zones became so restricted that farmers were prohibited from selling to other districts within Punjab. Dealers of wheat in Punjab were not allowed to hold any substantial amount of wheat in their storages either. During Gandhi’s Emergency Rule Punjab was allotted only 23% of its own river water. Upon reelection Gandhi raised the allotment by 1%, solely to silence her opposition through the technicality that she had legally raised it. It should also be mentioned that Gandhi allotted Haryana (which was no longer classified as a “riparian state” after its division from Punjab) 10% more river water than it even required- another crippling blow to the mostly Sikh farmers of Punjab (Leaf 1985, 487-488). Through this hailstorm of restrictions, the Akali Dal was noticeably useless. Though they did draft the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, many viewed it as an Akali attempt to retain its dwindling support from Sikhs.<sup>9</sup> In September

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<sup>9</sup> The Anandpur Sahib Resolution was a set of demands outlined for a more autonomous Punjab and Sikh community in particular. The more important points of the document included less interference from the central government in areas which other states enjoyed independence, such as the economy. Other demands

1982, the *Illustrated Weekly of India* covered the events in Punjab, and had this to say about the Akalis:

Incidentally, the Akalis were in power in Punjab for three years during the Janata regime at the Centre, but there is not a single letter on record to show that they were agitated over any of the issues they are now raking up. The Anandpur resolution was passed in 1973 and ratified by the party in 1978. Obviously, the Akalis in power had a healthy respect for the Government at the Centre. It is, therefore, argued that if they again start sharing power with the Congress (I) in Punjab they will forget their demands. Already the possibility of forging a Congress (I)-Akali partnership in Punjab is being furtively explored. (Chawla 2016, Index)

The people of Punjab were not all uneducated farmers. If a reporter in New Delhi could detect a *furtive* agenda on the part of the Akalis, there is no evidence that Punjabi citizens could not do the same. This is why support for the Akalis declined as Bhindranwale's ideology increasingly resonated with the educated, orthodox Sikhs. For the less politically savvy population, however, the charisma and simple delivery style of Bhindranwale captured their attention.

India's recent past is checkered with uprisings from communities against ruling powers. During the British rule, forest legislation suppressed subsistence farmers and villages across the subcontinent.<sup>10</sup> As a result, countless revolts called *fituris* occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These revolts were usually loosely coordinated and more the acts of individuals under the advisement of a village leader. One of the largest rebellions occurred in Chhattisgarh, where ironically the 22<sup>nd</sup> Punjabi battalion was called to restore

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included the expansion of Punjabi as the official language into other regions, and the fair consideration of Sikhs in civil service (Leaf 1985, 481).

<sup>10</sup> *Jhum* or "shifting" cultivation was the traditional cultivation method used by Indian farmers. This type of cultivation "shifted" the irrigated crops between patches of land controlled by the farmers, ensuring the land was never depleted of nutrients completely. It was, however, considered less productive than plough farming, the technique favored by the British. The real reason British officials opposed *jhum* cultivation was its destruction of timber which resulted during the process of clearing forest ground. Timber was a valuable resource to the British and therefore sparked a series of restrictions on the rural Indian populace (Guha, Gadgil 1989, 152-153).

order. The Punjabis were led by a British officer (Guha, Gadgil 1989, 153-156). In the same vein of revolt was the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, in which Indian troops (Sepoys) revolted against the British East India Company for usurping what was recognized as autonomous, Indian-owned lands. Though the conflicts of Indian villagers against the British were centered on resource restriction and land, their general structure of a native people revolting against a larger government resembled that of Punjab's. Both environments dealt with oppressive government rulings affecting the common rural population.

## CHAPTER 2: A NEW VOICE FOR PUNJAB

Jarnail Singh was born in the Farikdot District of Punjab in 1947. As a child, he showed interest in religion, and was thus sent to the *Damdami Taksaal* in the village of Bhindran. *Taksaal* means “mint” in Punjabi, because in the way a mint presses perfect coins, the *Taksaal* creates perfect, learned Sikhs. Upon becoming the head of the *Taskaal*, Jarnail adopted the name Bhindranwale, meaning “from Bhindran” (Mahmood 1996a, 74-75). Because of his rigorous studies of Sikh scripture, Bhindranwale was viewed as a holy man from the very start of his ministry.

This chapter first provides an overview of Bhindranwale’s early years as a preacher, analyzing his ascent to popularity among certain demographics in Punjab. What will be shown are the consequences of his popularity, such as the growing opposition from different Sikh factions, the Indian government and the media. Following his early years is discussion of the Nirankari incident, which brought Bhindranwale into the role of political activist. From this point in his career he begins using the political and economic conditions in Punjab in his sermons, with the goal of stirring up anger in his listeners.

### **Bhindranwale’s Early Career**

After becoming the leader of the school for Sikh instruction, the *Damdami Taksaal*, Bhindranwale began visiting Punjabi cities and spreading his fundamentalist ideology. He advocated for resistance to the cultural change that was occurring in Punjab, from the rise of Punjabi substance abuse to the increasingly secular climate in politics. While the majority of the Sikh population ignored many of their religious obligations, he encouraged all to take *amrit* (initiation), refrain from vices like alcohol and pornographic material, and

wear the visible 'signs' of a Sikh, of which Bhindranwale often referenced the turban and beard.

The question of his initial popularity arises: why did his pious teachings gain traction, especially among the youth? One of the major reasons in fact had nothing to do with his sermons. He was happy to intervene in family issues, especially when those issues involved Hindus. His call to refrain from intoxicants also helped women and children, who were frequently victims of abuse from the men in their families. Many adult men appreciated the change to more pious practices as well; the religious community was better than no community at all. To his benefit, Bhindranwale appeared at a time when Sikh leaders were not engaged with the community as he was, and that there had not been a charismatic personality for Sikhs to look to in quite some time. Bhindranwale did not sit in an office or gurudwara and delegate as he could have. Instead, he traveled Punjab from city to city preaching the return to more traditional behavior in a fashion that resembled Jesus of Nazareth. In his early travels and preaching he made no comment about politics at all. The lower castes appreciated Bhindranwale's regard for them as equals. The lower caste was used to the other Sikh leaders calling them equals without showing it in any tangible way (Singh 1999, 324-325). Bhindranwale, however, solved domestic disputes and showed no interest in a political career. He maintained throughout his life that he was not a political revolutionary, and it can be assumed that he preferred to be seen as a religious reformer, however calculated his political maneuvers may have been.

As Bhindranwale gained popularity, his opposition grew on all sides. The central government began to see him as a threat. The Akali Dal lost support as he gained it. The Akalis saw a shrinking support base, which contrasted Bhindranwale's expanding base. It

was an interesting endeavor to investigate *why* the Akalis were losing ground to him. Ultimately I attribute their loss to the political philosophy they adopted, a philosophy Bhindranwale abhorred: Recall, the Akalis believed in peaceful protest and inter-party collaboration, which did not seem to be providing results for Punjab, at least as far as the fundamentalists were concerned. Bhindranwale was simultaneously advising Sikhs to essentially become legendary masculine heroes of their time.<sup>11</sup> Other groups such as the Dal Khalsa and Babbar Khalsa also opposed Bhindranwale, though they were rather radical groups themselves.<sup>12</sup> Not even the SGPC, the governing body of India's gurudwaras, seemed to support Bhindranwale. Bagga Singh, an SGPC member, chastised Bhindranwale for acting like he was a Guru. He would regularly mock Bhindranwale by carrying a silver arrow and tying his turban in the dumalla fashion as Bhindranwale did (Gupta 1984, 93-94). He quickly became his own small force in the Sikh community.

