COMMENT[1]

VIOLENCE IN PUNJAB

More than ten thousand people have fallen victim to terrorism in Punjab, a number unrivalled by terrorist activity anywhere in the world. So traumatising are the memories of these ten years that no one – political actors, social activists and even academics – has bothered to discuss the reasons responsible for the violence and the return of 'peace'. Thus, whenever a violent event, like the assassination of Chief Minister Beant Singh takes place, it raises uncomfortable questions about 'peace' and the re-emergence of militancy. The projects of a Beant Singh or a K.P.S. Gill as symbols of peace has meant that their successes are greeted with jubilation while their setbacks lead to panic. These extreme reactions are natural in a situation where individuals are isolated from the political, socio-economic setting and presented either as heroes or as villains.

This kind of understanding attributes an autonomous space to state and non-state actors, overlooking the latent violence. The main focus is to target individual perpetrators of violence. In other words, the police eliminate the militants and vice-versa and even the judiciary isolates individual policemen for punishment. A vicious circle is thus set up, where the underlying assumption is that the killing of a lone terrorist or the punishing of a few policemen will result in the elimination of terrorism per se.

Terrorism is not merely a state of mind: it is a political strategy. If the state wants to silence the gun, it must confront the politics and ideology of terrorism. As long as the creed or basic causes that gave rise to it continue to flourish, the danger is that the terrorism can erupt again. The basic flaw of the state's strategy in dealing with the Punjab problem was viewing terrorism as a law and order problem. In such a context, violence becomes a 'truncated object' of study because it confines itself to state and non-state actors, precluding the need to understand violence as a part of a historical process. But it is important to remember that violence is a result of certain social conditions and inseparable from the existence and functioning of social and political institutions. For example, the return of peace to Punjab does not imply that the conditions which caused violence have been moderated, subsumed, or resolved. Therefore, it is incorrect to see the escalating violence as a result of an inadequate police apparatus alone.

This is not to deny the law and order dimension of terrorism. But we must remember that to check the democratic mobilisations against terrorism in the name of security along strengthens the forces of terrorism. Therefore, the recent assassination of Chief Minister Beant Singh should not scare away moderate politicians: this will only strengthen the hold of the hard-liners and extremists. A legitimate question we need to ask is: is violence being used as a substitute for democratic modes by the state as well as non-state actors, or is it being used as one of the tactics which ranged from ideological persuasion to violence?

In order to advance a conceptual framework we must therefore: *(a)* analyse the reasons, justifications and manifestations of violence; *(b)* make an assessment of the

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nature, character and longevity of peace in Punjab; and *(c)* suggest an alternate approach to understand and counter violence.

Historically, violence in Punjab has been considered a legitimate mode of political discourse. Both cultural and religious practices have attributed a positive value to the user of violence for retrieving dignity and fighting evil. The Sikh religious tradition legitimizes the use of violence, provided it has its basis in human values. But a militancy based on humanism was subordinated to martial militancy by vested interests. The British strategy of creating 'martial races' based on caste and religion reinforced the concept of martial militancy.

In order to understand violence in its proper social context and as a part of the fermentation in the ideological state apparatus, we must remember its history. Only then can we trace the relationship of both individual and state violence with the underlying social structure.

Punjab has a history of movements which used violence as a method of interest articulation and received a positive response from the people. For instance, the Namdhari or Kooka movement, launched in 1858 by Baba Ram Singh at Baini Sahib, in Ludhiana district, was militant and anti-imperialist in character. The Ghadar Lehar was another militant movement launched in the USA (1913-1918), whose main thrust was also anti-imperialist. Most of the Ghadarites later joined the Community Party and even the Naxalites. The Babbar Akalis were anti-imperialists and believed in physical elimination of British agents and informers. Another party (the Red Communist Party) also used violence as a mode of discourse in PEPSU in the pre-independence phase, organizing a number of violence peasant struggles in the Phulkian states. Although this mode of political discourse persisted all through, it became a dominant element only in the post-1980 phase.

