CRY FOR AN ENDANGERED HOMELAND?
The Contours of Sikh Diasporic Nationalism Since 1984

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The Indian government’s decision to send armies into the Golden Temple in June 1984 constituted one of the most traumatic experiences for the Sikh community. The destruction of the Akal Takhat and extensive damage to the whole complex of sacred buildings was felt by most Sikhs at the time as nothing less than a declaration of war on the community itself. The government of India justified its action claiming the real issue was not certain demands put by the Akali Dal but the maturing of a “secessionist movement” supported primarily by “overseas Sikhs.” As a reaction to the desecration of the Golden Temple, a Sikh resistance movement began against the Indian state in which over 30,000 Sikhs were killed by the security forces, while an even larger number of families suffered losses and indignities. After twenty-four years the government is still mopping up the debris; compensating the victims of the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi of November 1984, accounting or discounting for over two thousand men who ‘disappeared’ and a few hundred still in prison facing various charges. The fallout of the Indian security forces’ action in the Golden Temple and their subsequent excesses continue to haunt Sikh minds in many ways and the community rapidly acquired the attributes of a persecuted minority.

Unlike the Sikhs of Punjab who were under siege from the Indian security forces with tanks surrounding Sikh villages and helicopters hovering above watching any movements towards the Golden Temple, the unshackled overseas Sikhs took to the streets. On Sunday 3 June 1984 highly distressing scenes were witnessed within most gurdwaras across the world. Many men and women cried openly, others sobbed

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1 There is no agreement over the number of casualties during the decade long fighting between Sikh militant groups and Indian security forces starting in June 1984. The number of Sikhs killed has been reported by different authorities ranging from 30,000 to over 80,000. See Jaijee (1995) and Kaur (2002).

* There is a glossary of terms at the end of this paper.
in silence, feelings of humiliation and defeat piercing their hearts. As the government action was so massive and sudden, so was the Sikhs’ reaction as spontaneous, thrusting mobilisation on the unprepared. On 10 June overseas Sikhs, united as never before, rose in protest and mobilised with the war cry of “Khalistan”—an independent Sikh homeland—with protest marches through London, Vancouver, Toronto, New York, San Francisco and several other cities across the world.

This paper is devoted to the overseas Sikhs’ complex and changing relationship with Punjab, in particular its involvement and support for an independent “Sikh homeland.” The paper provides a description of the overseas Sikhs’ alliance with the land of their origins. It provides some data on how this alliance was transformed into a cry for an independent homeland in June 1984 and how this idea found some sympathy and approval from Sikh migrants dispersed across many countries. The paper draws on the vernacular Punjabi press, creative writings, popular songs, numerous booklets and propaganda materials issued by Sikh groups and associations. The first section examines the Sikh diaspora’s main characteristics, its strength in terms of location, numbers, resources and the elite. The second section examines the nature of the relationship that existed between overseas Sikhs and Punjab during the pre-1984 period. The third section deals with the turmoil which followed the army action in the Golden Temple in June 1984, charting the highly emotional reaction, the formation of new organisations, and how they mobilised their supporters. A further section describes how diasporic Sikh organisations reacted to Punjab’s changed political conditions in the late 1990s, and how they were affected by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in several western countries with a Sikh population. The paper concludes by offering some thoughts on how overseas Sikhs’ relations with their land of origins stands radically changed since 1984, with the idea of a homeland becoming a crucial component of diasporic Sikh imagination and how this imagination was facilitated by the globalisation process and the rapid diffusion of information technology.

The Sikh Diaspora: Some Characteristics

In the absence of any precise figures for the overseas Sikh population, it is generally accepted that currently there are about 1.5 to 2 million Sikhs abroad. Their location is uneven, with three major countries of