The Resurgence of Bhindranwale's Image in Contemporary Punjab

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The Resurgence of Bhindranwale’s Image in Contemporary Punjab

ABSTRACT

This article will examine the reemergence since 2008 of the public imagery in Punjab of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who symbolises a Sikh separatist movement against the Indian state which took shape in the 1980s. The rebellion, characterised in the mainstream urban-based Indian media as an extremist Khalistan movement, had its strongest years of support in the rural areas of Punjab from 1984 until the early 1990s. However, over twenty-five years later, the symbol of Bhindranwale, who was killed in the Indian army’s Operation Blue Star, has reemerged. The “bazaar economy” has provided a new canvas for the imagery of Bhindranwale, whose images are today visible in commodified forms available for purchase in shops and market stalls in Punjab. This article analyses this resurgence as a public response to contemporary politics in Punjab and locates the circulation of Bhindranwale through souvenir-like goods within the region’s ‘economic base of place’ (Urry 1995) in which the consumer market has enabled a conduit through which identity and political culture can be both purchased and displayed. The article examines the backdrop of his emblematic reemergence within the as it relates to the collective memory of 1984 and the meanings of Bhindranwale’s legacy and symbolism for the current times.

Key words: Green Revolution, India, Punjab, Khalistan, Sikh separatism
Introduction

1984 is a milestone in both historical and contemporary terms for Punjab. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947-84), one of the most well known Sikh leaders of the 20th century, died in June 1984 resisting the Indian army's entry into the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In October 1984 the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards followed by attacks upon Sikhs in Delhi and other parts of India in a communally charged response to her death. To some, Bhindranwale is remembered as a martyr to a valiant movement which stood up to Indian state dominance. To others, he represents the beginning of a dark period in Punjab's recent history of militancy, violence and state repression. Often referred to as ‘the killing fields’ by human rights interest groups, rural Punjab’s experience of human rights abuses and state repression during this time was severe and has been documented and commented upon extensively (Kumar et al, 2008: Pettigrew, 1995).

Despite recent reflections on Sikh separatism and the Khalistan movement as a remnant of the past (Jodhka, 2001; Van Dyke, 2009), the reemergence of Bhindranwale’s imagery in contemporary Punjab hints to his continued appeal decades after his death. The scheduled hanging of Balwant Singh Rajoana in March 2012 in Patiala gave a distinctive sense that the period after Operation Blue Star and the Delhi anti-Sikh ‘riots’ has far from been erased from the collective memory. Instead, the case triggered a mass mobilisation through a ‘bandh’ (strike) which resulted in a movement which continues to resonate in Punjab and the Sikh diaspora through various organisations and the ‘Pledge Orange’ Campaign. This article, however, wishes to put the reemergence of Bhindranwale’s image within its
historical context in order to understand such subsequent signs and expressions.

As Telford (1992) points out, the multifarious character of the Sikh community in the rural and urban contexts has presented opportunities over time for leaders and political interests both to attempt to consolidate Sikh identity and to contest it from within, highlighting various social cleavages and structural reasons behind the tensions between regional Punjabi/Sikh aspirations and the overly centralised Indian politico-economic system. It is likely that these tensions will keep on contributing to divergent portrayals of Bhindranwale who is seen both by his supporters as well as opponents as the most inspirational figure behind regional Sikh aspirations. These aspirations also have a role to play in tensions which have developed over time in Punjab society. The region was annexed by the British army in 1849 and was made a part of Britain’s colonial empire in India. When India became independent in 1947, Punjab was partitioned along with Bengal with Kashmir remaining a disputed territory until today. East Punjab with a Hindu and Sikh majority population became a part of India and the Muslim majority West Punjab became a part of Pakistan. When the Indian Punjab was reorganized after independence as a Punjabi speaking state in 1966, the Sikhs for the first time became a majority religious group in that Punjabi speaking province. According to the 2001 census, Sikhs are about 60% of Punjab’s population but merely 2% of India’s total population (Govt. of Punjab, 2008:94-95). This duality of Sikh location - a minority in India but a majority in Punjab- remains a continuing source of political conflict and tension between Sikh majority Punjab and Hindu majority India. Punjab’s industrial backwardness but agricultural advancement that enables Punjab to be the main producer and supplier of food in India adds the economic dimension to the tensions between Punjab and the federal centre (P. Singh, 2008).
Bhindranwale thus entered Punjab’s and India’s historical process as a part of the rise of religious revivalism in Punjab linked with the cultural changes taking place there as a result of the process of modernisation of agriculture and rural society in the 1960s and 1970s. It could be said that Bhindranwale’s appeal in the late 1970s and early 1980s was heightened by a combination of the identity politics of religion and language alongside a consciousness of conflict over political governance between the central government of India and the state of Punjab. Bhindranwale’s emergence in the late-1970s coincided with important shifts in the economy and culture of Punjab, especially in its rural segment.

