

Need to Reestablish Links

—Some Discussions With Sikh Communities in North America

The Indian government tries to attribute terrorism in Punjab to a mysterious “foreign hand” that tirelessly conspires to destabilise India. The government wants us to believe that the main reason for Sikh terrorism is instigation by the governments of Pakistan, USA, Canada and Britain. Clearly, this is done to cover up the government’s own mischievous role in generating and fomenting the conflict in Punjab.

Certainly, terrorists have been receiving moral and material support from outside the country. But the support is, in all likelihood, coming not so much from foreign governments as from elements in the Sikh community settled abroad, especially in North America and England. These elements can mobilise enormous reserves of money, weapons and people to enable the terrorists to continue and even deepen the conflict for an indefinitely long period, even without the active support of foreign governments—just as the Irish community in the US has been able to provide support to the terror of the Provisional IRA for decades without let up.

However, all Sikhs settled abroad do not support terrorist killings. There are also strong voices in favour of resolving the crisis through dialogue and consensus. These voices seldom reach us in India because the media oversimplifies and sensationalises the situation, focusing exclusively on those who support terrorist politics.

Last year, I had the opportunity to interact very widely with many people in the Sikh community living in North America where I had initially gone to attend a National Womens Studies Association conference. While there, I was invited to speak in about 20 cities by groups of Indians living in North America. Many of these invitations came from various gurudwara based Sikh organisations. Since my visit, the situation in Punjab, other parts of India and North America has worsened even further. Therefore, this report, based on dialogues with various overseas Sikh groups and individuals, seems to me to be even more relevant today than when it was originally written.

Indians in North America constitute a very prosperous and upwardly mobile migrant community. Sikhs constitute a large proportion of Indians living in North America. According to one estimate, there are about 1,25,000 Sikhs living in the US alone.

Broadly speaking, there were three major waves of Indian immigration to North America. The first small wave were agriculturists, most of them Sikhs from Punjab, who went to Canada and the west coast of the US in the early twentieth century. Slowly, some of them became prosperous farmers. Even today, many illegal immigrants from Punjab go to work as farm labourers on fairly low wages.

The second wave of immigrants were professionals, going to the US after the

mid-60s. At this time, immigration laws were relaxed to encourage large numbers of doctors, scientists and engineers from India and other underdeveloped countries to fill the deficit of skilled labour power in the US. This group too seems to have done remarkably well and is considered one of the most successful recent migrant groups, along with the Koreans and the Chinese.

The third wave in the late 1970s were small sector businessmen and shopkeepers. This group too seems to have been fairly successful. Many of them are importers of handicrafts, carpets and garments or wholesalers in goods like electronics.

Sikhs in North America are now not principally farmers or farm workers but more frequently shopkeepers, tradesmen and

professionals. Not all the migrant Sikhs are from Punjab. Many have migrated from other states of India where their families are settled.

Even though a large majority of overseas Indians have opted for or are seeking US or Canadian citizenship, most of them retain active links with their families in India. It is fairly common for Sikhs in North America to come to India to find spouses for their children. They also constantly help relatives to migrate. Many frequently visit their families in India. Some even invest in property or business in India. Their connection with Punjab and the rest of India is a real and live one, not just defined through religion.

Given the fact that a certain amount of moral and financial support for the various

forms of Sikh resistance in India, including the Khalistani factions, probably comes from some sections of the overseas community, it is important to understand their reactions, grievances and modes of expression.

Critical Juncture

We have not realised that the responses of the Sikh community abroad are varied and complex. We have tended to swallow the stereotype of all Sikhs abroad as fanatically separatist.

No doubt, terrorist groups are trying to establish hegemony, but there are strong voices in favour of a more responsible politics. They desire:

- an honourable settlement of the Punjab dispute;
- the right of states to more autonomy;
- an end of repression and false encounter killings in Punjab;
- punishment of those guilty of the November 1984 massacre.

-release of Jodhpur detenus and others against whom no charges have been framed.

