

ERIC MARGOLIS



India's griefs

India's prosperous northern province of Punjab appears headed toward civil war between its Sikh majority and Hindu minority. Each day brings new clashes, assassinations, bombings and turmoil. Since February, these clashes have left 400 dead and at least 1,000 people wounded.

This surging tide of violence has been caused by the growing militancy of Sikh fundamentalists who are demanding autonomy or outright independence from India. At the heart of this problem is the definition of religious groups in India.

The government of Indira Gandhi has tried to portray Sikhs, Buddhists and Jans as Hindus, part of an effort to weld the disparate nation together under the mantle of Hindu nationalism.

The Sikhs, descendant like other Punjabis from the original Aryan invaders of north India, have violently rejected attempts to drown their religious and cultural identity in a sea of Hinduism. Sikhism, a blend of Islamism and Hinduism, without the idolatry and caste system of the latter, is a proud, warrior faith that stands distinct from the rest of India.

The present troubles have been accentuated by the emergence of a messianic fundamentalist Sikh leader, Sant Jarnail Bhindranwale. This Rasputin-like figure, with his gaunt features and dark, flowing beard, recalls the "mad mullahs" of British India epics. His calls for the creation of an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, have led to infighting among Sikh factions, and presented Indira Gandhi with her most serious challenge in recent years.

To the outsider, India may appear monolithic. In reality, India has only been a unified nation since 1949; before independence from Britain, India was a dizzying collage of princely states, provinces, principalities and satrapies lacking in any common language, history or sense of nationhood.

Reliance on English

So diverse is India that a dark-skinned Tamil speaker from the south has about as much in common with a fair Punjabi as an Egyptian with a Finn. The present Indian state federal system was created in order to encompass these diverse peoples and regions. Yet today, India, with over 300 different languages and dialects, must still rely on English as its common national language.

Indira Gandhi, in an attempt to create a political dynasty for her second son, Rajiv, has been seeking to bring India's independent-minded state governments under the firm control of her Congress party. Such efforts in the Punjab unfortunately coincided by the unexpected upsurge of Sikh nationalism, creating the present dangerous crisis. This view is disputed by some cynical Indians who maintain that Mrs. Gandhi chose to provoke the Sikhs — and Hindu counteraction — in order to assure a victory for her Congress party in the next election.

So far, attempts by New Delhi to quell the violence in Punjab have backfired. The despatch of predominantly Hindu federal police into the province has only further inflamed the Sikhs and failed to prevent the rising wave of assassinations, bombing and sabotage of vital railroad facilities. Now, Mrs. Gandhi may be confronted by the necessity of sending in the regular army, yet here again she is bedevilled by India's ethnic problems.

Sikhs are foremost a warrior religion, glorying in the manly arts of combat. The invading British found the Sikhs to be the most redoubtable enemies in India; during the Raj, Sikhs became the military elite of the Queen-Empress's imperial armies. Today, Sikhs still occupy an extremely important and disproportionately prominent position in the Indian armed forces.

Should the army be sent into Punjab, Mrs. Gandhi could well face the prospect of mutiny by Sikh officers and units. The refusal of Muslims in the Lebanese army to fight their co-religionists, and its subsequent collapse, is an example that has not gone unremarked in New Delhi.

Dangerous menace

Demands by Sikh militants for the incorporation into an autonomous Sikh state of regions from the neighboring states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh also pose a dangerous menace to the Indian federal state. Changes in one state's borders could set off a chain reaction across India.

Though Indira Gandhi does profit politically from rising Hindu anger over events in the Punjab, she will likely be compelled to take some forceful action to quell Sikh militancy. Otherwise, growing Sikh agitation could threaten the fragile political and ethnic fabric of India. Rising communal violence in the Punjab threatens to ignite a train of violence across ever-volatile India.

Now that New Delhi has charged Pakistan with somehow being behind the Sikh uprising — a baseless claim intended to rally Hindu chauvinists — there also arises the possibility of India's 40 million Muslims being drawn into the fracas. Such an event brings back frightening memories of 1948-1949 when millions died in communal religious fighting.

New Delhi will certainly not tolerate the creation of an independent Sikh state; it will also be unlikely to grant more than token autonomy to the Punjab, lest the other members of the Indian Union seek similar concessions. The proud, anachronistic Sikhs, known as "the lions of Punjab," will thus be likely to continue their violent struggle to free themselves of what they see as oppression by Hindus and the bureaucrats who run India's socialist government.

From the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the Vatican of Sikhism, Bhindranwale and his followers will go on opposing, with their swords and spears, the might of the Indian federal government. (Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)