For the years leading up to the height of tensions in Punjab, Bhindranwale preached that Sikhs were being harassed for 'staged' crimes committed by the police. Specific examples of such crimes were rarely provided, however (Juergensmeyer 1988, 70). The "staged" crimes by the police usually involved Sikhs committing theft or violence, and always had the intention of linking the falsely accused (Sikh) criminals to Bhindranwale. Any act of Sikh misconduct was said to be on Bhindranwale's orders. He told his congregations that police would arrest Sikhs on false accusations, and that many of the

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<sup>11</sup> The reason for the Akali Dal's proposal of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was to regain support in the face of such opposition (Jetly 2008, 64).

<sup>12</sup> Sandhu notes that both the Dal Khalsa and Babbar Khalsa claimed responsibility for many crimes which Bhindranwale received credit/blame for, such as the Nirankari deaths in 1978. It is possible they were envious of his popularity (1999, 47).

people arrested were tortured or killed. While publicly deploring the false accusations, Bhindranwale touted the need for Sikh courage:

A bomb exploded in Virender's office. Two Hindus died there. They died in his office, no one knows who committed this crime, but trains were stopped and Sikh passengers were singled out and beaten up. They were beaten up, lost their turbans, and came to me and said: "Sant Ji, they beat us up." I said: "It is good. You should have had some more beating." A son of a Sikh who gets kicked by a sheep [a Hindu officer] and comes to us, does he have the right to be called a Sikh? (Bhindranwale 16 July 1983, quoted in Sandhu 1997, 240)

Bhindranwale also accused the police of excessive force on Sikhs, like the police burning of Damdami Taksal buses and Sikh scriptures in September 1981 (Mahmood 1996b, 9).<sup>13</sup> He frequently cited incidents involving the mistreatment of individual Sikhs, spinning them as representations of the government's treatment of Sikhs as a whole:

A young daughter of the Sikhs was stripped naked and... her father was forcibly laid on her... in Dauke village. It was the daughter of a Sikh... [Deputy Superintendent of Police] of Tarn Taran, stripped their daughter naked and, in our times, had her held by her breasts and paraded through the village. Has it ever happened to a Hindu? (Bhindranwale 13 April 1983, quoted by Sandhu 1997, 216)

The media was accused of being puppets for the Central Government, intent on painting him as an extremist. Mahmood recalls the tone of media reports after the Damdami Taksal bus arson, which also burned copies of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, "The press described it [Bhindranwale's reaction] as the venom of a prideful man whose sermons had been destroyed..." (1996, 9). The Indian government is not above media and historical censorship.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mahmood (1996, 9) relates the bus incident to another Damdami Taksal account. The story involves the accidental falling of Sikh scriptures to the floor in the Damdami Taksal, resulting in Bhindranwale becoming unable to eat or sleep for days, purely out of guilt. Stories such as this helped build Bhindranwale into more of an entity than a preacher.

<sup>14</sup> In 1961, for example, the National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT) was formed for the purpose of writing more secular textbooks for schools. The textbooks were critical of the cultural and spiritual elements in Indian society, framing many issues in a more modern, economic discourse (Nair 2009, 148-150). Then in 1977 (and again in 1999), the Janata government began its own reform of

The first major event which brought Bhindranwale out of the role of religious preacher and into the political realm was the conflict with the Nirankaris on April 13, 1978. This event would also be used as a prime example of the type of claims Bhindranwale made about police prejudice against Sikhs. In this tragic scenario, a group of Sikhs gathered outside a Nirankari assembly in Amritsar to protest it. The Nirankaris began to open fire on the protesters, killing thirteen and wounding dozens. The perpetrators were all safely removed from Punjab and later acquitted, described by the courts as acting in self-defense. Other protests of Nirankari assemblies were also met with violence. After the brawl, Bhindranwale personally cared for the dead and wounded, which only made his popularity climb higher. Many Sikhs in Punjab were witnessing Bhindranwale's character for the first time, and the majority viewed him favorably, evident by the proliferation of his supporters after the incident.

### **A Sikh leader in Politics**

Bhindranwale's political rhetoric began by claiming that Sikhs were being treated as second-class citizens with nobody to protect Sikh interests; he also held Gandhi responsible for the Nirankari acquittals. Bhindranwale's (very public) rhetoric about Indira Gandhi's involvement in the Nirankaris' trials was one of the initial reasons the Central government became concerned with Bhindranwale. The government also took issue with the militant identity Sikhs were embracing because of him. In the midst of Sikhs being arrested and/or killed by police, it was a bus with seven murdered Hindu passengers that pushed the

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textbooks, criticizing NCERT's interpretations. The government favored the removal books which seemed too sympathetic to Muslims (Hasan 2002, 82).



government to take official action. In 1983, immediately following the incident, Prime Minister Gandhi placed Punjab under President's rule. Bhindranwale found this truly remarkable, stating:

Someone killed seven Hindus in a bus. No Sikh has said this was good, everyone deplored it. But because seven Hindus had died, even twenty-four hours didn't pass. The Ministry was dissolved. President's Rule was imposed. The region declared as disturbed. However, one hundred and fifty Sikhs died and not one man has changed. Now all of you Sikhs should sit down and figure out as to what the thoughts of this Government of the Hindus are about the turban and the beard. (Bhindranwale 31 May 1983, quoted in Sandhu 1997, 236)

In the early 80's tensions rose in Punjab, but not as quickly as Bhindranwale's popularity. His way of communicating (solely in Punjabi) was simple and 'folksy' at times. Groups like the Dal Khalsa and Babbar Khalsa might have shared similar views as Bhindranwale, but they had no one who could compare to the theatrical spokesman Bhindranwale was. Over time, his rhetoric became less about rival groups like the Nirankaris, and instead became increasingly centered on the central government's actions and the hardships of Sikhs. Many of his stories and recollections of events were used to prove his claims of slavery and discrimination. His speeches began to attract larger crowds and became almost as much about himself as about prayer. Reporters from farther states began to interview Bhindranwale and his time became increasingly limited. Eventually Bhindranwale even granted televised interviews. During this period his speeches also began carrying heavier militant overtones.

One question many have labored to understand is why Bhindranwale never actually supported the Khalistan movement, though he became one of the movement's icons after Operation Blue Star in 1984. When asked about Khalistan his response was,

We are not in favor of Khalistan nor are we against it...We wish to live in Hindostan. We wish to live as equal citizens. The Center [central government] should tell us it wants to keep us or not... If it wishes to take a count, that is all right with us. It should give us territory

corresponding to ninety-three heads.<sup>15</sup> (Bhindranwale 11 May 1983, quoted in Sandhu 1997, 234)

Because Khalistan's largest proponents at the time were diaspora Sikhs, such as Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan in the United Kingdom, it is possible Bhindranwale was not very enthused with them.