What makes them even more unhappy than just their outrage at government policies is the fact that the official opposition parties have not been sufficiently impartial, and that Sikhs in general have been condemned and isolated. Many told me that the Longowal accord was possible because groups of concerned citizens like People's Union for Civil Liberties, People's Union for Democratic Rights, and Citizens for Democracy, had protested against anti Sikh violence, and had brought it to public attention. They feel that if more people intervene impartially, a settlement can be reached.

The Indian government does not realise that it can ill afford to treat the overseas Sikhs with contempt. It is foolish and unnecessary to alienate this influential and well knit community. If we do not make an attempt at this critical juncture to establish a dialogue and reach an amicable settlement, the situation has the potential to get worse and worse in years to come.

In the absence of a dialogue, and with the growth of the anti minority wave in



Sikh farmworker, Canada, in a protest demonstration : still from the award winning documentary :A Time to Rise" by Anand Patwardhan and Jim Monro

India, exemplified in the rise of organizations who stand by such slogans as "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan", the more responsible Sikh leadership gets demoralised, and the small section that is not open to dialogue gains ascendancy in the community. Every time an Arwal, Meerut or Ahmedabad massacre takes place, fear and uneasiness amongst Sikhs grow.

Just as Hindus are often blinded by the

rhetoric of national unity into justifying such massacres, so also Sikhs get carried away by the rhetoric of Khalistan as an ideally just state, and end up legitimising the murders of Sikhs and Hindus that are committed in its name.

Breakdown of Communication

The breakdown of communication between Hindus and Sikhs abroad is far more complete than it is anywhere in India.

Many Sikhs there told me how, when they went to attend condolence meetings for Mrs Gandhi, Hindus forced them to leave, saying: "How dare you come here after having murdered her?" Thus, while news of some Sikhs having celebrated Mrs Gandhi's death was splashed prominently in the Indian media, other more responsible reactions were not acknowledged but were snubbed.

As if controlled by one computer, most overseas Hindus stopped talking to Sikhs. Most of them unilaterally and suddenly snapped all links with Sikhs, behaving as if each Sikh was personally responsible for the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Many Sikhs narrated with anguish how Hindus with whom they had decades old, extremely close family friendships had altogether stopped associating with them. This was carried to absurd lengths—even a Hindu family whose child had been "adopted" by a Sikh friend, the latter having performed the naming ceremony, stopped talking to her and her family. Several Sikhs were in tears while recounting such experiences.

Sikhs were deeply hurt that their close friends who happened to be Hindus did not even ring up to ask if their families in India were safe during army rule in Punjab and the massacre that took place in North India following Indira Gandhi's assassination.

As one old woman put it: "Our Indian culture teaches us to bury all anger and enmity when there is a death. Somehow, even this little courtesy was not extended when the Sikhs were in mourning." Another said: "My biggest complaint is that most Hindus want us to stop feeling altogether. They want us not to feel hurt when innocent Sikhs are massacred, when the Golden temple is attacked by the army or when all Sikhs are treated as criminals for the actions of a few."

While some Sikhs also behaved as irrationally, it is significant that no Hindu complained that Sikhs have shunned Hindus. It seems that the initiative for a virtual boycott came from the Hindus. This was evident even during my visit. Several

times, Sikhs went out of their way to invite local Hindus to meetings. A few Hindus did attend some of the public meetings. But if the meeting was held in a Sikh home, Hindus would not come.

They have been a few exceptions to this rule, but they faced hostility from other Hindus. For instance, in New York, a couple of young Hindus suggested at the condolence meeting for Mrs Gandhi that a resolution also be passed condemning the massacre of innocent Sikhs. They faced such extreme hostility from fellow Hindus that they had to leave the meeting.

At one place, a South Indian Hindu who informed Sikhs about a condolence meeting for Indira Gandhi was subsequently boycotted by other Hindus who threatened to stop their business dealings with him if he continued associating with the Sikhs.

South Indian Hindus do not seem as involved in the hate-Sikh campaign. But, since interaction between Sikhs and South Indian Hindus has always been minimal, their lack of hostility has not acted as a bridge. As a result, when overseas North Indian Hindus stopped interacting with the Sikhs, the Sikhs felt that the entire Hindu community had turned against them.