Green Revolution, Capitalist Modernisation and Bhindranwale’s Social Reformism

The Green Revolution strategy of agricultural development in the 1960s led to the extension and deepening of the capitalist mode of production in Punjab agriculture. The commodification of social life as a consequence of increasing capitalist modernization in Punjab’s rural society resulted in several forms of fissures in social practices and cultural norms. In response to this socio-cultural crisis, various ideological currents emerged with two in particular dominating the discourse on social change in relation to economic development: a radical Marxism-inspired vision of an alternative collectivist socialist life and a religious revivalist vision of a ‘pure’ Sikh way of life. These two visions, which had been engaged with one another for decades, became increasingly exclusive of one another during this time. The radical vision became especially more popular with Sikh students in the universities and the professional medical and engineering colleges. Many of these students were the first generation of their rural families to
enter higher education. The radicalization of student and youth movements all over the world in the late 1960s also contributed to the spread of Marxist ideas among the educated Punjabi rural youth. The specific form this Marxist influence in Punjab took was the emergence of the Maoist Naxalite movement in Punjab from the late 1960s and early/mid-1970s. The theoretical and strategic importance attached to the peasantry as a revolutionary class in the Maoist thought appealed to the rural economic and cultural background of Punjabi educated youth. Further, the Maoist emphasis on ‘armed struggle’ gelled with the Sikh historical tradition and contributed further to the valorization of Sikh identity. The Maoist emphasis on ‘armed struggle’ gelled with the Sikh tradition and contributed further to the valorization of Sikh identity. While the Maoist movement was crushed through brutal state terror by the mid-1970s (Judge, 1992), its intellectual and political legacy did leave some impact on Punjab’s political culture.  

The egalitarianism derived from the Marxist tradition coexisted with that of the Sikh tradition. This coexistence on one hand radicalized the intellectual vocabulary of the Punjabi Sikh intelligentsia and on the other contributed to strengthening Sikh identity with egalitarianism lying at its centre. Maoist internationalism, by weakening the ideological appeal of Indian nationalism among the Punjabi Sikh intelligentsia, made its own indirect contribution to the strengthening of a separate Sikh identity. It is not surprising, therefore, that later on some activists from the Naxalite tradition either joined or aligned with a section of the Sikh militants who campaigned for a separate Sikh homeland of Khalistan.

The collapse of the Naxalite movement in the early/mid-1970s was followed by the emergence of religious revivalist currents, though there is no direct causal link between the two. The indirect link, however, points to the political vacuum created
by the defeat of the Naxalite movement. The Sikh religious vision which had remained dormant in the previous decade seemed to acquire added attraction in the new context. A number of Sikh revivalist groups started preaching the simple Sikh ethical way of life over the decadent consumerist style of life penetrating the rural society of Punjab as a result of the degenerative forms of capitalist modernization. ‘This degenerative form of modernization expressed itself in the menacing spread of alcoholism, smoking, drug-addiction, pornographic literature, lewd music and vulgar cinema’ (Singh, 1987: 169). The religious revivalist groups found a responsive audience among the rural Sikh population when they launched a moral and ideological crusade against this degenerative form of capitalist modernization.

Though many organizations and individuals played a crucial role in the Sikh revivalist movement, it was Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who, after becoming the head of the Sikh seminary Damdami Taksal on August 17, 1975 (D. Singh, 2003: 50-51; Darshi, 2006:32; G. Singh and S. Singh, 2005: 130), came to occupy the central role and eventually to symbolize the Sikh revivalist movement. His movement went through a number of phases: first, a moral, humanist and egalitarian phase when he focused on preaching against vulgar consumerism and casteism (Singh, 1987: 170-171); second, a Sikh ‘orthodoxy’ phase during which he collided with a ‘heterodox’ sect called the Nirankaris in 1978 in Amritsar when over a dozen Sikhs were killed in a Sikh-Nirankari clash (Grewal, 1998: 216; Dhillon, 1992: 143); third, an anti-Hindu phase when he directed his tirade against an urban-based Hindu press baron, Jagat Narain, who had supported the Nirankari campaign against the Sikhs (Deol, 2000, chapter 6) and finally his insistence that the central government must accept the provisions of the Anandpur Sahib
Resolution, an important historical document framed in 1973 outlining the regional aspirations of Punjab and the Sikhs (Sandhu, 1999: 476-77). It was in the last two stages that he started to become portrayed in the urban-based Indian media as anti-Hindu and anti-centre.

The capitalist modernisation of Punjab’s agriculture in the mid-sixties compressed into a very short time-span the enormous changes taking place at the level of economy, society and culture.\(^9\) The techniques of production were revolutionised, social relations were restructured, and the social cultural ethos was altered. While there was an increase in agricultural output, the benefits of the green revolution were not experienced proportionately or evenly (Telford, 1992). Thus, modernisation through the green revolution in Punjab can be characterized, in Marxist terms, as having two forms: progressive and degenerative. The progressive form expressed itself in the erosion of obscurantist beliefs and values; and modern ideological influence spread at a fast speed among young Sikhs, especially students from rural backgrounds. In particular, during the decade of mid-sixties to mid-seventies, the Marxist influence was widespread among the college and university students.

