

Khalistan movement

February 25, 2023

In news— Several followers of Amritpal Singh, a radical preacher and pro-Khalistan leader, clashed violently with police outside Ajnala police station near Amritsar.

A brief history of Khalistan movement-

- The Khalistan movement is a **fight for a separate, sovereign Sikh state in present day Punjab** (both India and Pakistan).
- Over the years, it has survived in various forms, in various places and amongst different populations.
- **The movement was crushed in India following Operation Blue Star (1984) and Operation Black Thunder (1986 and 1988)**, but it continues to evoke sympathy and support among sections of the Sikh population, especially in the Sikh diaspora in countries such as Canada, the UK, and Australia.
- **The origins of the movement have been traced back to India's independence** and subsequent Partition along religious lines.
- The Punjab province, which was divided between India and Pakistan, saw some of the worst communal violence and generated millions of refugees: Sikhs and Hindus stranded on the west (in Pakistan) rushed to the east, whereas Muslims in the east fled westward.
- Lahore, the capital of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's great Sikh Empire, went to Pakistan, as did holy Sikh sites including Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism.
- While most Sikhs found themselves in India, they were a small minority in the country, making up around 2 per cent of the population.
- **The political struggle for greater autonomy began around the time of Independence, with the Punjabi Suba Movement**

for the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state.

- The States Reorganisation Commission, in its 1955 report, rejected this demand, but in 1966, after years of protest, the state of Punjab was reorganised to reflect the Punjabi Suba demand.
- The erstwhile Punjab state was trifurcated into the Hindi-speaking, Hindu-majority states of Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, and the Punjabi-speaking, Sikh-majority Punjab.

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution-

- **The Punjabi Suba movement had galvanised the Akali Dal which became a major force in the new Sikh-majority Punjab**, and gave the Congress hard fights in the Legislative Assembly elections of 1967 and 1969.
- But in 1972, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's resounding victory in the 1971 Lok Sabha elections, the Akali Dal's performance in the state was underwhelming.
- The party met at the sacred town of Anandpur Sahib, the birthplace of the Khalsa, in 1973, and released a list of demands that would guide the political path of the Akali Dal.
- Among other things, the **Anandpur Sahib Resolution demanded autonomy for the state of Punjab**, identified regions that would be part of a separate state, and sought the right to frame its own internal constitution.
- The Akali Dal was trying to cash in on the growing demand for an autonomous state which had emerged alongside the Punjabi Suba movement and had gone global by 1971 – when an advertisement appeared on The New York Times proclaiming the birth of Khalistan.
- **While the Akalis themselves repeatedly made it clear that they were not demanding secession from India, for the Indian state, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was of grave concern.**

What was Operation Blue Star?

- Operation Blue Star was the codename of a military operation which was carried out by Indian security forces between 1 and 10 June 1984 in order to remove Damdami Taksal leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers from the buildings of the Golden Temple, the holiest site for Sikhs which is located in Amritsar, Punjab, India.
- By 1984, the situation in Punjab had become increasingly untenable for the government.
- Bhindranwale had given a call to arms, and instances of violence against Hindus as well as government officers had become common.
- In 1983, a senior police officer was shot dead after praying at the Golden Temple and his body was left to decay in the sun, while the local police station did nothing – perhaps both out of fear and sympathy to Bhindranwale's cause.
- **Indira Gandhi took the fateful decision to order the Indian Army to flush out militants from the Golden Temple and neutralise Bhindranwale.**
- **Operation Blue Star began on June 1, 1984,** but due to fierce resistance from Bhindranwale and his heavily armed supporters, the Army's operation became larger and more violent than had been originally intended, with the use of tanks and air support.
- The image of Indian Army tanks shelling the holiest shrine of Sikhism was traumatic, and the very large number of civilian casualties that occurred during the operation added to the trauma.
- **While the operation was ostensibly successful in its aims – Bhindranwale was killed and the Golden Temple was freed of militants – it gravely wounded the Sikh community** around the world. It also galvanised the demand for Khalistan.
- **On October 31, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was**

assassinated by two Sikh bodyguards.

- This triggered the worst communal violence since Partition – even according to conservative estimates, over 8,000 Sikhs were massacred in massive anti-Sikh street violence.
- **A year later, Sikh nationalists based in Canada blew up an Air India flight killing 329 people.** They claimed that the attack was to “avenge Bhindranwale’s killing”.
- Punjab saw the worst violence, becoming the hub of a long drawn out insurgency that lasted till 1995.