This attitude of the Hindus seems to spring from their feeling that India belongs to them, and the minorities are somehow less Indian than Hindus are. Thus, if some Hindus criticise the Indian government, they see themselves as being anti a particular government or party, but if some Sikhs do the same they are dubbed antinational. Most nonresident Indians usually are full of stories about how their talent went unrewarded in India but is now recognised abroad. I found that many overseas Hindus talked about how they were compelled to leave India because the callousness and corruption of the government make it impossible for any decent person to survive with dignity in India. But these same people furiously oppose any criticism of government policies by the Sikhs. Thus, many Hindus who condemn Sikhs for being antinational

do not realise that by considering the country and the government as the exclusive property of the majority community, they contribute to making minorities feel unwanted and alien.

Openhearted Dialogue

I began accepting invitations to *gurudwara* meetings with some trepidation because I felt the Sikh leaders might be inviting me to speak with a limited agenda in mind. In North America, as in India, different political factions are trying to wrest control over *gurudwaras*. Some of these factions are committed to terrorist politics. I was not sure a dialogue would be possible under such circumstances.

They said they wanted to honour **Manushi** for what they considered an impartial report on the November 1984 massacre. They knew I would stand with the Sikh community in its protest against the violation of its human rights and the government's failure to bring any of the November 1984, massacre murderers to book. However, I was not sure whether they were prepared for the fact that I firmly oppose the terrorist politics being pursued by some Sikh groups.

But, in fact, wherever I went, I was treated with typical Punjabi hospitality and made to feel completely at home, no matter how serious my political differences with my hosts. The openness and generosity with which the community argued and discussed these volatile issues was really impressive. Normally, when even minor political differences surface between groups, the dialogue freezes into hostility. In this respect, this was a unique political experience.

Though I openly voiced fundamental differences with the politics of many of the local leaders, they took pains to make space for open discussion, even when they could have easily avoided doing so. For instance, when I reached Vancouver, there was a preliminary meeting with about 30 active members of the local Sikh organisation. Expecting this city to be a hotbed of separatist politics, I clarified my stand at this initial meeting so that the leaders could,

if they so desired, cancel my public speech to the congregation at the *gurudwara*, scheduled for the next day. I did not want to speak on their platform under false pretences. When a group of them hinted that it might be better for me to avoid "controversial" topics, I explained that I did not think it right to censor my opinions for fear of offending some people. They did not seem unduly perturbed at this.

The next day, a Sunday, there were thousands in the *gurudwara*. Far from wanting to cut short my speech, the leaders asked me to speak for at least 45 minutes. After I spoke, I was honoured with a plaque, and then the secretary of the *gurudwara* took over the mike.

There had been absolute silence while I spoke, but the gentleman who spoke next was interrupted by a young man who said aggressively: we don't want too much talk. We want to know whether or not you are for Khalistan." The speaker clarified that he was, and also tried to interpret my stands as favourable to Khalistan. At this point, a few persons in the audience suggested that I had better speak for myself.

I reiterated my opposition to the politics of creating a Khalistan by killing innocent people and forcing the Hindus to leave Punjab. Afterwards, many Sikhs came and congratulated me, saying: "Just as well you said what you did. If any one of us had said what you said, we would have been intimidated into silence."

I kept expecting the leaders to clamp down at any moment, because they might see me as spreading confusion among the followers. But, on the contrary, after the *langar*, they arranged an open forum at which anyone could ask me questions. This turned into an excited exchange spread over nearly three hours. A couple of people from the audience gave fiery speeches defending terrorist politics, but others continued, undaunted, with their questions to me in the spirit of a genuine dialogue rather than confrontation.