However in contestation with left-wing currents, religious revivalism was becoming hegemonic in rural Punjab.\(^9\) This hegemonic influence of religious revivalism worked through the political economy of the household in rural Punjab. Based on his field work in rural Punjab in the 1970s and the 1980s, Singh (1987) noted, documented and analysed this phenomenon by looking at the differentiated nature of the impact of religious revivalism on children, women and men in rural households:
It is not surprising that two groups that most actively responded to and joined religious revivalism’s attack on the degenerative form of modernisation were children and women. Children and women were relatively free from the spread of degenerative form of modernization but were the worst sufferers as a result of the male adults’ moral degeneration. The most ardent followers of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in the first phase of his rising popularity were children and women. Invariably, children and women formed a bloc within the family against drunken and drug-addicted fathers/brothers/husbands. The morally degenerate male adult had no anchor to hold on against this attack from a moral, religious posture (pp. 169-70)\(^\text{10}\)

Judge (2004) also refers to the role of the family as a social unit in noting Bhindranwale’s appeal in shaping the visible Khalsa Sikh identity:

“It is interesting that the construction of religious identity took place through the use of expressions that form the part of experience of everyday life of the individual. Family is an institution, which shapes and exerts tremendous influence on the individual in the socialization process’ (p.3951).

The underpinnings and valorization of this masculine identity emphasised the patriarchal family structure and bolstered masculinity as a force to be bridled (Axel, 2001). While the cultivation of Jat Sikh masculinity, in particular, was one outcome of Bhindranwale’s appeal in utilizing the patriarchal base of society, the emerging new post-1984 Khalsa identity came to take on new forms of transmission of masculinity and identity through militancy and flows of out-migration. Chopra (2011) highlights how the transnational migration of men during the period of militancy in Punjab became an integral part of the unfolding commemoration process which came to constitute the idea of Khalistan both in Punjab and in the Sikh diaspora in which family strategies for sending sons abroad is one important legacy. Another cohort who have also been part of the migration wave were the
children of the late 1970s to the eighties, then receptacles of the religious reformism of Bhindranwale, who have become the carriers and transmitters of the forms of remembrance which commemorate and memorialize social, collective memories.

The rise of religious revivalism in Punjab during the early phase of Bhindranwale’s public life was a reaction against the degenerative form of bourgeois modernization that was accelerating at that time and continues to exacerbate existing social inequalities and barriers towards access and opportunities for those on the margins, whether in caste or class terms. Almost parallel to Bhindranwale’s religious reform movement, there was the development of a movement led by the constitutionalist Sikh Akali party for Punjab’s regional demands concerning river waters, transfer of Chandigarh as a capital city to Punjab and restructuring of federal arrangements for devolution of more administrative and financial powers to the states. The seeming failure of the moderate Akali movement to make was also contributing to the rise of popularity of Bhindranwale amongst the Sikh masses. Bhindranwale seemed to be gathering more support among the Sikh masses for advocating that the use of violence was more likely to lead to achieving the goals of the Sikh struggle than the path of peaceful agitation promoted by the moderate tendency. The espousal of violence by Bhindranwale attracted the wrath of the state’s security agencies leading to stepping up their attacks against Bhindranwale supporters. Some of Bhindranwale’s followers were killed in police custody and were reported by the police to have been killed in encounters. Such ‘encounters’, which came to be known in the media as ‘fake encounters’, increased in number.
Bhindranwale’s followers and other Sikh extremist groups stepped up their violent attacks on police, government officials, Nirankaris and politicians while the moderate Akali party was failing to achieve any success in getting any of Punjab’s demands accepted by Indira Gandhi.

Indira Gandhi decided to use military means to crush both the moderate and militant forms of Sikh rebellion in Punjab. The military operation she launched was given the name of Operation Blue Star. At the operational level, the central aim was to take control of the Golden Temple at Amritsar and other key gurdwaras from Bhindranwale’s armed supporters and Akali activists, as well as to facilitate the transport of wheat from Punjab to the rest of the country and thus defeat the Akalis’ threatened disruption of this wheat transport. She had swept the polls after the 1971 victory which coincided with the dismembering of the ‘enemy’ of Pakistan in the creation of Bangladesh, and she now wanted a repeat performance by slaying the Sikh ‘enemy’ within. A few hundred armed supporters of Bhindranwale, however well entrenched in the protective location of the Golden Temple complex, were no match for the military might of the Indian state.