In the last few years of Bhindranwale's life, a rumor had begun to spread that he was secretly an agent or traitor for the central government. The controversy only helped add to the mystique of Bhindranwale, who by 1982 was becoming a widely known figure in many parts of northern and urban India. Bhindranwale's interaction (if any) with the central government is still a topic up for debate. I agree that his step into the political scene was advantageous for the center because his expanding support base drew from the rival Akali Dal's. Bhindranwale, however, addressed the rumor that he was an agent for Indira many times. He was convinced his enemies were trying every way possible to shrink his (by now) huge support base in Punjab. Stories circulated about Bhindranwale with such speed that he eventually had to speak about it. His first mention of this rumor is midway through 1983, less than a year before his demise. In March 1984 Bhindranwale instructed his congregation to reaffirm their loyalty to him when other speakers slander him as an agent for the central government. On another occasion he responded by comparing his actions to the Akalis,

The reports allege that some friends... have started to say that Bhindranwale speaks for the Congress; that Bhindranwale is hurting the *panthak Morcha* [Khalsa brotherhood]... The secretary of the Akali Dal has been issued [gun] licenses and he is an akali; Bhindranwala's licenses have been cancelled under Congress' rule and Bhindranwalas are still congressites! Bhindranwala does not enter the house of any communist, akali, congressite, or socialist M.L.A. [Member of the legislative Assembly of a state] and is still a congressite; and all of

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<sup>15</sup> 93 heads represents the Sikh percentage (93%) of all fighters hanged by the British during the fight for India's independence.

our M.L.A. brothers [of the Akali party] have dinner at the home of the murderer of Siri Guru Granth Sahib our True King, the former Chief minister Darbara, the incarnation of Zakariya, and still are Akalis! (Bhindranwale 1 April 1984, quoted in Sandhu 1997, 321)

Bhindranwale gave a sense that other Sikh leaders and movements were rivals. He remained separate from the Babbar Khalsa, Dal Khalsa, Naxalites, Khalistan movement and the Akali Dal by constantly reiterating his meager role as a preacher. In spite of the steep competition, it was Bhindranwale who united Sikhs, eventually replacing Ranjit Singh as the most recent in a long lineage of legendary Sikh leaders.

## CHAPTER 3: CHARISMATIC ACTIVIST

In this chapter, I argue that Bhindranwale qualifies to be categorized as a charismatic authority. From this point on, a myriad of theories from a number of fields are incorporated to understand Bhindranwale's tactics and appeal to the people. The intermingling of such theories are thus explained first. The criteria for a charismatic authority, which I apply to Bhindranwale, are explained as an amalgam of several scholars' works on the subject of charisma.

The remaining sections of this chapter are dedicated to the accounts which correspond to the criteria outlined. Bhindranwale's power to defy the government, use of imagery, and innovative rhetoric are discussed here. Perhaps the greatest sign of his charisma was his ability to invoke actions from his followers for his vision of a completely autonomous Sikh land.

### **Theory and Criteria**

*Charisma* is a derivation of *χάρις*, the Greek word for *grace*. Grace is the divine bestowal of gifts or blessings upon someone. Sociologist Max Weber (1922, 1978) first conceived of the charisma as a social instrument while analyzing the various forms of societal authority, which he boiled down to three: traditional, rational, and charismatic (Tucker 1968, 733). What Weber found was that in a society under stressful conditions, typically economic and/or political, a leader can emerge with a message and persona that lead people away from the more institutionalized forms of authority (Epley 2015, 2). Weber saw charisma as an assorted mix of exceptional qualities in an individual, perhaps even

supernatural (1978, 1111-1112). Charisma is an unstable entity by nature. It can leave an individual who does not demonstrate his or her powers to followers. Further, it can take different paths of routinization, transference, or dissipation. If a leader who is deemed charismatic is successful in his or her rebellion, the new regime will eventually become the establishment, like that which he or she overthrew, and the charisma of the leader becomes routinized as part of the new establishment. Charisma can also be transferred to a successor, whether in a new established system or not. Finally, the charisma can simply die out after the individual who possessed it dies, though it can also linger on in his or her cult (Tucker 1968, 753-754). Since Weber first conceived of a charisma, many well-known leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Che Guevara and Jesus of Nazareth have been held up to the criteria, which I will proceed to lay out, in order to qualify them as charismatic authorities. In this chapter, the same criteria shall be applied to Bhindranwale. To do this, I use an amalgam of Weber's ideas and later scholars' additions to them; this mix allows me to analyze the effects of Bhindranwale's actions and rhetoric on Punjabi Sikhs.

I agree with Weber's argument that the measure of a person's authority need only be the size of his or her following. The self-evidence of a leader's charisma is that supporters *believe* in a leader's charisma as something real (Conger 1993). In the case of Punjab, however, there is also a communal aspect to consider. Smaller, ostracized groups can become more fanatically loyal to charisma (Tucker 1968). To attain such loyalty, a *revolutionary* leader—the category of charismatic authority I place Bhindranwale in—appeals to the disenfranchised masses by addressing social and political issues, and a *religious* revolutionary leader often intensifies the rhetoric by advocating violence (Epley 2015). Finally, beyond the charm and appeal of a leader's words, evidence of his or her

power (divine or otherwise) is expected by the loyal followers (Weber 1978). These proofs of power serve to reinforce the faith of the followers not only in their leader, but in the righteousness of their collective cause itself. Through this list of prerequisites, with which I match events in Bhindranwale's career, I find sufficient grounds to evaluate his status to that of a charismatic authority.

### **Charisma at Work**

On April 24, 1980, the head of the Nirankaris was gunned down in Delhi. Authorities suspected a number of Bhindranwale's men, but a later report in the *Indian Express* explains why none of his men were arrested, "...It is almost certain that the killers will never be arrested because they are alleged to be in the protection of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale..." (Singh 1999, 329). His reputation was becoming a headline topic for the Indian media. On September 20, 1981, Bhindranwale was arrested on suspicion of murder of Lala Jagat Narain.<sup>16</sup> His followers were outraged and took to the streets. Eighteen Sikhs died in the riot that ensued following his arrest (Sandhu 1997, 35).<sup>17</sup> Bhindranwale was released surprisingly quickly, having been incarcerated for only a few days. He returned to Punjab a hero who was able to defy the government with no fear. In his first statement about Narain's murderers, Bhindranwale proclaimed, "If these killers came to me, I would have them weighed in gold" (Ibid, 35). Because of the Sikh deaths at police hands during Bhindranwale's arrest, his radical statements became like premonitions to his

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<sup>16</sup> Narain was a Congress party leader.