Next day, the organisers arranged another big public meeting open to everybody - Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and

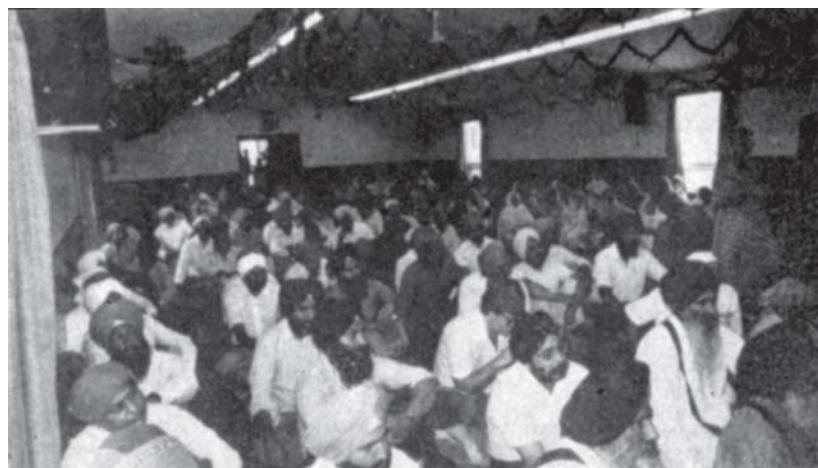
non-Indians. Again the speech was followed by a two hour question and answer session. It was followed by another discussion at someone's house, where people continued to talk and argue in good faith and without cynicism. They arranged for press conferences even though I had told them I would speak against terrorist politics.

This experience, which was fairly typical indicated the hunger for communication that the community feels. Often, discussions went on late into the night. Many people came from long distances to attend these meetings. The intensity with which they participated showed that many of them were seeking

isolation. Some realise that ever since Operation Bluestar, the Sikhs themselves have contributed in some measure to building walls of mistrust and hostility. This has prevented them from reaching out to more responsible and responsive sections of the Hindu community, both in India and abroad.

They repeatedly asked me to inform them when any civil liberties activists from India should be visiting America so that the dialogue could continue. However, they seemed diffident about extending direct invitations, fearing that invitees might consider it unsafe and that the government might obstruct them from accepting.

Some groups among Sikhs are beginning to take more interest in



Section of the audience at gurudwara meeting, Toronto

answers, rather than taking rigidly fixed positions. They are eager for information.

No matter how forcefully I spoke against the terrorist politics of certain Khalistani elements, I continued getting more and more invitations to speak at *gurudwaras*. When I asked some organisers why they allowed me to question their politics from their own platforms, they invariably replied: "You spoke the truth at a time when few non-Sikhs were willing to do so. Therefore, we honour your right to speak the truth as you see it today, even if it differs from our view."

After our discussions I found many more Sikhs willing to acknowledge the need for efforts on their part to end their

international struggles for human rights such as that against apartheid in South Africa. They are trying to raise the question of atrocities on Sikhs as part of a larger human rights platform. They realise that if terrorism continues, they will not be able to convince anyone of their human rights credentials. If this trend of supporting human rights struggles in India — not just human rights of the Sikhs but of all other minorities and disadvantaged groups (including the Hindus in Punjab) can gather strength, it will be a positive advance.

*since then, Prof. Rajni Kothari has been invited by some of these groups

The first aim of terrorists is to force their own community into silence. Terrorism is the politics of a brutal minority in a community imposing its will on a silent majority. Sikh leaders who refuse to succumb are the primary targets of terrorist violence

A good example was the meeting organised by a New York based Sikh women's organisation. They worked hard to ensure that representatives of different Indian community associations in New York, such as Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Dalits, Muslims and many others, attended the meeting. The meeting was remarkably free from hostility between people of different communities. The Sikh women organisers spoke openly against terrorism as well as State violence.

In a few places, after November 1984, certain US based Sikh organisations had come together with organisations of Dalits and other disadvantaged minorities in India on a common platform to discuss issues relating to the status of minorities in India. Some pro Congress(I) Hindus went in a delegation to the Indian Embassy to request that such "ganging up" of "antinational elements" be stopped. It is unfortunate that this positive development of the Sikhs getting sensitised to issues of discrimination against disadvantaged sections of Indian society should be viewed by Hindus as a threat.