The death of Bhindranwale eclipsed every living Sikh leader in terms of popularity among the Sikhs. His defiance and sacrifice were hailed as resembling those of the great Sikh martyrs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (D. Singh, 2003; Darshi, 2006; G. Singh and S. Singh, 2005). In between these commemorative readings and interpretations of Bhindranwale after his death, however, there appeared to be a consensus (at least publically) that while Bhindranwale may have represented a just cause, the creation of a separate Sikh state was not feasible and that amends needed to be made with the Indian state. It is this consensus and a widely shared desire for peace and an end to violence
which opened the space for the reentry of the ‘moderate’ Sikh party the Akali Dal through Parkash Singh Badal who forms the current state government leadership. The ensuing phase within Punjab’s political history saw the Akali party and the Congress party enter a new period of rivalry between themselves as the era of militancy and Khalistan mobilization began to seemingly fade. In this light, public commemorations of Bhindranwale subsided as the Punjab began a process of recovery from the previous two decades of violence, curfew and police. However, the socio-economic grievances, memories of 1984 and the lack of justice served by state institutions, and perceptions and distrust of politicians and corruption remained a continuing set of concerns. It is at this point that we begin our discussion of the reemergence of the imagery of Bhindranwale.

The Resurgence of Bhindranwale: Meanings and Mediums

While the display of Bhindranwale’s image during the decade after 1984 gave a sense of “lest we forget” with regard to the atrocities suffered during and after the storming of the Golden Temple and the attacks on Sikhs soon after Indira Gandhi’s assassination, images of Bhindranwale became virtually absent in the public sphere in Punjab after 1994. The martial rule-like conditions of the previous decade of police ‘encounters,’ curfews, disappearances of men and a general atmosphere of fear and retribution made public society cautious to speak out of line within the tides of conflict across police, state, civil society and insurgency. The manner in which the intelligence and police forces operated in projecting images of ‘terrorism’ as that which stood against the ‘good’ of the state and its police increasingly became viewed with distrust and cynicism by Sikhs, particularly
through the merciless perception of K.P.S. Gill, the Director General of Police at the time, for using inhumane techniques of torture to extract information from and to eliminate suspected Sikh militants. To some he was characterised as ‘supercop’ and to others a ‘butcher’ of Punjab. 1995 is significant in terms of this silence or absence of public images of Bhindranwale. In September 1995 Jaswant Singh Khalra, a human rights activist, ‘disappeared’ from his home in Amritsar. His widow has been campaigning ever since then to get justice regarding this case and the thousands of other unaccounted cases, estimated to be around 25,000 which she and others argue should be viewed as war crimes against humanity. K.P.S. Gill and the Punjab police have been filed to have intervened in this and the many other cases through intimidation and threats and have attempted to obstruct any efforts to seek justice. Interestingly, Khalra was featured in Amnesty International’s campaign to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Despite Gill’s record, the Indian state and other states, including Sri Lanka, have continued to employ Gill as an advisor on how to tackle and crush other movements of insurgency, including Maoist Naxals in central India and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

Criticisms of the state and the media’s role in projecting a largely pro-national Indian stance were accentuated by such international attention bolstered by a vocal Sikh diaspora placing pressures both ‘within’ and ‘without’ Indian territorial boundaries (Axel, 2001). The panopticon role of the Indian state line on anti-militancy during the 1980s up to the mid-1990s began to show cracks by the interventions of extra-national agencies and a growing public discontentment in Punjab and amongst its diaspora due to the lack of official acknowledgement or justice served for the state-sponsored human rights abuses which had taken place.
The Jaswant Singh Khalra example highlights a watershed in the breaking of the silence in critiquing the Indian state and its actions. While the contemporary displays of Bhindranwale’s image could be said to be distant from this case, his image also acts as a reminder of the government and police enforcing a law and order out of touch with the voices and sentiments of civil society.\textsuperscript{11} The media had become an important part of the ‘carceral continuum’ (Foucault, 1977) running from the torture cells and prisons of Punjab to the social policing of commentary on the Punjab situation that came to exist in people’s daily lives. The limits of deviance and acceptability as set by intelligence and police agencies were being set not only by encounters with officers of these agencies but also through the circulation of media reports.

After a decade of militancy and state repression which saw thousands of civilian casualties\textsuperscript{12}, hundreds of detentions without charge or trial and thousands of extrajudicial executions and ‘disappearances’ (Amnesty International, 2003), we might say that there was an attempt in the 1990s to achieve a collective amnesia about this period which created both an official as well as unspoken popular taboo about displaying Bhindranwale’s pictures in any form. Whereas many gurdwaras both in India and abroad had previously displayed Bhindranwale’s picture somewhere in their complexes, this practice was also abandoned showing a conscious attempt to erase or at least move on from showing a synonymous connection between Sikh religious institutions and the politics of Sikh separatism which Bhindranwale represents. However, the resurgence of Bhindranwale’s popularity over a decade later, if only in terms of imagery, is a reminder of that which cannot be erased. The eye-catching hoardings and paraphernalia carrying Bhindranwale’s picture are a display of a consciousness and memory of a history.
and politics which have not been forgotten.