<sup>17</sup> Reports surfaced that the killings might have been staged-managed by police to legitimize use of force on the crowd (Sandhu 1997).

congregation. Before long his reputation developed into his legend. Such is the case regarding the tale of Bhindranwale exposing the problems with Article 25. Article 25 of the 1949 constitution of India declared many religious communities to be categorized as Hindus, and was used as a staple of Hindu disregard for Sikhs. The popular Bhindranwale fable depicts him using the article to outsmart a Hindu court proceeding: when asked to swear on the *Guru Granth Sahib*, Bhindranwale refused and requested to swear on the holy book of Hindus. He reminded the court that under Article 25, Sikhs were classified as Hindus. The court asserted that by swearing on a Hindu scripture, Bhindranwale could lie. The bailiff did not know which book to hold up and the court spun into confusion, leading to Bhindranwale's famous plea, "Either change the Constitution or change the book" (Mahmood 1996b, 11). There was an abundance of such stories, making Bhindranwale appear untouchable, as if by divine grace. Whether accounts like this were true or not would not be of concern to Weber. What mattered was his support base believed them.

After the Nirankari debacle in 1978, Congress quickly labeled Bhindranwale an extremist. He altered Congress's definition of an extremist, telling his congregations there was an underlying meaning: to be an initiated, orthodox Sikh meant you were already considered an extremist by the central government. His delivery convinced Sikhs they were a misunderstood minority, as in his speech in April 1984,

The Government has started to label as extremist anyone who is an *amritdhari*<sup>18</sup> and administers *amrit* to others; one who is himself a *Baani*<sup>19</sup> and teaches others to do the same; one who says that a Hindu should be a true Hindu, a Muslim should be a true Muslim and a Sikh should be firm in his own Faith... (Bhindranwale 13 April 1984, quoted by Sandhu 1997, 323)

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<sup>18</sup> *Amritdharis* are persons formally initiated into the Sikh faith (Sandhu 1999).

<sup>19</sup> *Baani* here is *Gurbani*, i.e. Guru's Word, Siri Guru Granth Sahib (Sandhu 1999).

He made sure Sikhs grew accustomed to being labeled “extremists.” The term was meant to scare the people of Punjab back into line with India. What it actually accomplished was the opposite. Tucker explains the tendency of small racial or ethnic minorities to easily become unified and radical, “If... a particular social group experiences extreme distress at a time when the general distress level in the society is low, a charismatic movement of great vigor but small size may emerge” (1968, 746). In February 1983, Bhindranwale devoted a portion of his speech to government fear of a Sikh minority. His objective was to instill confidence into his congregation in spite of being such a small minority in India. To do this, he quoted his primary source of guidance, Gobind Singh, who proclaimed that one Sikh was equal to many Hindus. Indira seemed to regard Sikhs as a containable group in the grander scheme of India.<sup>20</sup> Bhindranwale, however, believed a much larger revolt was taking place:

There has been an announcement from the Akal Takhat that 115,000 volunteers are ready to die. I too have joined them on the stage on two occasions... I have preached at length to all the mothers and brothers... and got them to make a pledge to become extremists. She [Indira Gandhi] says there is a handful of people. She should carefully note that 115,000 raised their arms. (Bhindranwale 23 May 1983, quoted by Sandhu 1997, 243)

At the order of their leader, Sikhs began to arm themselves, cut ties with non-*amritdhari*'s, accept the militant identity of their history and claim the *Guru granth Sahib* as their only authority. Bhindranwale effectively transformed his congregation from an audience of listeners to fighters, or at the very least, to a group of sympathizers with his much more militant and masculine doctrine than most other preachers were advocating.

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<sup>20</sup> See Sandhu *Struggle for Justice*. 1999. p.141



## **A Shift in Allegiance**

Schweitzer organizes charismatic leadership into nine categories, of which I find his *revolution* category the most applicable. This type of leader is understood by his or her appeal to the emotion of the masses. Interestingly, in this category, religious leaders in particular justify violence to protect their movements (Epley 2015, 4). For Weber, a leader's rejection of society's established order causes a shift in allegiance; followers are urged to replace their faith in society's structures with faith in a new leader. Conger's addition to Weber explains Bhindranwale's vision for Sikhs: "a reorientation of the world to a more ideal and transcendent order" (1993, 279). A charismatic leader fights for that *transcendent* order. For fundamentalist Sikhs, a Sikh-run Punjab was that order, and Bhindranwale had verbal ammunition for anyone against Sikh autonomy.

Bhindranwale is not known to have studied Marx, but he shared some of Marx's logic. Tucker applies Marxist theory to a leader's rhetoric, stating that a leader must "...*accentuate* the sense of being in a desperate predicament..." (1968, 751). Marx himself has said, "The real oppression must be made still more oppressive by adding to it the consciousness of oppression; the shame still more shameful by publicizing it" (Einleitung 1957, 381). Through the socio-economic developments addressed in the previous chapter, Sikhs witnessed a plethora of injustices and believed Indira Gandhi to be at the root of many of them. In February 1983, Bhindranwale gave a speech openly calling Sikhs *slaves* in Punjab. He outlined the unfair judicial system, Indira's denial of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution's demands, and economic measures taken by the government to suppress Punjabi prosperity. Indira was again the culprit:

How shall we get rid of this curse of slavery? If you wish to speak Punjabi, if you want a Punjabi-speaking state demarcated, if you wish a train named after Harmandir Sahib, if you want to get this city given the status of a holy city, not eighty but eighty-five thousand to eighty-six thousand of you go to jail, over one hundred and thirteen shed your blood and achieved martyrdom and still there is no announcement from Indira. (Bhindranwale February 1983, quoted by Sandhu 1997, 190)

Bhindranwale's speeches between 1982 and May 1984 (his last being on May 24) contain twenty-five subsections dedicated to what I label 'hot' words - words that trend heavily throughout.<sup>21</sup> The frequency of the terms *oppression*, *discrimination*, and *Indira/Gandhi* indicate the consistency in Bhindranwale's theme of Sikh slavery. The frequency rate of these three words also (and unsurprisingly) increased leading up to 1984. Why is this data significant? Because the political and economic views of the community were not only being shaped by a preacher with no political experience or aspirations, but increasingly emphasized as time passed.<sup>22</sup>

### **Proof of Power**

Weber recognized the need for a charismatic authority to demonstrate power, lest his or her supporters become disenchanted. He writes, "Most of all, his divine mission must prove itself by bringing well-being to his faithful followers..." (Weber 1978, 1114 cited Lungskow 2008, p.30). Tucker (1968) explains that the "powers" of a charismatic leader can range from visionary, communicative, and practical, stating, "In the one case, the charismatic leader appears as prophet; in the other, as activist" (748).

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<sup>21</sup> See Sandhu *Struggle For Justice*. 1999.

<sup>22</sup> These three hot words are only surpassed in frequency by the terms *Sikh*, *weapons* and *Hindu*.