Government Discrimination

The Indian government has been discriminating against overseas Sikhs in many ways. The introduction of stringent visa regulations to prevent Sikhs from freely visiting India seems to have had disastrous results. Even in normal times, the Indian bureaucracy is notorious for its high handed functioning. With the new pretext of controlling terrorism, some bureaucrats seem to have found it easy to throw overboard even the minimal restraints that operated earlier I was told by several people that they were not allowed to visit India to attend the funerals of close relatives such as parents.

The few who managed to get visas by pleading and string pulling were harassed no end when they reached India. For the Indian police and bureaucracy, "curbing

terrorism" seems to have become a lucrative business. People told me they had to pay bribes to avoid being arrested on trumped up charges. One person narrated how, while he was going to Punjab from Palam airport in Delhi in a taxi, he was stopped every 20 minutes by the police, ostensibly to check his baggage for weapons, but actually to extort bribes. During the four-hour journey through Haryana, he had to pay bribes more than 20 times.

I was told that there were a few instances of Hindus and Sikhs getting together to collect relief for the victims of the November 1984 riots. But the Indian Embassy officials insisted that it be channelled through the prime minister's relief fund. None of the donors, Hindu or Sikh, wanted this as they did not feel confident that the money would reach the victims.

Embassy officials have been shunning Sikhs. Many Sikhs complained that while the Embassy officials are often present at and involved with the functions organised by the Hindu community, they now refuse to attend functions organised by the Sikhs. Thus, there is considerable substance in the allegation that by treating every Sikh as a real or potential terrorist, the government has further alienated the community.

Unfortunately, many North American Hindus have fallen prey to the politics of mistrusting minorities, and feel that Sikhs are getting what they deserve when the Indian government unleashes anti Sikh propaganda in North America. They do not realise that in an atmosphere already vitiated by racism and anti Asian sentiment, any hatred stirred up against Sikhs will soon spill over into suspicion of all Indians.

Terrorising Their Own Community

Few Sikhs that I met in North America spoke openly against terrorism. This is because the chief target of terrorists in North America are Sikhs themselves. The

Hindus there cannot be targeted so easily. Both Hindus and Sikhs believe the myth that terrorism is directed against Hindus alone. But many Sikhs confessed to me that in several places the *sangat* (congregation) is a hostage to the self styled militants.

This fits in with the logic of terrorist politics. The first aim of terrorists is always to force their own community into silence. Then they can claim to speak on behalf of the community. Terrorism is the politics of a brutal minority within a community imposing its will on the silent majority.

Just as, in India, Akalis and other Sikh leaders who refuse to succumb to terrorist politics are the primary targets of violence, so also, in America, the Sikh community is in a state of siege at the hands of terrorists. It needs to be known that as many Sikhs as Hindus have been killed in Punjab by terrorists.

Many Sikhs see terrorism as a Congress inspired conspiracy to defame the Sikh community. They recount instances of certain terrorists in India who were liquidated in police custody after they confessed to being Congress(I) agents. They give examples of certain Sikh groups and *gurudwaras* in North America which are known to be receiving funds from the Indian government, which wants to control and instigate *gurudwara* politics by these means. These Sikhs were very critical of Congress(I)'s role in *gurudwara* elections and politics, particularly since the party pretends to decry mixing of religion with politics.

However, I found that they had no satisfactory answer to my question: "Why is it that even some of those who think terrorism is a Congress inspired game to defame and destroy the Sikhs, end up apologising for it as the response of aggrieved Sikhs to the misdoings of the Congress government?"

Terrorism cannot simultaneously be a legitimate response of certain Sikhs as well as a Congress inspired game. Those Sikhs who are convinced it is the latter should be the most determined in its condemnation. If some of them justify and support it as the response of aggrieved members of a

community then they have to assume full responsibility for the mad and self destructive actions of the terrorists who under the guise of acting as defenders of Sikhism have been killing not just Hindus but also as many Sikhs, not sparing even little children.

Among the militants in North America, there are many factions fighting for control over gurudwaras. Some Sikhs alleged that millions of dollars had been extorted and no one dared demand any accounting, even though they suspected mismanagement.