These historical conditions and their interaction with the state apparatus have given rise to structural violence which manifested itself in state and individual violence. They were, variously, articulations of a secular Punjabi identity, antagonistic assertions of secular Punjabi identity, antagonistic assertions of communal identities and distinct religious identities. The conflicts between these identities, the partisan nature of politics and a lop-sided growth of the economy provided a fillip to retrogressive violence action.

All these competing identities co-existed. For instance, Punjab has a culture and language which transcends religious group boundaries and a unified politico-administrative unit tried to integrated the diverse religious, caste and other identities. Despite the formulation and reformulation of a composite linguistic cultural consciousness, the tendency to evolve a unified sub-nationality with a common urge for territorial integrity remained weak in Punjab. On the contrary, politics mobilized people along communal lines resulting in the Partition in 1947 and, in 1966, a division of the Punjabi-speaking people.

In the pre-independence phase, reformatory movements like the Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabha movement and the Ahmadiya, with their emphasis on *shuddhi*, *amrit prachar*, *tabligh* and *tanzim*, blurred the real contradictions and promoted religiosity and differentiation among people. In fact, the British colonial government made conscious effort to shape communal identities, and British historians like Mill,

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Elphinstone and Elliot, reinforced the perceptions of communal monoliths. Constitutional changes – such as the Morley-Minto reforms in 1909, the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 and the Act of 1937, incorporating principles of separate electorates and communal reservations, perpetuated and intensified this communal polarisation.

The shift in the content and form of politics from mass involvement to elite manoeuvres and calculations accentuated communal divisions which adversely affected the formation of a secular Punjab identity. It is, therefore, relevant to point out that the British colonial politics of separate communal electorates and encouragement to communal organizations, accentuated the reality of communalism.

This process could not be reversed even after independence. The interactions between the state and structural reality shaped communal articulations but it could not become dominant because non-communal assertions also co-existed. Politics reinforced the assumption that both Sikhs and Hindus have distinct interests and demands. The most obvious example of this was the Hindi agitation and Punjabi Suba movement when linguistic and regional issues were articulated but only within a communal frame. Communally divisive politics and exclusiveness thus emerged as a dominant mode of political activity.

There was also an aggregation of groups on categories other than communal, that is, primarily around class and language. An estimated 47 per cent of Punjabi Hindus, according to the 1971 Census, claimed Punjab as their mother-tongue, at a time when even the language question had been communalised. This clearly demonstrated that Punjabi as a sub-nationality has its own inner dynamism. The objective conditions thus thwarted the communal political initiated by mainstream parties.

In this context, the multi-cultural character of Punjabi society was unable to express itself in the practice of politics and impact the state structure. This was a blow to the state's claim to the allegiance of its members and also to the claim to some conception of a shared purpose or a sense of shared benefits. In other words, denied access to their own language, culture and resources alienated a large section of the people from the state, their culture and language and their own physical and material resource base. This process of alienation concealed a dormant violence.

The path of development on which the state embarked and the consequent denial of the legitimate claims of the people produced conditions of structural disequilibrium. The differentiation in the economy sharpened political assertions. The political discourse and symbolism, followed in the pre-1966 period, found continuity but the political programme represented sectional interests. In short, the danger to the *panth* of Sikhs as a single political entity having common secular interests found expression in the political entity having common secular interests found expression in the political discourse of three Akali Dal factions, but the demands raised were more economic than political in nature. This became visible in the latter half of the 1980s.

The three trends within the Akali Dal can be identified as *(i)* standing for state autonomy, but without unduly disturbing the existing political arrangement; *(ii)*

demanding self-determination within the constitutional framework; and *(iii)* raising the slogan for Khalistan. This made it difficult for the various Akali factions to group themselves under one banner. Political demagogues used communal and religious symbols in an extreme form to outdo or eliminate each other and to increase their support base for greater leverage in politics. This provided an ideological cover for the use of violence to register claims.

This situation was further complicated by the penetration of the green revolution, whose growth created agricultural surpluses which were not converted into an investment in industry. The green revolution was not a total strategy and it did not throw up organic inter-sectoral linkages. The surpluses generated did provide an assured market to consumer goods, but did not provide channels for profitable investment of these surpluses in industry and trade.