Except for a few murder accusations, Bhindranwale had not proven anything to demonstrate power before 1983. The December 1983 issue of *India Today* contains an interview with a Chandigarh officer, who explained that the worst offense Bhindranwale could be accused of was harsh speech rhetoric. He *did* have a gift for settling disputes for Sikhs over money or land more expediently than the legal system. From inside the Golden Temple he doled out judgments and punishments (Art and Richardson 2007, 431). Mentioned earlier, he was popular for settling family disputes as well. Bhindranwale's proofs of authority were rather subtle. Then on December 15, 1983, he moved to the religious sanctuary of the Akal Takht, the administrative building in the Golden Temple complex. The same day, Bhindranwale and fifty armed Sikhs showed up on the Deputy Commissioner's doorstep. Such a marching brigade was indisputably illegal. Not only are armed and mobile demonstrations prohibited throughout India, but at the time the rights of Punjabi Sikhs to carry weapons were being restricted. Nobody was injured, but his "message" invigorated Sikhs: Bhindranwale was not moving to escape the law—he *was* the law.

The second show of power occurred while Bhindranwale was living in the Takht. A Sikh police officer was gunned down on the steps of the Golden Temple during a personal religious visit. Both the government and people living in Amritsar knew who gave the order to murder the officer. When the suspects were killed by police in a firefight, Bhindranwale became angry. Instead of arresting him, however, the government sent another Sikh officer to speak to Bhindranwale about the one that was killed; he was also gunned down at the Temple steps (Chawla 2016, 163). Bhindranwale remained a free man.

There is an incredibly long list of crimes he was suspected of authorizing, yet he miraculously evaded prison.

Bhindranwale's greatest proof of power to militants, however, was his martyrdom. First, a brief synopsis of the military operation, known as Operation Blue Star, which led to the casualties of Bhindranwale and many others, is in order. From June 3-8, 1984, the Indian army attacked the Golden Temple, where Bhindranwale and a large group of militants had been stockpiling weapons. In anticipation of an attack, Bhindranwale distributed cassettes warning Sikhs that a battle was imminent (Fair 2003, 64). The army traded gunfire with the Sikh fighters for over two days, until army tanks entered the Temple grounds at the end of the day on June 5, effectively taking control. On June 6, While being urged to flee as the army gained ground, Bhindranwale told his comrades, "Baba Deep Singh came so far to give his head at this place, and I am privileged to be able to give mine right here" (Mahmood 1996a, 40).<sup>23</sup> Bhindranwale was shot minutes later. As Bhindranwale lay dead in the main entrance of the Akal Takht, many of his fellow militants who had been captured tried vigorously to merely touch his feet (Gupta 1984, 92). Sikhs around the world were outraged that the sanctity of the Golden Temple had been violated. Many were also in mourning of their beloved sant. The following months served to vindicate Bhindranwale's claims of Sikh oppression at the hands of the Indian Government, as Sikhs in villages throughout India were attacked, tortured, and killed after Blue Star. The attacks were not suppressed by the police (Singh 2002, 57).

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<sup>23</sup> Baba Deep Singh is a Sikh hero believed to have fought the Afghans with his head cut off (Mahmood 1996a, 40).

The proposed criteria for a leader to be considered a charismatic revolutionary requires him or her to accrue a following, defy the government, articulate the level of injustice occurring, demonstrate his or her power and to shift allegiance of the people from the status quo to a new vision. I have argued that Bhindranwale has fulfilled these requirements. His charisma has given him a larger than life identity among Sikhs from the start of his career to the present.

## CHAPTER 4: IDEOLOGY BEHIND THE CHARISMA

The previous chapter analyzed the people's perception of Bhindranwale and the criteria with which I qualify him as a charismatic authority. This chapter looks at the ideology his charisma allowed him to promote in Punjab. This chapter echoes many of the issues within Sikhism introduced in Chapter 1, meaning Bhindranwale fully integrated them into his sermons and speeches.

Emphasizing the identity of militant and patriarchal (masculinist) men was top priority on Bhindranwale's list of talking points. Uninitiated Sikhs were scorned, and young men were taught to carry weapons. Epic scriptural stories were brought back to life as Bhindranwale equated the past to the present, and the divine to the temporal. His militant style of dress was unmistakable and provoking, now immortalized through pictures which hang in countless Gurudwaras and Sikh homes. In addition to Bhindranwale's ideology, the role of his congregation to pressure others into joining his army of Sikhs is also analyzed through the use of social role theory.

### **Sikh Militancy Repackaged**

To those outside the Sikh community, Sikhs appeared to suffer (and continue to suffer) from a massive identity crisis, unsure if they are fundamentalists, radicals, militants, religious nationalists, etc. My use of the term *militants* ultimately stems from the British army's *martial race* epithet attributed to Sikh soldiers (Streets 2010). In Chapter 2, I outlined the development of the martial identity employed by the British. Though Gobind Singh and previous Gurus celebrated the image of Sikh fighters, it was the British who

implanted the martial mentality as part of Sikhs' very nature; a label that lingered in the Sikh psyche.

Juergensmeyer's anthropological work in Punjab, however, reveals that Khalistani Sikhs saw themselves as anything *but* militant. In this section I expound on religious philosophy outsiders might label *militant*, which Sikhs call *pious*. This is, in fact, the crux of Bhindranwale's argument. Sikh piety is not simply a system of prayer and ritual; it is integrated with the destruction of evil. Evil exists in both the temporal and cosmic dimensions. Bhindranwale bore the obligation of declaring the eternal cosmic evil present in India in the form of the central government. This section investigates his militant outlook. I shall start with an overview of his philosophy and effective use of visual stimuli. Next, I analyze his rationalization for advising Sikhs to carry weapons. Finally, I analyze the tactics Bhindranwale used to appeal to the communal logic of his followers.

Bhindranwale believed in the idea of a great 'struggle' against Sikhs and the religion as a whole.<sup>24</sup> It was no accident that the Partition left the only Sikh- dense state in turmoil, nor was the current suppression of Punjab a coincidence: the Hindu- saturated government looked down on Sikhs. The threat of slow eradication was upon the Sikh community, and the strength to combat such forces was (again) necessary to survive. Bhindranwale claimed that such strength could only come from the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book and last Guru. Greater than the sin of owning weapons and killing someone was the sin of having weapons and not seeking justice in Bhindranwale's opinion (Juergensmeyer 1988, 77). He preached the importance of following in the footsteps of

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<sup>24</sup> The Sikh 'struggle' has a similar connotation to the use of jihad by Islamic fundamentalists. Douglas Streusand writes that the political meaning of jihad, an interpretation many Muslims agree with, is "...the establishment of Muslim rule (1997)." Bhindranwale sought to set up a Sikh controlled Punjab.

Guru Gobind Singh and to be *Shastradhari* (weapon-bearers). His speeches did not follow the typical calm, uplifting style that might be expected of a preacher. His voice was tense and his energy resembled that of someone leading a rally rather than a congregation. The content frequently shifted between scripture and current events.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Bhindranwale drew much of his discourse from the most militant of the Gurus, Gobind Singh. Like Gobind Singh, he maintained that one Sikh was the equivalent to many Hindus, though the exact ratio differed between the two. He was appalled that Sikhs would allow others to criticize or degrade the *Adi Granth* and not take immediate action: ‘...whoever insults the *Guru Granth Sahib* should be killed then and there...’ (1988, 70). Bhindranwale shunned the government so vehemently that even Sikhs who left their positions in government to ask forgiveness were shown no mercy. He demanded the Anandpur Sahib Resolution be implemented in its entirety and demanded the heads of those who opposed it, even if only certain sections were opposed.

