

# Rocking a shaky boat

**K**halistan. It sounds like one of Rudyard Kipling's fictitious lost kingdoms of the Himalayas. But Khalistan is a very real place, at least to many of India's Sikhs.

On Monday a group of radical Sikhs issued a declaration from Amritsar's Golden Temple, the most holy place of the Sikh religion, proclaiming the creation of the independent state of Khalistan.

Yesterday, Indian paramilitary commandos struck back by raiding at least part of the Golden Temple complex and arresting the extremist Sikh leaders.

The idea of creating an independent Sikh state out of India's federal union may seem implausible to outsiders. Sikhs, after all, represent only a tiny portion of India's vast population. Yet to Sikhs, whose religion, like Islam, is very much a part of daily life, Khalistan seems to offer spiritual and political fulfilment. Since the West accepts the idea of a Jewish state, argue many Sikhs, why not a state for the Sikh faith?

The rest of India's many peoples — and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in particular — look upon the notion of Khalistan with emotions ranging from scorn to horror. India's Congress (I) Party firmly rejects claims that Sikhs are being mistreated and abused in the Punjab. Sikh extremists at the Golden Temple are regarded in New Delhi as dangerous fanatics of the Ayatollah Khomeini school.

The storming of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army last year did not, as many hoped, put an end to Sikh armed extremism.

Instead, Indira Gandhi's assassination by her own Sikh bodyguards suddenly transformed the troubles in Punjab from a local into a national issue. In spite of Rajiv Gandhi's strong efforts to placate discontented Sikhs — a statesman-like

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effort from someone whose mother had just been murdered by Sikhs — unrest has continued to grow. In the past two months alone, 146 people have died in the Punjab's mounting violence. In Punjab, India's breadbasket, Sikhs are randomly killing Hindus; Hindus are beginning to retaliate against the Sikhs.

Sikhs themselves are bitterly divided between those who feel part of federal India and the independence-seeking extremists. Much of the recent violence in Punjab has been directed by extremists against fellow Sikhs described as "traitors."

Now Sikh nationalists are claiming parts of neighboring provinces populated by Hindus. The extremists who proclaimed independent Khalistan even boasted that the new capital of their state was to be Delhi.

What are we to make of this distant conflict whose reverberations are felt within our own Asian community? Will intra-Sikh factional fighting and a nasty little covert struggle between Sikhs and Indian security agents spread to Canadian cities?

Sikhs do have many legitimate grievances. They are a proud, warrior people — among the finest men in Asia, I have always felt — who are afraid of being swamped by India's vast Hindu majority. Yet cooler heads among the Sikhs realize that no government in Delhi would ever allow one of India's federal states to secede.

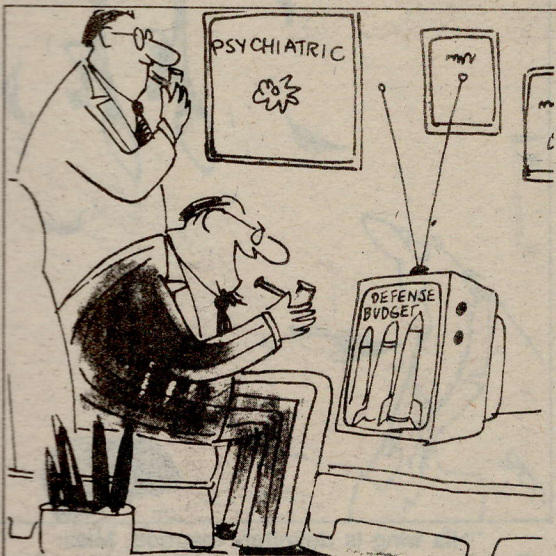
If Delhi permitted the creation of Khalistan, other separatist movements would erupt in Bengal, Nagaland, Kashmir, and perhaps in the great southern state of Tamil Nadu. India's 60 million Muslims might demand equal autonomy. Even the old princely states, such as Mysore and Hyderabad, could demand independence. India as a unified nation is, after all, only 37 years old.

That India, a dazzlingly complex mixture of races, tribes, religions, cultures and peoples, manages to stay together is a remarkable achievement. Imperfect as it may be, India's democratic system is still a triumphant symbol to the Third World of how poverty and social blight do not have to mean despotism.

The stability and national integrity of India must take precedence over the needs, no matter how real, of less than 2% of her population. As observers, we can only hope that somehow Rajiv Gandhi will manage to rally Sikh moderates to India and to defuse Sikh extremists. Canada can help India by not allowing extremists to mount anti-Indian campaigns from here. We can also help the Sikhs by encouraging the government in New Delhi to continue addressing their legitimate grievances.

What must be avoided at all costs is a further escalation in violence. Sparks from the Punjab could ignite volatile India.

## Punch



"Instead of the billions spent on defence, think of the money we could make if we got all those paranoids into therapy."