Similarly, although the state provided opportunities and access to education, created in turn a large employable work-force, it did not crate conditions and opportunities of employment. Rising unemployment growing disparities of wealth and incomes leading to unequal conditions for availing of opportunities and poverty gave rise to individual and social anger. A sense of deprivation seized vast masses and bred insecurity and fear. It became easy for retrogressive ideologies to flourish in such an atmosphere. In the absence of alternative progressive political and cultural mobilizations, political parties seduced the people by exploiting this situation.

The green revolution reinforced the phenomenon of relating poverty. The high cost of living in Punjab, as compared to Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan from where most of its migrant labour comes, has accentuated the socio-economic crises of the local landless labour. The preference for the low-paid migrant labourers also contributed to new political alignments within the Akali Dal.

Another development was the impact of the green revolution on religious practices and beliefs. In the absence of rational explanations about the riches of some and rags for many, the common man responded to theories of fatalism and superstitious beliefs. The growth of religious fundamentalism had its roots in rapid modernization which was exploited by the likes of Bhindranwale. Thus, cultural and social development could not keep pace with the prosperity brought about by the green revolution.

The green revolution strategy, however, provided a basis for the growth of social tensions. But the economic differentiation within the peasantry and between emerging agrarian interests and urban trading and industrial bourgeoisie, weakened the assertions of a communal based nationality. In other words, the demand for an independent Sikh state could not find a forceful expression in political discourse and was raised as a slogan by a marginal political leadership: mainstream political forces did not articulate the demand for Khalistan.

The demand for Khalistan did not acquire mass support despite the unimaginative and ruthless political and administrative initiatives and the protagonists' brutal and senseless killings. This was because the historical process weakened the communal-based national identity and strengthened the Punjabi sub-national identity. However, this does not imply that the formation of *Khalistan* (not Khalistan identity) can be overruled. In short, the question of Khalistan must be addressed not

on grounds of political and economic feasibility, but on the forces inherent in the social processes which may shape and nurture such an idea.

This situation is also linked to the various identities which are taking shape in South Asia. They are on the one hand an impetus to slogans like Khalistan and on the other, provide conditions for the growth of a larger Punjabi identity transcending territorial boundaries. This could challenge identities based only on religion, and provide a new impetus to those based on language and culture.

The most visible dimension providing support to the so-called Khalistan movement seems to be an external stimulus. This has two inter-related components: one is the problem of rootless emigrant people who could multiply their wealth but were unable to find corresponding social respectability and political power in the country of their origin. It is also argued that hostile Indo-Pakistan relations and growing imperialist penetration in the region are influencing, to a large extent, answers to the 'Khalistan question'. The protagonists of Khalistan hope that the Sikhs will effectively intervene and restructure the geography of the region.

The Khalistan movement may be relatively stronger in USA, UK and Canada, but it merely exists as a slogan within Punjab. It is the demand for greater state autonomy that is the central issue in Punjab politics. The main political party, i.e. Akali Dal, raised this demand in 1973 and it became a movement around 1978. The interactive relationship between state and structural realities reinforced the need for greater autonomy for the regional and sub-nationalities, but the political response to this demand was greater centralisation of power. The concentration of power in individuals has reduced their capacity to resolve or even accommodate social and economic interests. This process makes institutions irrelevant and individual powerless. In a situation of non-fulfilment of genuine and legitimate demands, these individuals are identified as the source of popular discontent and, therefore, the target of assassinating political opponents rather than questioning the basic structure as a result of centralisation of political power in the hands of individuals.

All these factors still persist. The ground reality continues to produce a dwarfed secular Punjabi identity; a blocked economy still finds it difficult to accommodate emerging agrarian interests and create greater employment opportunities, leading to a politics which is not representative, competitive and federal.