“...Punjab is being ruled by the Sant [Bhindranwale] and not by the Congress (I), they [officers] feel” (Chawla 1981, 170).<sup>25</sup> Law enforcement agents openly expressed fear for their lives when he was released from jail during Narian’s murder investigation. He only permitted Sikh policemen to interrogate him, and after his release the Punjab government asked his men to turn their weapons in; Bhindranwale instructed them not to. When the All India Sikh Students’ Federation, an institutional ally of Bhindranwale’s, attempted to ban tobacco sales in Amritsar, Hindu merchants marched in protest.<sup>26</sup> Two

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<sup>25</sup> Taken from the November 1981 issue of *Indian Express*. See G.S. Chawla *Bloodshed*, p.195

<sup>26</sup> Some protestors had swords and other small weapons.



days later, Bhindranwale led 20,000 armed Sikhs through Amritsar looking for the Hindu protestors. When the protestors heard Bhindranwale was on the hunt they quickly disbanded.

He maintained a militant image by wearing a belt of bullets around his upper torso. Seizing every opportunity for camera time, he would appear in the temple accompanied by heavily armed Sikhs whenever reporters needed pictures. The most notable photo op was on a 1981 visit to Delhi, in which he arrived on a bus literally covered in dozens of heavily armed Sikhs. The visit and the photos of it made headlines (Bloodshed 2016, 193). He was notorious for sporting an all-white robe and a turban tied in the *Dumalla* fashion of *Nihang Khalsa* (warrior) Sikhs. Perhaps the most theatrical prop of Bhindranwale's image was the silver arrow he often held during public appearances.<sup>27</sup> The silver arrow is a symbol of Guru Gobind Singh, who was a great archer. Gobind Singh is also the guru most associated with Sikh devotion and justified violence. The subliminal message Bhindranwale was sending his followers and opposition was clear: Punjabi Sikhs were ready to fight for autonomy.

### **Miri-Piri**

Bhindranwale was a firm believer in the concept of *miri-piri*, and he himself became the link between spiritual and political matters. By 1984, his speeches were as much about the Akali Dal and Indira Gandhi as about Sikhism. He was no longer the wandering, pious religious preacher. In the eyes of his opposition he was the voice of a militant group in

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<sup>27</sup> Bhindranwale could also be seen on temple grounds sitting cross legged and dramatically enveloped in a robe. His softer image resembled popular portraits of Guru Nanak, in which he was typically sitting and dressed in robes as well.

Punjab. Juergensmeyer writes that the veil of religion gave legitimacy to the violence, noting, "...the destruction of evil is a part of the logic of religion..." (1988, 80). Should that evil exist in the temporal sphere, it must be destroyed through temporal means; mixing economic and political grievances with religious truths made Sikhs comfortable with violence. The reason Bhindranwale supported *miri-piri* was his belief that the Hindu government was just a mask for the true evil, secularism. This evil had to be smothered, not so much for Punjab, but for God. Bhindranwale taught his young Sikh congregation that they were alive in a pivotal time and could make a difference. For economically and politically frustrated Sikhs, this was monumental.

Through his analysis of actual rural religious practices in Punjab, Oberoi offers insight into the Sikh rationalization of Bhindranwale's 'cosmic-temporal' rhetoric. Mentioned in Chapter 1, the majority of Punjabi Sikhs were located in the rural areas, and many praised local gods and quasi-historical figures more intensely than they did the universal Sikh deity. Why? Oberoi explains that local gods had a much more intimate relationship with villagers, affecting their daily life more than the official Sikh god, seen as formless and distant. The cosmic met the temporal regularly as villagers asked local gods for rather mundane blessings—popular requests were productive harvests and protection from things like disease, as well as for protection from outside forces and harmony throughout the village (1992, 376). It is here that we begin to see why Bhindranwale may have appealed to rural Sikhs. There was something beyond his religious message and his examples of the cosmic-temporal struggle. He helped them in family and financial disputes. He seemed able to instill harmony among all Sikhs, rural and urban. Bhindranwale had become a local figure to praise, if not worship at some level.

Before long, his supporters began praising those who committed violent acts. Each time Bhindranwale was suspected of a crime the size of his audience grew. If for no other reason, Sikhs wanted to see the man who defied the Indian government. During this period there were many who were declared martyrs. It seemed the more Sikhs were tortured or killed, the more willing their companions were to join them. After Operation Bluestar, Sikhs regarded Beant Singh, Indira Gandhi's bodyguard and assassin, as a hero. Groups of young Sikh men formed *martyr brigades*, the equivalent of Islamic suicide bombers, in Punjab (Juergensmeyer 2004a, 2). Bhindranwale's message obviously resonated with people, flourishing in separatist circles decades after his death.

The new miri-piri discourse authorized violence, though it was still unclear on whom to inflict it. Whether naturally ingenious or carefully crafted, Bhindranwale's speeches and interviews display recurring schema for illustrating his point. Das (1992, 247) believed that Bhindranwale used dualisms, or an 'us versus them' argument to separate the Sikh community from the (mostly Hindu) central government. There were also a large number of Hindus living in Punjab, however. Bhindranwale claimed he held no animosity toward Hindus, but referred to Indira as the woman "born in the house of Brahmins" (Juergensmeyer 2004a, 5) to describe her Hindu heritage and high caste status. Bhindranwale knew the epithet would conjure up hostility from his audience, made up of mostly lower caste Punjabis.

Sikhs felt their rights were limited when compared to Hindu rights. Sikhs were not free to carry firearms or travel throughout India freely. When Indira Gandhi began referring to them as extremists, Sikhs were mysteriously relieved of duty from police and military forces in large numbers. He told his congregation not to expect Hindus to be sympathetic

to the Sikh plight, when it was Hindus who killed their fifth and sixth Gurus. Bhindranwale contrasted the apathy of the Hindus with stories of Sikhs saving Hindu lives, at times even saving the nation of India (for Hindus), as in 1947.<sup>28</sup>

### **Forced Conformity**

Bhindranwale seemed aware that if his appeal to Sikhs to conform on the basis of his philosophy and charisma failed, his congregation could force their support. His followers exhibited traits of a social role theory known as *instrumental conformity*. Biddle provides a basic definition of instrumental conformity: the likelihood "...to conform when others can view their [an outsider's] behaviors, have power, and are likely to exercise sanctions over the person" (Biddle 1986, 79). His support base began pressuring non-*amritdhari*<sup>29</sup> Sikhs into accepting the roles of militant, masculine freedom fighters:

A 'Singh' is made from a Sikh. The words 'Sikh' and 'Singh' are closely connected. Maharaj [*Guru Granth Sahib*] has implanted a great secret in this... At first there is the 'Sikh' and then there is a 'Singh'. If there is a 'Singh' only then is there a 'Sikh.' A Sikh is one who takes instruction. So, one who is not going to take instruction is not a Sikh. And if one has accepted the teaching he is a 'Singh.' One who has accepted the teaching has kirpaan in his gaatra... One who is a Sikhs [*sic*] will have: 'complete appearance, straight beard; wooden kangha in his hair.' Nowhere is it written as kanghi, it is written as kangha and not kanghi.<sup>30</sup> (Bhindranwale 9 August 1983, quoted by Sandhu 1997, 260)

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<sup>28</sup> 1947 was the year of the Partition. Mahatma Gandhi and two other Hindu leaders asked Sikhs to stand in front when the new Indian flag was marched in the face of the British. The British killed many Sikhs, but Bhindranwale pointed out that a Hindu somehow became India's leader (1999). He portrayed Sikhs as honorable warriors and Hindus as conniving opportunists. There was no need to declare that Sikhs should distance themselves from Hindus, it was implied.