Attempts to address 1984 had repercussions which were felt far beyond Punjab, not least in Delhi where the anti-Sikh ‘riots’ which followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi began to reappear in the print media. The grievances about the manner in which no accused perpetrators in the so-called ‘riots’ had ever been brought to justice became of interest to the press. The recognition of state complicity within such acts of partaking in and covering up violence upon groups followed the anti-Muslim atrocities of Gujarat in 2002. This recognition led to the replacement of the word ‘pogrom’ for ‘riot’ foregrounding institutional complicity in the acts of violence which was not communal but an attack by one community or group upon another with institutional complicity, if not backing. Parallels had been made between the Gujarat example and the ways in which politicians and police colluded in blocking any recourse to justice in the Delhi experiences. Several high profile cases of politicians within the Congress party, not least of MP Sajjan Kumar and T.C. Tandon, the Delhi Police Commissioner, who were in office in 1984, were said to have been directly involved in actions and cover-ups of attacks upon Sikhs in November 1984 were being summoned by courts in Delhi. This retrospective search for justice has stretched as far as the U.S. where in 2010 a group called Sikhs for Justice filed a civil case under the Alien Torts Claims Act in which the petitioners sought damages from the Indian Road Transport and Highways Minister Kamal Nath, who was visiting the U.S. on holiday, for his alleged role in the 1984 anti-Sikh ‘riots’. The manner in which complaints, grievances and analyses had been previously silenced about the anti-Sikh ‘riots’ which followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi was part of a wider phenomena of state
censorship which entered the popular psyche about the position of Sikhs within the national context of India.\textsuperscript{14} The contemporary context since the turn of the millennium has seen an upsurge in a demand for recognition, apology and justice for 1984. In the case of the Road Transport and Highways Minister, his initial response was of disbelief that he was being summoned not by the Indian judicial system, but the U.S. one: “Nobody has ever charged me in India. But if the United States charges me 25 years later for something that has happened in India...well it just reflects on the authenticity” (Times of India, 2010).

Thus, the ‘authenticity’ of claims made outside of Indian territorial authority, merely reified the findings of the Nanavati Commission in its 185-page report in 2005 which showed that there was evidence of senior members of the then ruling Congress party as well as the Delhi police being involved in instigating mobs, turning a blind eye to complaints and pleas, and abetting in the killing of Sikhs in their own constituencies as a show of vengeance for the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The Nanavati Commission’s central findings were that there had been strong currents of complicity within state agencies in aiding the obstruction of justice in the cases of 1984, many of which were never filed or were filed in retrospect many years later, which needed to now be addressed.\textsuperscript{15}

For our purposes here, it is important to note that the corruption and complicity that existed around the violence and lack of justice was exposed through the opening up of access to information enabled by the new media since the mid-1990s. However, one must not simply view the media as a monolithic or unified entity or voice. Even the mediums vary, with information technologies entering into the picture as a serious force within social access to information. The Nanavati Commission report, for instance, was available immediately after its release online,
which was a stark difference from merely twenty years earlier when getting any kind of state recognition in a public way or being able to view such documents regarding the Punjab situation would have been virtually impossible. Quite a contrast to the information ‘black outs’ which were not uncommon during the emergency (1975-79) or during the period of militancy and state repression post-1984, the new media technologies have a reach which is both channelled through the state discourses on nation, region and identity while also occupying an autonomous space which can potentially offer critiques of the status quo.

**Bhindranwale in the Market: A Subliminal Resurgence?**

The recent visibility and consumption of Bhindranwale’s image through items available for sale in bazaar stalls and shops needs to be understood in the backdrop of this history of capitalist development in the region, state repression and a collective consciousness of injustice. It is within this context that the bazaar economy provides a market for the consumption of his symbol within an ‘economy of signs’ (Lash and Urry, 1994) through which people’s sentiments of political currents in the region, which could not be expressed otherwise through other mediums, can be produced, sold and purchased.

During the early 1990s images of Bhindranwale had been retracted into private spaces, largely out of people’s fears of being targeted or branded by the police as militants or sympathisers. He continued to signify a symbol of solidarity either with the grievances felt by many against the Indian state for its treatment of the Sikhs or for the more extreme sentiments of those hoping for the establishment of a separate Sikh homeland Khalistan. However, the private nature of displaying this defiant symbol meant that these sentiments remained outside of the public space.
The political rivalry between the ‘moderate’ elements of Punjab politics through Amarinder Singh’s Congress party and Prakash Singh Badal’s Akali Party soon occupied the centre stage in terms of the public discourse on politics in the state. However, this discourse was neither addressing the earlier grievances symbolised by Bhindranwale nor was it in tune with the popular sentiments critical of corruption and power politics. The attempts to generate a collective amnesia about Bhindranwale by the state forces could be said to have been unsuccessful. While wiping out militancy and militants, the image and sentiments remained a part of the history, social memory and psyche of the place. Thus, while the public space had become dominated by the display of order and control, in a Foucauldian sense, through a heavy-handed enforcement of this by both police and political forces, civil society continued to hold the memory of the previous decades, which, we might say has become crystallised in the Bhindranwale images which are now in circulation.