Much of the politics in Punjab has been shaped by the conflicts in various class factions of the ruling elite. The basic thrust of this politics during the last decade was *(i)* an appeasement of extremist sections; *(ii)* making democratic methods of interest articulation ineffective and rendering moderate politics irrelevant; *(iii)* negotiating with various political groups for sharing political power without addressing the real issues; *(iv)* undermining the norms of competitive politics by dismissing popularly elected governments and not holding elections. (The elections to the state assembly were postponed on the pretext that voting would be influenced by the gun. Incidentally, parties opposing the elections secured more than 61 per cent of the votes in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections but they still opposed the elections to the state legislatures); and *(v)* after the Akalis boycotted the 1991 state assembly elections, they ceased to be perceived as a threat to legislative politics. This brought about a qualitative shift in politics: consensus against terrorism became a reality.

The excessive use of physical force and frequent misuse of para-military forces to resolve political-economic issues have provided legitimacy to such actions and prevented non-violent tactics, such as fasts. In such a situation, the terrorists in Punjab shared a grievance with the wider community which give them social recognition. Moreover, staged encounters and non-trial of individuals by the courts made a mockery of the judicial system.

Delays in trial and the harassment caused to the innocent, are examples of state malfunctioning and insensitivity. The prevalence of underground economic activity and the cultural affinities of the migrant population of west Punjab with the people in the adjoining villages of Pakistan, accelerated the process of criminalization under a communal environment which soon acquired legitimacy. In a nutshell: a perception of deprivation, the criminalization of politics, lack of representation in the participatory political institutions, and above all, the absence of progressive social and political mobilization gave an impetus to the growth of terrorism in this region.

The strategy adopted by the militants and state was the same: both attempted to acquire legitimacy and outdo the adversary in this process.

In the initial phase, extremist politics derived its legitimacy from the 'Amrit Prachar' movement. A latent reservoir of fervour generated by the use of religion in politics was to shape the new terms of political discourse. In the past this process was encouraged both by Akalis and the Congress. Though it was a dominant trend in the pre-Blue Star Operation days, it persisted till 1990.

In the second phase, the militants used force to acquire legitimacy. A number of panthic edicts like a dress code for the children, a teaching code for the teachers, language, medical, industrial, water, election, gurdwara, Khalsa panchayat, electricity, banking, revenue and civil bureaucracy codes were promulgated by the militants. Their enforcement made the militants unpopular. This phase also saw the humiliation of members of Sikh religious groups by a section of militants, alienating them from their support base. The state, on the other hand, worked towards isolating the militants and appeared more legitimate in the process. Another strategy adopted by the militants was to communalise the situation. The state continued to draw upon the reservoir of mistrust and suspicion existing amongst 'communities' but at the same time responded to the demand for 'stability' raised by the middle class.

Thirdly, the state continued successfully to build up a political consensus against terrorism. On the other hand, the militants were a fragmented group, unable to present a united front.

Fourthly, though foreign support to militancy was available, there was no systematic support for 'Khalistan'.

The consequences of this strategy were that: *(a)* The emphasis was on competing legitimacy and not on legitimacy acquired by involvement of the masses in politics. This alienated the people from the state and the militants, leading them to choose the lesser evil; *(b)* There was a communalisation of social practices by the main actors, thereby undermining constitutional provisions and evading social responsibility; (c) The political consensus that emerged was forced, and not evolved;

and *(d)* the question of human rights was approached from a partisan angle. In the process, society was counter-posed to the state and vice-versa.

Thus, even though 'peace' has returned, the conditions which generated violence still remain. The interaction of a multi-cultural social reality and the mono-cultural nature of the state is fraught with tensions. The new economic policy with its emphasis on globalisation of capital, without ensuring mobility of labour, may provide communal, ethnic or regional cover to such tensions. A transformational political discourse has been replaced by status-quoist politics, marginalising a large section of people. All this is likely to further compound the crisis. A 'structural transformation' of the economy is the specific need of Punjab. The revival of competitive politics and a functioning administration are important conditions for ensuring peace in Punjab.

In conclusion, with the re-emergence of violent forms of protest in the context of a denial of cultural autonomy, distributive economic justice, non-functioning democratic institutions and norms of democratic politics, a greater reliance on the repressive state apparatus cannot be ruled out. Whether peace can survive in such an atmosphere is the question.