

**Refugee Review Tribunal
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RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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Questions

- 1. Please provide brief background information on the changing of the Punjab/Haryana borders and any conflict between Punjabi speaking Sikhs and Hindi speaking people in the area.**
- 2. Are Sikhs discriminated against, as claimed, in the area?**
- 3. Please provide brief background information on the Sant Bhindrawala group. Who are they and what is their aim?**
- 4. What are Gurudwaras?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Please provide brief background information on the changing of the Punjab/Haryana borders and any conflict between Punjabi speaking Sikhs and Hindi speaking people in the area.**

In 1966 the then state of Punjab was divided along predominantly linguistic lines into the mostly Sikh, Punjabi-speaking state of Punjab; and the majority Hindi-speaking state of Haryana. Chandigarh, on the border of Punjab and Haryana, remained the capital of both states and is administered as a Union Territory from Delhi. Data from the 2001 Census in India indicates that Punjab state has the largest population of Sikhs in India: 14,592,387 out of 24,358,000, or 59.9% of the population. Haryana has the second highest: 1,170,662 out of 21,144,564, or 5.5% of the population. Chandigarh union territory has 145,175 or 16.1%. Most of Haryana's Sikh population is in the northeast and the northwest of the state. Haryana has one of the highest percentages of Punjabi speakers after Punjab: 7.1% according to the 1991 census (RRT Country Research 2002, *Research Response IND15065*, 10 April – Attachment 1; 'Religion – Sikhs' 2001, Census India website <http://www.censusindia.net/religiondata/Summary%20Sikhs.pdf> – Accessed 16 August 2006 – Attachment 2; 'Table 26: Three Main Languages in every State, 1991' 1997, Census India

website <http://www.censusindia.net/cendat/datatable26.html> – Accessed 16 August 2006 – Attachment 3).

During the 1970s and 1980s when the Sikh separatist movement was involved in a series of violent incidents in Punjab (see Question 3), there was also related violence in Haryana, including reprisals against the Sikh population. A 1987 *New York Times* report provides an example of this. It states that after “Sikh terrorists killed at least 72 people in attacks on Hindu bus passengers” there were demonstrations and reprisals against Sikhs in Haryana and across other areas of northern India, including mob attacks on Sikhs which resulted in several deaths. The Indian army was called in to Haryana to halt the reprisals (Hazarika, Sanjoy 1987, ‘Anti-Sikh violence in Northern India’, *The New York Times*, 9 July <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE3DA113EF93AA35754C0A961948260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print> – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 4).

One of the demands of some Sikh separatist groups at that time was “the return of Chandigarh and other Punjabi-speaking areas in the newly created Haryana back to Punjab” (Aliq, Asif Anwar & Anwar, Abid 2007, ‘Embers of a Sikh fire’, *Himal South Asian*, October http://www.himalmag.com/2007/october_november/embers_of_a_sikh_fire.html – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 5).

No recent reports were found of violence between Sikhs and Hindus in Haryana, or of acts by extremist Sikh separatist groups in the state.

There have been a series of demonstrations and some violence over another recent issue which affects Sikhs in both Punjab and Haryana: the reform movement Dera Sacha Sauda which is presenting a challenge to mainstream Sikhism and provoking a sometimes violent reaction in both states, and threatening relations between them.

An October 2007 report from *Himal* describes the movement and a recent large violent protest in Punjab:

The controversy over Dera Sacha Sauda, the breakaway Sikh sect, has only just begun to wind down. Early May saw a frenzy over Dera chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, who angered Sikhs by imitating Guru Gobind Singh, Sikhism’s revered Tenth Guru. Gurmeet Singh had appeared in photographs carried in two dailies, in which he wore attire similar to the Tenth Guru in order to advertise his organisation. Gurmeet Singh apologised a few weeks later, but by then the matter had escalated so far that hardline Sikhs refused to accept his contrition. Besides being belated, the subsequent apology was undercut by Gurmeet Singh himself, who defiantly stated that he wears “whatever my followers design and give me to wear”.

Groups on both sides were able to bring out supporters en masse. Under the leadership of a hardline Sikh religious group, the Damdami Taksal, more than 10,000 protesters moved towards Salabat Pura Dera, 30 km from Bhatinda, where Gurmeet Singh was alleged to have committed his act of sacrilegious imitation. There were subsequently clashes involving Sikhs and up to 3000 Dera activists, leaving at least one person killed and dozens more severely injured.

