

Western perception of India: "they riot and kill each other"

by Stephen Mitchell

It is absurd, and perhaps morbid, to suggest that one tragedy can actually outweigh another, but it is often this principle that determines the size and prominence of newspaper headlines.

It was also this principle that determined how many North Americans reacted to the November, 1984 New Delhi massacre of 5,000 to 10,000 demonstrating Sikhs by Indian state authorities.

There is nothing particularly commonplace about a massacre of this proportion. Take even the conservative estimate of people killed at the demonstration. Five thousand people constitute a small town, a sell-out crowd at Massey Hall or the approximate number of students at Lakehead University.

So why was the massacre so quickly accepted and forgotten outside the Third World?

Last week, at a seminar on human rights violations in the northern Indian state of Punjab, Howard Adelman, director of York's Centre for Refugee Studies with concern about a deeply-rooted Western dismissal of the Third World as "an irrational one to which we don't belong."

Adelman was seated beside a clear-eyed and resolved Sikh named Dal Bara Singh Gill.

"There's a common perception we have here," Adelman explained, "and it goes something along the lines of: 'well, that's the way they do things in India—they riot and kill each other.'" The irony was not lost on Gill, who nodded soberly.

Gill, an advocate as well as general secretary of the Punjab Human Rights Organization (PHRO), is in the middle of a world tour, addressing Sikh nationalists, Amnesty International chapters, members of parliament and university students. A seminar was arranged around Gill's visit to York so the Centre of Refugee Studies could pledge its commitment to the goals of the PHRO.

The Punjab-Indian conflict is not a simple issue to encapsulate. Punjab nationalists believe India is denying them their right of self-determination, as stated in the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. In last week's seminar, Gill noted the democratic rights and civil liberties of the Sikhs have been "constantly under attack for the past six years."

This six-year span has seen an escalation of events. First, the Indian government, fearing possible revolutionary activity, banned assembly in The Golden Temple, a cornerstone of the Sikh religion. Next, rising conflicts led to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by two Sikh nationalists. Finally, the Indian military unleashed its force in a massacre that would leave thousands dead.

Gill is among the many Sikhs who are convinced the massacre was organized, engineered and executed by high-ranking members of Indian Congress, and carried out by police and military squads.

The Indian government, Gill added, has followed through by attempting to silence the Punjab uprising with "undeclared political censorship," the curbing of the powers of Sikh lawyers, and the enactment of special laws that impose a state of emergency in Punjab "whereby the right to life and personal liberty . . . has been taken away."

The Sikh dignitaries touring with Gill echoed the PHRO general secretary's concern about the negative Sikh image media systems are spreading in North America. PHRO International Relations expert N.S. Chahal, at one point in the seminar, turned to Adelman and said, "You—as an individual, and as a society—are getting the common view of what is happening. And that is most unfortunate."

The issue of self-determination," Adelman mused at one point, "is poorly developed in international law."

His point is well taken. Self-determination is an issue that is part human rights and part politics. Human rights are almost universally agreed upon, if not practiced, and politics are characterized opinions.

Perhaps, Adelman said, it is counter-productive to mix human rights and politics in debate. If a self-determination movement is adopted as a human rights cause, how do we reconcile ourselves with the individuals inside the movement who use violence?

The Canadian government has opted not to wrestle with this distinction. Canadian Sikhs have not been granted access to Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Joe Clark—a governmental choice Adelman called "fundamentally

wrong." It was speculated at the seminar that Ottawa might just consider an endorsement of Sikh self-determination to be an endorsement of terrorism.

Looking at the issue from a local perspective, Adelman informed Gill that York's Scott Library was notably lacking information on Punjab nationalism. Adelman produced from his bag a book called *Sikh Separatism*. As a "both empathetic and detached" view of the conflict, this book was the most thoroughly-researched piece of information he could find on the subject.

"I think what we have to do is raise the debate [for or against Sikh independence] to the level of knowledge rather than opinion," Adelman said.

It is the curse of any outlawed movement that its leaders are looked upon as advocates, and not analysts. Midway through the seminar I was handed a small booklet. The title, *The Fascist Offensive in Punjab*, glared up at me. I was holding a PHRO report, stocked with a numbing series of tortures, killings, detentions and disappearances. I read as much as I could and I was not cynical about the validity of the reports. I trusted them as I trust the 'Urgent Action' updates of Amnesty International.

But the word "fascist" has a connotation closely linked with expression of opinion, not fact. At the end of the seminar, all present agreed there would soon have to be a foundation of expertise on the issue of Sikh separatism, so that those of us outside Punjab could have more information on which to base our opinions.

If India were to grant Punjab the privilege of self-determination, the new nation would embrace a population with a 62 per cent Sikh majority. Hindus would account for 26 per cent and the remaining 12 per cent would be made up of Muslims and Christians. One unanswered question dogged me throughout the seminar: Would the new Sikh-run Punjab embrace a minority group of the religion from which it had so bitterly torn itself away?

Chahal leaned toward me and spoke softly, looking directly into my eyes: "Yes," he said. "Before 1849, a state of Punjab existed, a British protectorate, with Hindu and Muslim and Christian people included.

"Sikhs are a tolerant people."



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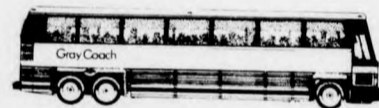
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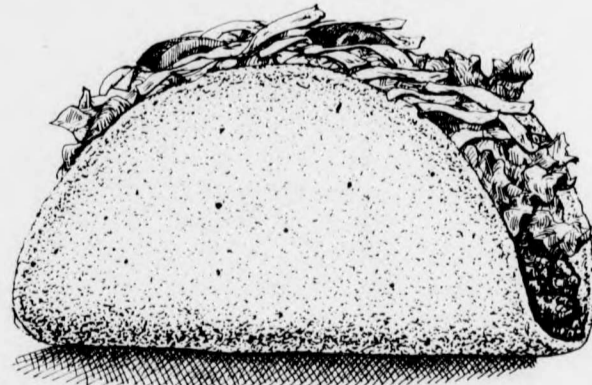


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