While one avenue to voice opposition is militancy and armed struggle, another is electorally through the vote. However, the polarised partisan set-up in Punjab between the Congress and Akali parties needs to be acknowledged for generating a sense of alienation and a lack of any real choice within mainstream politics in contemporary Punjab. Alongside this, the form of regulation by the state has changed and the proliferation of information technologies has taken place, making the ability to express one’s preferences less constricted, which presents a contradictory effect. While appearing in a subliminally silent but visible manner, Bhindranwale’s image has become a reminder of the history of repression and resistance. It is around 2008 when the previous privately displayed images of
Bhindranwale began to emerge once again, after 25 years, in the public sphere. This could be seen less as a resurgence of the politics represented by Bhindranwale and more as a desire to highlight the unaddressed grievances and disdain for the current political order which appears more concerned with building power bases and alliances than in being accountable to the society it governs. The public displaying of Bhindranwale imagery offers a new mode for a politics of resistance through a visual voicing of a politics of opposition to the current order.\textsuperscript{16}

Figure 1.

Bhindranwale t-shirts for sale

Source: Kahol (2009), \textit{India Today.}

The visibility of Bhindranwale today exists within this contradiction. Whereas in the 1984 period and thereafter, the state could censor directly what people did, displayed and said, information technologies now offer a route through which people can voice and share their opinions. The penetration of the market into Punjabi society has also played a significant role in managing people's grievances and aspirations. Material concerns and desires which are less threatening to the political order have overtaken spiritual and political ones. The Bhindranwale images of today, as they did nearly three decades ago, emerge out of this evolving political economy. Indeed, these symbols operate on one level as 'economies of signs' (Lash and Urry, 1994) through which local desires and demands for alternative ways of viewing the region beyond its fraught history are being articulated. They are also, as Urry (1995) defines, markers of the 'economic base of place' in allowing for a place such as Punjab to 'consume one's identity' through these signs (Lash and Urry, 1994). Axel employs the notion of \textit{fantasy} in critiquing
Indian national integration through Sikh subjectivity and the threats that the Khalistan movement have posed to it which we find useful in developing a framework for reading the contemporary visual representations of Bhindranwale: ‘The image of a Khalistan, and of the demanding Sikh subject, makes reference to a territorial dispute…But the image of a Khalistan also acts as a mirror in which is reflected the fragile basis of the nation-state’s form’… (2001: 117). The Sikh diaspora, as Axel argues, presents a global canvas for this consciousness of critique of the Indian army’s actions in 1984 while also encouraging a fetishisation of a great Sikh historical past. Tatla (1999) presents the global Sikh diaspora’s position as one of response and activism around deep-felt grievances and marginalisation after the events of 1984 which situated Sikh identity not only in opposition to the Indian state who had desecrated their holiest shrine but also led some to mobilise these sentiments into a ‘search for a homeland’.

The ubiquitous hoardings showing pictures of Bhindranwale reveal a range of uses of his image in different contexts. As a martyr (‘shaheed’), Bhindranwale (furthest right, in Figure 2) has been depicted alongside other martyrs- Bhagat Singh, Udham Singh and Kartar Singh Sarabha, commemorating Bhindranwale as someone who deserves to ‘rub shoulders with martyrs’ (Bajwa 2009). In October 2009 a hoarding appeared in Ranbirpura village, seven kilometres from Patiala showing these four martyrs together.

Figure 2.
Billboard depicting ‘Shaheed’ (martyr) Bhindranwale

Source: The Tribune (2009)
This particular hoarding was erected by the residents of the village who felt “there is nothing wrong in the hoarding as Bhindranwale was also a great warrior, who sacrificed his life for the honour and prestige of Sri Harmandar Sahib and Sri Akal Takht Sahib.” (Ibid). Soon after the October 2009 news coverage of the hoarding appeared, it was taken down after protest by urban Hindu and Congress organisations, showing that there remain limits to how and where the image of Bhindranwale is permitted to appear in the public sphere.

The reappearance of Bhindranwale in contemporary posters, billboards and now market spaces has been striking and, as such, has attracted much attention, though little action to curb the hoardings has taken place. The coalition style of electioneering and government formation has shaped Indian and Punjab politics since 1998. The Akali party entered into an alliance with the BJP, which, counter to the sentiments of Bhindranwale in critiquing the dominant ‘Hindu’ Indian state model, showed a partnership which bolstered a model of a unified India with support for regional (Akali), moderated identities. The reassertion of a more autonomous vision, critical of both corruption within the state government and Akali subservience to the BJP, is another potential reason for the reappearance of Bhindranwale with such visual force.