Another complication is the widespread infiltration of Congress (I) agent provocateurs into *gurudwaras*. Everyone suspects everyone else of being a government agent. In order to prove that they are not agents but are committed to the cause of the community, leaders try to outdo one another in militant rhetoric. People mistrust this rhetoric because they know the agents indulge in it to provoke trouble. However, they dare not stop using it, for fear of being called traitors to the community or worse still, congress agents.

One prominent leader explained the dilemma. In a public meeting he presented himself as a staunch Khalistani. But when I met him informally later, he admitted that Khalistan was not a viable proposition. He said the demand for it was just a way of expressing anger against the Central government. His reason for using a language in which he does not believe was: "If I don't use this language, the militants will snatch the leadership from people like me. So we have to use this language to keep the militants at bay. Internally, we are trying to restrain them from doing crazy things."

It is important to realise that for many Sikhs abroad, Khalistan is a tactical position, a slogan raised in the hope that pressure of this kind will make the Centre concede the genuine demands of Punjab.

There is also a distinction between supporting distinction between being a Khalistan and supporting terrorism or violence. Some combine the two positions.



Representatives of various Indian communities in New York at a reception by Sikh Women's Organisation

But there are also many pious Sikhs who oppose the killing of unarmed people, but support Khalistan because they sincerely envision it as a place where a peaceful, self-reliant and dignified human life will be possible. This trend is also visible in some sections of the World Sikh Organisation which, in its constitution, commits itself to fighting for Khalistan by nonviolent means. Within this organisation, different people speak in different voices, and the character of local chapters is decided by the inclinations of local leaders.

Some are trying to organise a lobby to put pressure on the Indian government by mobilising support from the Canadian and US governments. This seems to be a foolish strategy unlikely to yield the results they desire. Also, none of the WSO leaders is able to explain how Khalistan can be created without forcing Hindus out of Punjab and Sikhs out of the rest of India and without resorting to violence.

Many Sikhs harbour the illusion that by presenting their support for terrorism as being a simple consequence of the violation of their community's human rights they will be able to mobilise support in North America. However, this is not happening. On the contrary, given the already existing atmosphere of racial prejudice against Asian immigrants, their

political activity is further strengthening prejudice against Indians in general and Sikhs in particular.

It is impossible for the Sikh community to appear as defenders of human rights while important segments of the community continue to be involved in supporting the politics of blowing up planes, massacring innocent people and creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in the gurudwaras. For instance, the blowing up of the Air India plane provoked as strong a reaction in Canada against the Sikh community as it did in India.

Most Canadians are extremely resentful of the violence resulting from the activities of certain Sikh groups, not out of a concern for India but because they are genuinely afraid that the politics of violence will have an inevitable spillover in Canada. The fear is not misplaced. There have been instances of intergroup rivalries taking on a violent form as various Sikh groups compete with each other for hegemony. The forcible take over of certain gurudwaras by terrorist groups has created an atmosphere of fear and tension with threats of violence constantly hanging in the air.

This fear and resentment of Canadians against terrorist politics is reflected in the tightening of immigration laws in Canada

and repeated demands that they be made even more stringent for Asians. Indians were never particularly welcome in Western countries but now there is a definite hostility to allowing Sikhs into these countries, whether as refugees or as immigrants, legal or illegal. Recently, when 174 Sikhs landed on Canadian shores illegally, a massive furore began, demanding that they be denied refugee status.

So far, Sikhs have been very successful immigrants wherever they went. But now, because of the indiscriminate violence terrorist groups have unleashed, they seem to be jeopardising the economic and political future of Sikhs in Europe and America.

Misinformation Campaign

The North America Sikhs are more prone to exaggerated militant rhetoric than the Indian Sikhs. One reason is inadequate information. Because the Indian press succumbed to censorship with regard to army rule in Punjab, and slavishly justified certain government actions such as the Operation Blue Star, its credibility has been badly shaken in the eyes of the North American Sikhs.

Most of them believe that what they read in Indian newspapers is censored information. So they rely more on rumour and have a distorted picture of what is happening in India. Many of them believed that the issues of *Manushi* which carried the report on the November 1984 massacre, and the PUCL-PUDR report on the same event had been banned in India, whereas this was not the case. Similarly, many were convinced that anyone who spoke against the government would invariably end up in jail.