<sup>29</sup> Sikhs who have taken *amrit*, or have become an initiated member of the Khalsa.

<sup>30</sup> *Kangha* is the comb used by Sikhs; *kanghi* is used by people who cut their hair (Sandhu 1999).

In addition to his followers coercing the rest of Punjab, Bhindranwale himself informed listeners that they had better become loyal to his vision, lest they be sanctioned most severely:

...Whatever is written in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution... we shall definitely get that accepted [by the government]. If any of us becomes soft on this, I shall not spare him nor do I ask any leader to spare me [if I should retract]... Telling you is my duty, but getting [the government] to accept it will be yours. If I fail to tell you, do not forgive me and if you do not protect your rights, Guru will not forgive you. (Bhindranwale 16 July 1983, quoted by Sandhu 1997, 249)

Bhindranwale made sure to draw attention to Sikh bystanders. Through pressure from himself and his support base, much of the Sikh populace found it easier to deal with police harassment for being tied to extremists than to face their own neighbors. It is ironic that the same leader who vowed to fight the authoritarian Indian government at times sounded like an authoritarian himself.

### **Understanding Martyrdom**

Bhindranwale connected current political events to historical anecdotes and mythological stories. These accounts held intrinsic value to the congregation as Indians.<sup>31</sup> Stories from the Guru Granth Sahib, like that of Samman and Moosan were told to show the *true* Sikh philosophy—acceptance of death.<sup>32</sup> Bhindranwale derived two lessons from the story: first,

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<sup>31</sup> Comparable to American politician demagoguery, referencing George Washington or the “founding fathers” with the intention of stirring up emotion from voters.

<sup>32</sup> The story of Samman and Moosan describes a father and son who agreed to provide langar for Guru Nanak’s visit to their town, though not being financially able to. In desperation, they conspire to loot the house of a wealthy neighbor for food. Upon leaving, Moosan gets stuck in the opening they had created. After Samman’s unsuccessful attempts to rescue his son, Moosan requested his head be cut off, so that people would not recognize him and accuse Nanak’s followers of being thieves. Samman then beheaded his son and brought the severed head home with him, later picking up the body a well. Upon his visit, Nanak calls out for Moosan, forcing Samman to explain his absence. Nanak then goes to Moosan’s body and brings the boy back to life for his devotion to Sikhism (Sandhu 1999, 25).

that the Guru, who represented the Sikh faith, was more important than any individual. Second, that self-sacrifice in devotion to the Guru would be repaid, so there was no need to worry about losing one's life.

Juergensmeyer's encounters with Sikh and Muslim militants leaves one asking how militants view scripture. To reiterate: do militants view scriptures as ongoing works? In his essay, Juergensmeyer (2004, 4-5) recalls his childhood pastor leading the congregation to a field, then claiming that the final battle of Christian scripture was really in the present. Juergensmeyer hints at the pastor's sense of conviction rather than fear or worry, which would have seemed more appropriate. If death does not worry militants, the argument of the *cosmic-temporal* connection might be problematic with my use of hypermasculinity (Described in 'Masculinity'). But I believe religion plays a part in their acceptance of death, but not only by bringing scriptural stories back down to the temporal level. Instead, the reason they anxiously await martyrdom may be found in the reverse of *cosmic-temporal*, the *temporal-cosmic*. Though a bit of a stretch, there may be a lurking desire by the militants to get their names remembered or, like Bhindranwale's name, almost worshipped. Axel (2001, 43) writes of Sikhs in the UK funneling money into Punjab to keep the fight for Khalistan going; these financial channels are known as *Shaheedi* (martyr) funds. In Juergensmeyer's interviews, the militants seemed to believe they were committing legendary acts, perhaps equal to those of scripture (2004a, 2). Indeed, martyrs and great leaders are often as celebrated as figures in holy texts (the majority of Christians, for example, know who Paul the apostle is). Their goal, then, of becoming a legend like

Bhindranwale is all but impossible.<sup>33</sup> To summarize, Bhindranwale used scriptural ideals and figures as a way to relate current events to Sikh stories, usually to rationalize violence. For young men, Scriptural anachronisms transformed current events into an opportunity to immortalize themselves in the same manner Bhindranwale did.

### **Regaining Sikh Masculinity**

Hypermasculinity theory encapsulates Bhindranwale's ideal image of Sikh men quite well. It identifies social settings which bring out exaggerated traits in males. These studies often look at 1) cultural norms, 2) rejection from peers, 3) parental influence and/or negligence, and 4) the formulation of anger and the desire for control, as the causes of hypermasculinity. In this section I apply these causes to the young Sikh males of Bhindranwale's support base. I also analyze the importance Bhindranwale gave to the appearance of Sikh males.

The culture of the Sikh community in Punjab leaned towards patriarchal. Sikh men were hard-working and courageous. Bhindrwanwale understood the role of men as breadwinners in Punjab; success and power were aspirations for men more than women; Sikh women expected men to be braver than them in war, and Sikh men believed that women belonged at home (Juergensmeyer 2003, 1-2). Under what they viewed as Indira Gandhi's repressive economic policies, many Sikh men were unable to fulfill this cultural norm, the first in my list of hypermasculinity causes. Because of this, many found a sense of pride being in Bhindranwale's cult. His rhetoric seemed to advocate the one emotion

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<sup>33</sup> Bhindranwale mentioned martyrs, scriptural or contemporary, in every one of his speeches. Contemporary martyrs were called 'heroic'. See Sandhu 1999.

that males culturally allowed to express in a patriarchal society: anger. He also understood that Sikhs felt ostracized in India, believing they had been shortchanged and misrepresented by the central government. Scheff (2006) explains that a male rejected by his peers will replace anger with all other emotions (3). Treating the states within India as peers, Punjab was economically and religiously rejected by India. The result was a sudden surge in Sikh militants under Bhindranwale; this exemplifies the second cause.

The idea of a strong father in a patriarchal society plays a role in the masculinity of his sons (Gopal 2004, 807). However, at the time Bhindranwale began touring villages, many Sikh men had degenerated into what Khushwant Singh (1999) described as, "...drunken or doped fathers, husbands or brothers" (324). Scheff (2006) believes the effect of parental neglect, which was evident in Punjab at this time, on young men is their growing desire for a feeling of power (2). However, Rather than merely desiring financial power or physical power over women—both common manifestations of power in individual males (8), Bhindranwale's rhetoric insinuated that Sikh males should seek power over society. Sivan (1997) describes similar behavior in young males throughout the Middle East in the mid 1980's. In response to the economic downturn that affected most Middle Eastern nations, male membership in violent Islamic groups spiked (par.4).