While politicians have been perplexed with how to deal with the resurgence of Bhindranwale’s imagery, the bazaar economy has been far more scrupulous and aware of the marketing potentials that Bhindranwale’s image presents. The car stickers, t-shirts, posters, calendars and other items which can be easily purchased and displayed on one’s private property as a souvenir or decorative piece are also symptomatic of the commodification of culture which has spread rapidly through Punjab. While many of these items have been produced in India for the expanding
market, there have been recent reports showing that the growth in sales has been met by Chinese manufacturers undercutting the prices of Indian-made goods. An article appearing in March 2010 “Bhindranwale T-shirts: Made in China, Sold in Punjab” in the Indian Express comments on the availability of the items across Punjab:

Bhindranwale may seem a long way from Beijing, but trust the great Chinese assembly line to go the distance. The face of the Sikh militancy movement is enjoying a surge in popularity in Punjab, and he is doing so riding on Made in China products — ranging from T-shirts to calendars, bumper stickers to coffee mugs and key chains, some carrying his pictures with the message “I will have to make a comeback”.

Youths in villages and towns of the state can be seen sporting bright yellow T-shirts, emblazoned with huge photos of Bhindranwale carrying an AK-47 rifle. And the paraphernalia is being openly sold in prominent markets in Jalandhar, Patiala, Amritsar, Ludhiana and even Delhi.

The surge in demand for Bhindranwale paraphernalia is aptly spoken for through the messages on the items such as “I will have to make a comeback” as a symbol of more than just commodified identity politics. The widespread availability and range of items as one comes across the stickers in market stalls, on billboards or on passing cars’ rear windows is striking. Indeed, as this article goes on to explain, the demand for Bhindranwale items has been met by supplying Chinese manufacturers aware of the growth potential in this market who have undercut the prices of Indian-made goods.
The numbers are surprising. Sukhdev Singh, a shopkeeper in Amritsar, claims to have sold 1.8 lakh calendars with Bhindranwale's photos, each priced at Rs 20. He claims that the rush is unabated, something which has prompted the Chinese to enter the market. “More memorabilia has been introduced in the market as watches, key chains and car stickers. The Chinese-made T-shirts are selling at Rs 170 each as compared to the Indian-made ones, which are priced at Rs 350 each. Similarly Chinese key chains and watches with Bhindranwale's photo on the dial are available at one-fifth the price of same products of Indian make. Stickers are available in seven different colours. Our estimates suggest that over 3.5 lakh car stickers have been sold so far,” says Tejinder Pal Singh, a shopkeeper based in Jalandhar.

As our earlier discussion of the green revolution and capitalist modernisation highlighted, the economic base of Punjab's society made it a fertile place for consumer culture and commodification amidst the evolving turn towards religious revivalism. In current times, some of the outcomes of this often appear contradictory. One example is the opening in 2009 of the Damdami Taksal shop in Amritsar, near the Golden Temple. Bhindranwale had been head of the Damdami Taksal, which was labelled a central wing within the Khalistan movement and had been the target of intelligence and police attention during the years of militancy. The book shop opening in 2009 appeared in a visibly prominent way, within the market economy and culture of consumption in contemporary Punjab, rather than existing outside of it. The advertisement of the opening of the shop covers an end building with an approximately 50 feet high image of Bhindranwale. Another example is the bus service which is based near to the Golden Temple entrance. The buses which are run by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee
(SGPC), the governing body who manage most of the large gurdwaras in Punjab, have imposing stickers on the fronts of the buses, appearing as though Bhindranwale is standing in a mascot-like role at the front of the buses. The irony in this example is that the SGPC has historically had strong ties with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) party, which now finds itself having to tolerate the popular appeal of a deceased figure who is being revered as a hero, despite official attempts by all of the mainstream political parties to discredit him. However, this does not mean that the paraphernalia exists without tension or dispute. This dispute exists in every day conversations as well as through the internet. Speeches of Bhindranwale are available on YouTube, alongside a multitude of transcribed speeches, photos and video clips. This is a medium which has embraced the potentials for reasserting the meanings of Bhindranwale amongst the youth of Punjab as well as the diaspora.¹⁷

Conclusion

The reemergence of Bhindranwale in the market place reflects a continuing public engagement with Punjab’s recent history of conflict with the Indian central state, identity politics and economic and cultural turbulence. Capitalist modernisation of Punjab agriculture in the 1960s and the 1970s, a collective memory of injustice, the intertwining of that turbulence with Sikh identity aspirations and the further penetration of consumer capitalism in the region have contributed to creating the context for Bhindranwale’s appeal. The symbolic reappearance of Bhindranwale recently in the public sphere in Punjab has been explored in this article in a manner which poses some possibilities for what meanings may be behind it. While
the hoardings tend to appear in spaces which exist in the private market rather than publically accountable spaces, this presents issues for any authorities to be able to intervene and censor these images. It could be said that the penetration of consumer capitalism in the rural and urban areas of Punjab has occurred so rapidly that virtually every type of space in the public, including bazaars, gurdwaras, billboards, shops, streets and buildings are available for advertising goods and services, as well as for other expressions. Bhindranwale’s imagery and appeal, just as other forms of values, movements and ideas have been commodified, now exists within this phase of Punjab’s rural and urban development. Markets and new media have been central to this proliferation in permitting the transmission of what had in earlier eras been censored, banned and crushed.