The Punjab state government, which initially attempted to maintain a distance from the issue, was forced to intervene after the supreme Sikh body, the Akal Takht, issued an ultimatum on 20 May, demanding that the state government close down all reform deras within a week. While Dera Sacha Sauda activists complained that they were being scapegoated, sword- and

kirpan-bearing Sikhs blocked roads and organised dharnas. Punjabis were suddenly witness to a sight they had not seen in two decades, harking back to the days of militancy that had engulfed the state during the 1980s (Alig, Asif Anwar & Anwar, Abid 2007, 'Embers of a Sikh fire', *Himal South Asian*, October http://www.himalmag.com/2007/october_november/embers_of_a_sikh_fire.html – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 5).

The same article states that Dera Sacha Sauda started in Haryana and has assets in both states:

The Dera Sacha Sauda came into existence in 1948 at Sirsa, in present-day Haryana, then part of the undivided state of Punjab within India. The organisation was founded by Shehenshahji Mastana, a pious Sikh leader from Balochistan, with an eye to social reform and spiritual purification – among the Sikhs in particular, but also others in general. The organisation takes its name, sacha sauda, meaning 'true business', from the place where a 12-year-old Guru Nanak was believed to have fed the poor, with money given to him by his father to do business. Indeed, with a charter to include all religions in the new faith, the Dera has emphasised humility, meditation and social work...

...There are two types of reform deras in Sikhism. The first exclusively follows the tenets of the Sikh faith, and bestows its gurus with supreme power. These deras are popularly known as being part of the Nihang group. The second type does not restrict itself to Sikhism. While neither condemning nor supporting Sikhism, this second type claims to follow the positive aspects of every religion, including Sikhism. Dera Sacha Sauda falls into this latter category, as a social reformatory 'faith' with its own set of guidelines. The immense popularity of Dera Sacha Sauda, which claims to have 15 million followers, is a direct result of its active reform work over the past half-century.

The Dera Sacha Sauda purports to accept no donations, but owns 700 acres of donated farming land in Punjab and Haryana, from which the bulk of the organisation's income is drawn. (The group's income has come under regular suspicion in recent years for Gurmeet Singh's propensity to drive around in luxury cars.) The Dera's physical presence goes far beyond these two states, however, and includes 36 local and urban branches in eleven states across India (Alig, Asif Anwar & Anwar, Abid 2007, 'Embers of a Sikh fire', *Himal South Asian*, October http://www.himalmag.com/2007/october_november/embers_of_a_sikh_fire.html – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 5).

The following news reports describe recent violent incidents in Haryana.

- A July 2007 report describes a clash between mainstream Sikhs and Dera Sacha Sauda followers in the Haryana village of Mallawala, in which guns were fired and eight were injured ('Eight injured in Dera-Sikh clash' 2007, *Asian News International*, 24 July – Attachment 6).
- Another July 2007 reports states that there had been more than a dozen recent incidents in Haryana, and that "officials in Haryana feel that instead of dousing the controversy, Punjab has allowed it to grow, resulting in a law and order problem in Haryana". Haryana was thinking of banning a Sikh enclave which was to be held in the state, and the chief ministers of the two states had met to discuss the issue (Bharadwaj, Ajay 2007, 'Dera-Sikh conflict affects Punjab-Haryana relations', *DNA – Daily News and Analysis*, 9 July – Attachment 7).

- Another July 2007 report states that police had put up barricades to prevent thousands of Sikh protestors from Punjab reaching the capital Chandigarh and that “the Haryana government does not want the Punjab-centric problem to spill over to the next state and lead to violence” (‘Police stop Sikh marchers on Chandigarh outskirts’ 2007, *Indo-Asian News Service*, 9 July – Attachment 8).

A May 2007 report states that the Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh had expressed concern about the situation; that the national government had sent forces to Punjab and Haryana to control the situation; that eight districts of Haryana adjoining Punjab had been placed under special control; and that parts of the border had been sealed (‘Manmohan Singh expresses concern over Punjab violence’ 2007, Yahoo! News India, 18 May <http://in.news.yahoo.com/070518/139/6fy9p.html> – Accessed 9 October – Attachment 10).

2. Are Sikhs discriminated against, as claimed, in the area?

No detailed reports of discrimination against Sikhs in Haryana were found among the sources consulted.

The recent incidents of violence described in the previous question have led to claims of discrimination by some Sikhs in Haryana, in the sense that the state government is not thought to have done enough to punish Dera Sacha Sauda followers who have attacked Sikhs. Some claim that there are ties between the group and the state government and police.