Many also believe that no community in India has been persecuted the way the Sikhs have and that the Sikhs did not receive any sympathy from other Indians. This belief also results from lack of information. The fact is that several communities and regions of India have suffered more brutal oppression for many years, and received much less sympathy from other Indians, including Sikhs. Large

parts of the Northeast have been subjected to military rule, suffered massacres, desecration of places of worship and mass arrests, but have received far less of a sympathetic hearing than the Sikhs in Punjab. The role of the Congress government in organising the massacre of Sikhs in November 1984 was condemned openly by many more people than are willing to condemn the much more regular violence inflicted on the Muslims in different parts of India. Many more non Sikhs also actively organised relief for the victims of the 1984 massacre than non Muslims usually have done for Muslim victims of similar violence.

Also, it is much easier to give moral and other support to terrorist politics if one is sitting at a comfortable distance of 12,000 miles from the battleground than it is to pick up a gun oneself when one knows that the consequences of being caught are brutal torture and death. Anyone who espouses terrorist politics in India does so at some personal risk but the risk element is much reduced for supporters abroad.

A few people expressed open recognition of this fact. The wife of a committed Khalistani told me : "I ask all these people (including my husband) who are talking of Khalistan: 'Are even your own sons willing to go and live in that Khalistan? All of you want comfortable lives in America. Then why do you jeopardise the safety of millions of people in Punjab and other parts of India?'"

Another woman, a doctor, was even more outspoken. She said: "I will believe in the sincerity of those demanding Khalistan if they are willing to send one son each to go and fight for it or, better still, if they go themselves and spend one year implementing their militant politics in Punjab. It is all very well to talk so militantly, sitting comfortably here, and make others, most of them from poor families, shed their blood. Sikhs have always prided themselves on their bravery. Where is the bravery in applauding the murders of innocent people, encouraging others to take to violence, and risking the

lives of millions of people of your own community, while you sit safe and comfortable so far away?"

Many Sikhs remarked that usually Sikh young men from poorer families are the ones who actually execute the terrorist politics in India even though the money bags are those who have made their fortunes in America.

It is ironical that even though most North American Sikhs keep asserting that they have little or no faith in the Central government, they keep waiting for the same government to provide a solution and keep reproaching it for failing to do so. They are making no attempt to work out more people oriented solutions. I found them resistant to openly acknowledging that though the militants claim they are fighting the Central government, their politics and rhetoric are actually leading their community not only into a deadly conflict with non Sikh Punjabis but also into a bitter internal war within the Sikh community.

Desire For Peace

The sentiment for peace is not lacking. In Baltimore, a Sikh gentleman tried hard to persuade me to help organise a peace march of Sikh and Hindu women to the Indian embassy to appeal for an end to terrorist killings and State repression. Many others were keen that I address meetings in every gurudwara of North America and help initiate a dialogue between the Hindus and the Sikhs.

My assessment is that even many of those who talk of Khalistan would in fact be satisfied with other honourable solutions. Many stated that the Congress party had deliberately destroyed the goodwill between the Sikhs and the Hindus, and that replacement of the Congress at the centre by a more reasonable government would automatically ease the situation.

Even the devout worshippers of Bhindranwale acknowledge that he was originally a puppet set up by Mrs Gandhi to divide the Akali Dal. The main reason they revere him is that they see him as a martyr who died defending the Golden Temple.

Dynasty change at the Centre and decentralisation of decision making are two major issues. Many said what they really want is the kind of federal structure that exists in the USA.

Most Sikhs do realise the dangers and pitfalls of Khalistani politics. I heard many saying: "How can we be desirous of massacring Hindus? One leader who uses Khalistani rhetoric commented: "If this bloodshed does not stop now, it will never stop — not even if Khalistan comes into existence. Sikhs will give birth to not just one Khomeini but many Khomeinis — because they won't put up with any one dictator."