Apart from hypermasculinity theory, the Sikh male body itself merits investigation. The turban and the beard are symbols of Sikh manhood, for better or worse. From the late 1970's to the mid 1990's, police in Punjab (and elsewhere in India) profiled Sikhs in government positions, while arresting and torturing suspected criminals at will. Initiated men were easily identifiable. Still, Bhindranwale was relentlessly concerned with the appearance of his men. Clean-shaven Sikhs were chastised for attempting to "blend in"



with their Hindu counterparts. In his sermons he would ask the uninitiated members of the crowd if they resembled the tenth Guru: physically imposing, bearded and hair wrapped in a turban. He also instructed them to pray to God and ask to be made into women if their beards were “too heavy” for them (Juergensmeyer 1988, 79). Obviously he was speaking to men that had not yet joined his regime.

### **Charismatic Legacy**

Not everyone possesses the qualities of a leader such as Bhindranwale, but in Punjab and in the diaspora many aspired to follow his footsteps. This brings us to Weber’s ideas of routinization and charisma transfer. The transfer of charisma becomes a necessity when the leader who possessed it is gone. Tucker (1968) expounds on Weber’s hypothesis, stating that followers of a deceased (or retired) leader construct a system of succession to that leader’s charisma, and adds that a leader’s charisma survives in his or her cult (754). A sense of reverence for the deceased leader naturally forms.

An argument can be made for his sustained charisma through the media. Pictures of Bhindranwale’s body have stirred reactions from Sikhs worldwide (Axel 2005, 143). His recorded speeches have received millions of views on video mega-site Youtube.com. His name is included in the majority of media coverage of Sikhism in any capacity. Shirts are printed and Sikh homes have picture frames with images of his face found on the internet. Posters of Bhindranwale alone have been the subject of news reports from the Indian mass media. Among the major news outlets that have run stories of Bhindranwale are *Hindustan Times*, *Indian Express*, and *The Hindu*. *The Hindu* in particular released an article entitled, “Poster Brings Bhindranwale back in Punjab discourse” (2015). The *Indo-*

*Asian News Service* shared an article on Bhindranwale's presence in Punjab, stating, "Bhindranwale continues to live on in Punjab through stickers, posters, T-shirts, photos and even key chains" (2009, 1). His images, soundbites and videos are as effective in inspiring Sikhs to advocate for Khalistan as the Khalistan movement's philosophy. Thus, I argue that, reminiscent of Gobind Singh using the *Guru Granth Sahib* to sustain the spirit of the Guru on Earth, Bhindranwale has used the medium of information technology (i.e. the internet) to sustain his charisma, which as his study argues, has proven effective.

I have shown that Bhindranwale has changed Sikh discourse and provided a unique interpretation of the Sikh male throughout history, while continuing to invigorate Sikh youth, and young men in particular. The dissemination of his images, sermons, and interviews represent the popular fundamentalist traits of militancy, martyrdom, masculinity and oppression to Sikhs both in Punjab and in the diaspora today. Bhindranwale's name is as widely known to Sikhs as the Gurus', and he has become as highly praised as the Gurus by many after his death.

## CONCLUSION

### **Research Questions and Findings**

The purpose of this study is primarily to qualify Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority. Secondly, I aimed to show that his philosophies were so widely accepted in large part due to his charisma. While there were other radical factions operating in Punjab while Bhindranwale was alive, none saw his level of support from the people of Punjab. Political groups as well, like the Akali Dal, had been unsuccessful in catching the central government's attention for their concerns. What I needed to illustrate was that Bhindranwale was more than just the organizer of a violent faction or a politician. Lastly, I found it necessary to conceive of Bhindranwale's posthumous charisma in a way that has not previously been done, attributing his relevance today to the internet. With those objectives in mind, I believe the historical examples I provided corroborate my claims.

My research apart from Bhindranwale's charisma is consistent with the work of leading experts in Sikh Studies. The history of Punjab's social issues in Chapter 1 echoes Leaf's (1985) work on political and economic developments, and Singh's (1982) concern for the religious tensions occurring at the time. Chapter 2 introduces Bhindranwale in a manner which reflects Sandhu's (1997) deep convictions about him, Mahmood's (1996) experience among militant Sikhs, and Juergensmeyer's (1988) work on violent religious leaders. Chapter 3 contains my work on charisma, the crux of this study. While the criteria I apply to Bhindranwale is a mix of Weber (1922), Epley (2015) and Tucker (1968), who make up the majority of my theoretical base, I do not believe I have misused their work to fit my needs in any way. In Chapter 4, I use Juergensmeyer's work on Bhindranwale and

violence to show how Sikhs received his message. My job was to propose Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority, and to show that this charisma was the reason the Sikhs in Punjab accepted his ideology.

### **Future Research Possibilities**

The findings of my research are restricted to Charisma as a foundation for radical doctrine. My arguments would have benefitted from deeper analyses of psychology, gender studies, and role theory, as they all provide much needed context for understanding the mind state of Punjabi Sikhs from the Partition of Pakistan and Punjab to 1984. I find potential in applying Jung's idea of the collective unconscious to them as well, particularly Jung's thoughts on the archetypal need for a powerful leader in mankind's unconscious (Odajnyk 1973, 145). In the same vein as Jung is Weinberg's (2007) work on the social unconscious and a society's "inheritance of acquired characteristics" which, he argues, are distinct from cultural norms (315-316). I would be interested to see which traits of Sikh men conform to Weinberg's definition of such characteristics. However, after attempting to incorporate these elements at length in my thesis, I realized that such comprehensive work was outside the scope of my objective.

A second regret of mine was the decision to make this a completely text-based composition. During the months of research, it became clear that one of the best ways to illustrate Bhindranwale's larger than life persona was through Sikhs today. Stories of his greatness (and evil) are abundant in every Sikh's memory. Even the local gurudwara in South Florida has two framed pictures of Bhindranwale overlooking its dining hall. I feel I could have conveyed his charisma much more easily if I had opted to interview subjects.

## **Research Contribution**

My qualification of Bhindranwale as a charismatic authority, and my application of a concept I label sustained charisma are the most valuable contribution of this study. In an ever-emerging market like India's, the chances are high of certain groups feeling shortchanged during the course of social and political reforms. By understanding the precursors which lead to such a galvanizing figure, societies experiencing unrest among their citizens may be able to find answers from academia to quell the tension.

I feel my contribution to the field of Religious Studies lies in the fact that Bhindranwale was a Sikh, rather than a Hindu or Muslim, for example. The Sikh religion receives less recognition and attention than any other of the largest worldwide religions. I find it astounding that Bhindranwale's rebellion is not included in more universities' South Asian, International relations or Political Science curriculums. In a broader sense, many scholars of Religious Studies still relegate Sikhism to a blend of Islam and Hinduism. Figures like Bhindranwale help shed light on the extreme measures Sikhs have had to take to distinguish their identity as both a distinct community and religion within India.

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