A July 2007 report from Sikh publication *The Panthic Weekly* provides further detail on one recent incident:

Tensions flared up again between the followers of the controversial Sirsa based Sauda cult and members of the Sikh community after cultists indiscriminately began to fire upon protesting Sangat members. At least 12 Sikhs were injured in this latest incident.

This incident is seen as one of the most violent ever since the Dera issue geared up back in May. The incident took place after a group of Sacha Sauda followers forcibly kidnapped a local Sikh named Sukhpal Singh, son of Giani Sher Singh, a manager of Gurdwara Dasmi Patshahi, and locked him in a house where they battered him severely. When other Sikhs found out, they gathered outside the house and started protesting against the dera followers.

Violence escalated when a dera follower named Jit Insaar, who was also involved in the beating of Sukhpal Singh, opened fire on the Sikhs who were protesting outside in the street. The sudden gunfire left about 12 Sikhs injured. The situation was brought under control when security forces reached the spot and arrested Jit Insaar and confiscated his weapon, other Sauda followers involved in this incident were not initially charged by the police. Injured Sikhs were admitted to a local civil hospital’s emergency ward.

Avtar Singh Makkar of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Jathedar Balwant Singh Nandgarh visited the injured Sikhs at the civil hospital and assured their cooperation and support for the victims. **They demanded strict action be taken against the cultists who were involved in this heinous attack on the Sikh Sangat, and demanded more cooperation from the Haryana Government.**

In light of various violent incidents in Haryana, and the ongoing harassment by the state Police, a delegation of Sikhs belonging to Sirsa and other parts of Haryana recently held a meeting at Akal Takhat Sahib and addressed their concerns with Jathedar Joginder

Singh Vedanti. The delegation, which consisted of over 150 Sikh men and women, held that ever since the Ratio gathering was postponed, Sacha Sauda followers have advanced their anti-Sikh activities.

The delegation alleged that cases have been booked on over 1200 Sikhs, included women, on the order of the Dera Sacha Sauda which holds close ties with the Haryana Government and Police. Haryana based Sikhs urged Jathedar Vedanti to use his influence to get the false cases against the innocent Sikhs dropped by the Haryana Government. Jathedar Vedanti expressed sympathy with the Haryana Sikhs and agreed to hold talks with Jathedar Avtar Singh (SGPC) in regards to their concerns ('Haryana Sikhs Fired Upon by Cultists, Many Injured' 2007, *The Panthic Weekly*, 25 July <http://www.panthic.org/news/126/ARTICLE/3445/2007-07-25.html> – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 10).

The leader of the Punjab political party Shiromani Akali Dal commented in July 2007 that there was “a sense of insecurity” prevailing in the Haryana Sikh community, and that the state government should take steps to ensure “complete security” for all Sikhs in the state ('Sikhs in Haryana feel insecure, says Sukhbir Badal' 2007, *Punjab Newslines*, 26 July <http://www.punjabnewslines.com/content/view/5056/38/> – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 11).

3. Please provide brief background information on the Sant Bhindrawala group. Who are they and what is their aim?

Questions 3, 4, 5 and 6 of a 2006 RRT Research Response provide background material on Sant Bhindrawala and the Sikh separatist movement known as the Khalistan movement, drawing on reports from the UK Home Office, academics, Amnesty International and the media. It indicates that Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was a Sikh religious leader who first appeared around 1978 from relative obscurity and went on to lead what is generally referred to as the Khalistan movement. He preached strict fundamentalism and an armed struggle for national liberation, developing a mass base among the emerging underclass of educated Jat Sikh youths. A series of violent incidents culminated in 1984 when 10,000 Sikhs barricaded themselves in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, after which Operation Blue Star was initiated by Indira Gandhi, and the temple was besieged and shelled by the army. Thousands were killed, among them Bhindranwale. After his death, the number of militant groups operating in Punjab grew, the main ones being the Khalistan Commando Force (Paramjit Singh Panjwar faction); Khalistan Commando Force (Zaffarwal); Khalistan Commando Force (Rajasthani group); Babbar Khalsa; Khalistan Liberation Force (Budhisingwala); Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan (Sangha); Bhindranwale Tiger Force (Manochahal); All India Sikh Student Federation (Manjit); All India Sikh Student Federation (Mehta Chawla); and the Sikh Student Federation (Bittu). However, the Khalistan movement began to fade around the early 1990s reportedly due to the impact of almost a decade of violence and economic repercussions. Human rights groups have criticised the government of Punjab for the fact that there is still impunity for those in the security forces who carried out human rights abuses during this time (RRT Research and Information 2006, *Research Response IND30435*, 17 August – Attachment 12).