Once they feel reassured that it is possible for Sikhs to live in India as equal citizens, with honour and dignity, many would reconsider their stand on Khalistan. At present, they feel deeply hurt at being completely boycotted by the Hindus. The attack on the Golden Temple, the massacre of thousands of innocents in November 1984 for which not a single person has been brought to book, and the hostility almost every individual has suffered at the hands of the Indian government machinery simply because of being Sikh, have become symbols to them of injustice meted out to them as a community.

What Can Be Done?

Overseas Sikhs have the ability and the means to turn the Punjab conflict into a prolonged bloody civil war by lending moral and material support to terrorist groups in Punjab, just as some of the descendants of Irish immigrants in America have done in northern Ireland. All those who wish to avoid further advances toward a civil war type situation in Punjab need to make the effort to understand the mood, the viewpoints and the grievances of the Sikh community overseas.

The Hindus living in India and abroad need urgently to rebuild the numerous earlier bridges of communication, to end the isolation of the overseas Sikh community. We need to demonstrate to them that we in India are capable of resolving the conflict by sensible negotiation within a democratic framework that and that in this country minorities can

live with dignity. To demonstrate this, we need to:

- * unconditionally support Sikhs when their human rights are violated and fight to end government participation in such violations;

- * vigorously demand punishment of those guilty of the November 1984 massacre of the Sikhs;

- * ensure that no person is detained without legal and Constitutional procedures, and end torture in police detention and killings in staged police encounters. Every detained person should be entitled to a speedy, fair and open trial, following due legal processes;

- * take the issue of regional autonomy seriously, instead of just assuming that all those who ask for decentralisation of power are out to weaken the nation. We need to realise the dangers of the myth created by the

should first be taken in Punjab to reach a regional solution acceptable both to Sikh and Hindu Punjabis living in Punjab.

At the same time, it is crucial that overseas Sikhs should take an uncompromising stand against terrorist torture and killing of innocent people. Since a large part of the funds, weapons and support for terrorist activities is allegedly coming from the overseas community, a decisive shift of their support away from the terrorists would help a more credible Sikh leadership to emerge in India as well as overseas. This new leadership would then be in a better position to press for an honourable solution. The terrorists are only providing legitimacy to the Congress (I) government's policy of indiscriminate repression and further authoritarian centralisation.

Even though many of the Sikh grievances against the Central government

Sikhs need to stop acting as the owners of Punjab; Hindus need to stop acting as the owners of India. Only then can a peaceful settlement be reached

Congress (I) that any opposition to its authoritarian rule at the Centre is automatically antinational;

- * demand the abrogation of all legislation which places vast arbitrary powers in the hands of the government, for example, the National Security Act, Anti Terrorist and the Disturbed Areas Acts;

- * bring together all Punjabis — Hindus, Sikhs and others — to negotiate among themselves, through their own chosen leaders, a mutually acceptable solution to the present crisis. They could then jointly press this solution upon the Central government with the support of all those searching for a peaceful and just resolution; and

- * demand an end to President's rule in Punjab because Central rule is the biggest obstacle in the way of solving the Punjab conflict.

Sikhs need to stop acting as the owners of Punjab; Hindus need to stop acting as the owners of India. Only then can a peaceful settlement be reached. Instead of waiting for the Central government to come up with a "national" solution, an initiative

are perfectly genuine, killing innocent Hindus and Sikhs and trying to create Khalistan by a new murderous partition type terror in India is no solution. This has, in fact, only helped the Congress (I) carry on its divide and rule politics. Terrorism must be stopped unilaterally to make any negotiations feasible.

The overseas Sikhs have a special responsibility in ensuring that they do not, by their ill informed actions, jeopardise the well being of Sikhs living in India. It is easier for them to confront terrorist politics in North America, because even terrorists are aware that they cannot as easily go on a rampage in America as in Punjab. Therefore, it is relatively easier to isolate them there and deny them legitimacy.

If they can at least neutralise them there, they will more credibly be able to mobilise general opinion abroad against the violation of human rights of Sikhs in India. This will also help bring into focus the real issues in Punjab, such as the need for decentralisation of power. Finally, they need to inform themselves better of the situation in India, and to base their political thinking on facts instead of mythology.