As mainstream political parties in Punjab ignore the continuing appeal of Bhindranwale and the meanings behind the resurgence of his imagery, he has re-emerged in Punjab as both a reminder of the past thirty years of Punjab while hinting that the popular sentiments continue to remember, commemorate, purchase and exhibit themselves, rebelling against the current status quo, however subliminally expressed this may be. If the Indian state forces had thought they were successful in dismissing the credibility of Bhindranwale’s following or of erasing the sentiments of Bhindranwale from the memories of the people of Punjab by eradicating ‘militancy’, it seems that this new era of visibility of his commodified image in the ‘bazaar economy’ may be alerting us not only to his lasting legacy as a relic of the past, but also to the fact that there is a market of consumers commemorating, purchasing and displaying his image in contemporary times.
References


1 For an insightful exploration of the contemporary commemoration of Ghallughara Dihara (Day of Genocide) each year at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, see Radhika Chopra (2010)

‘Commemorating Hurt: Memorialising Operation Bluestar’ in Sikh Formations, 6:2, pp. 119-152.

Chopra poignantly situates this yearly modern event as a reenactment of martyrdom at the hands of the Indian army at the holiest Sikh shrine in 1984 as well as within medieval Sikh history.
Balwant Singh Rajoana admitted and was found guilty of playing a leading role in the 1995 assassination of Beant Singh, the then Chief Minister of Punjab. By refusing to plead for clemency, Rajoana came to represent a contemporary symbol not only of the remembrance of state repression as a living Sikh martyr but also of a brewing sense of political consciousness which refuses to accept the Indian state’s authoritative position on the fallout of the 1980s and 1990s.

http://www.ipledgeorange.net/


For understanding the nature of the Marxist influence in Punjab, see Singh 1985b, 1997 and 2002. Three studies of the pre-Naxalite communist movement in Punjab are: Josh (1979), Singh (1994) and Sharma (2009). All the studies of Marxism and communism in Punjab bring out the significance of the rural dimension of Punjabi communism.

The argument of Ajmer Singh (1992) is an example of a transition from a Maoist/Naxalite perspective to that of Sikh militancy.

Akhand Kirtani Jatha was one such very well known organisation. See Barrow (2001) for a detailed study of this organization.


Gill (1974) elaborates on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and attempts its application to India and Punjab.

For a discussion on the crucial impact of this study on the subsequent literature on this aspect of the ‘Punjab crisis’, especially Shiva (1989) and BP Singh (1998), see Singh (1999).

Estimates of casualties vary between 10,000 and 100,000 and depend upon the time period taken into account for estimating the figure. Kumar et al. (2003) have attempted to estimate unreported deaths in custody, illegal cremations and ‘disappearances’ and their figure of nearly 3,000 illegal cremations in Amritsar district alone suggests that a total casualty figure of 10,000 is certainly too low. See also Dhillon (2006).


The move to characterize the 1984 violence in Delhi as genocide and not a ‘riot’ was instigated by pressure from the Sikh diaspora. On June 11, 2010 Canadian-Sikh MP Sukh Dhaliwal (Vancouver) along with Andrew Kania MP from Toronto submitted a petition to the government of Canada backed by a global human rights advocacy group, including the US-based Sikhs for Justice (Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, legal adviser). The motion was admitted in the Canadian parliament.

There was widespread protest against the report as it was said to not mention clearly enough the role of Jagdish Tytler and other members of the Congress Party in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The report led to the resignation of Jagdish Tytler from the Union Cabinet. A few days after the report was tabled in the Parliament, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh apologised to the Sikh community for Operation Blue Star in 1984 and the riots that happened later that same year.

It is worth noting that the election of the Congress to government in May 2004 marked a shift in public perceptions of the Congress party with Manmohan Singh, the former Finance Minister, being appointed by Sonia Gandhi as the first Sikh Prime Minister of India. Despite this, the Akali party won the subsequent state elections in 2007 and 2012, showing a complex electoral relationship between state and centre amidst party politics.

Southall, a suburb of London, is known as “mini Punjab” due to the concentration in the area of migrants from the rural areas of Punjab. Des Pardes, a Punjabi weekly published from Southall and with a sizeable circulation among these migrants, reported that a Punjabi CD ironically titled in English ‘Never Forget Bhinderanwale’ was recently released at the main gurdwara in Southall (Des Pardes 2010, p. Ext-1). This CD carries religious protest songs and is sung by the traditional Sikh
musicians called Dhadis who enjoy huge popularity in the rural Sikh population of Punjab and amongst the Sikh migrants coming from the rural areas of Punjab. For a detailed study of this rural Sikh musical tradition, see Nijhawan (2006).
Bhindranwale t-shirts for sale
Source: Kahol (2009), India Today

64x61mm (72 x 72 DPI)
Billboard depicting ‘Shaheed’ (martyr) Bhindranwale
Source: The Tribune (2009)

98x70mm (72 x 72 DPI)