4. What are Gurudwaras?

Gurudwaras (also spelt “Gurdwara”) are Sikh places of worship, or temples. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was formed in 1925 to control the important Gurudwaras and prevent them being mismanaged by corrupt officials. Elections to the SGPC are held every five years, and can become contentious affairs, with opposing political factions attempting to gain control of the body. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (see previous question), for instance, stood for the SGPC in 1979, but he was defeated. The SGPC is based in Punjab, and there have been moves from time to time to set up a separate committee in Haryana to administer Gurudwaras in the state. The Haryana chief minister has spoken in favour of such a development.

A page on the Sikhism Guide website states that “Gurdwaras are Sikh places of worship. The word Gurdwara means ‘gateway to the guru’. Many gurdwaras are associated with significant events in Sikh history”. The page has photographs of some important historical Gurdwaras, such as the Golden Temple in Amritsar. A colour printout has been attached (‘Historical Gurdwaras’ 2007, Sikhism Guide website <http://www.sikhismguide.org/gurdwaras.shtml> – Accessed 8 October 2007 – Attachment 13).

The SGPC website at <http://www.sgpc.net/> states:

S.G.P.C. the abbreviation for the SHIROMANI GURDWARA PARBANDHAK COMMITTEE. It is directly elected by an electorate of the Sikh Nation, male and female above 18 years of age who are registered as voters under the provisions of Sikh Gurdwara Act 1925. This act enables SGPC to control all the Historical Gurdwaras as well as Gurdwaras under Section 87 of this act. The elections to SGPC are held after every five years. SGPC is also called Parliament of the Sikh Nation. Now apart from the management of Gurdwaras, it runs many prestigious educational institutions including Medical colleges, Hospitals and many Charitable trust (‘Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Sri Amritsar’ (undated), SGPC website http://www.sgpc.net/the-sgpc/index_eng.asp – Accessed 8 October 2007 – Attachment 14).

An excerpt from a backgrounder on Punjab by the South Asia Terrorism Portal discusses the Congress Party’s reported attempt to gain power in the Sikh Community by backing Bhindrawale for election to the SGPC in 1979:

...At the same time, the ‘secular’ formations, including prominently, the Congress (I), also adopted the politics of alternating communal incitement and appeasement, as they made a bid not only for the popular vote, but equally for the control of the religious affairs of the Sikhs through the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the body that administered Sikh religious affairs and places of worship. This incendiary mix of unprincipled politics and the manipulation of religious identities and institutions gradually brought the lunatic fringe of the Sikh far right to the centre stage of the State’s politics, pushing it into the spiral of violence that was to consume 21,469 lives in a little over a decade of strife, before the movement for ‘Khalistan’ was comprehensively defeated in 1993.

The incident to which the genesis of the terrorist movement in Punjab is traced, occurred in April 1978. The 13th of April marks the birth of the Sikh Khalsa, and had been chosen in that year by the Nirankari sect to hold its annual convention at Amritsar. The Nirankaris are accused of apostasy by the Akalis and by other fundamentalist Sikh groupings. A gang of a few hundred members of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and Fauja Singh attacked the Nirankari convention. There was a long history of such clashes, but on this occasion, 13 Sikhs were killed, including Fauja Singh, along with three Nirankaris. Over the next six years, until his death in June 1984, Bhindranwale was to propagate a creed of unadulterated hate, mobilising the political frustrations of the Sikhs from a

fundamentalist religious platform. Despite his virulence, he was propped up by the ‘secular’ Congress (I) in the SGPC elections of 1979, though only 4 of his 40 candidates won. He also canvassed for Congress (I) candidates in the General Elections of 1980 (South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) (undated), ‘Backgrounder – Punjab’, SATP website <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/punjab/backgrounder/index.html> - Accessed 5 April 2002 – Attachment 15).

A March 2007 report states that the Haryana chief minister had spoken in favour of a separate committee for the state:

Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda on Thursday spoke in favour of setting up a separate Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) for managing the Sikh religious places in Haryana.

Speaking on a resolution for formation of a separate SGPC moved by Congress MLA Nirmal Singh in the Vidhan Sabha, Mr. Hooda said this was a long-pending demand of the Sikh community in Haryana. Stating that the Sikhs were a minority community in Haryana, he said it was the “moral duty of the State Government to value their sentiments and protect their interests”...

...He apprised the House that a committee set up under the Chairmanship of Agriculture Minister H.S. Chatha to examine this demand was yet to submit its report. A large number of affidavits received by the committee had advocated a separate SGPC for the State, he added (‘Separate SGPC for Haryana’ 2007, *The Hindu*, 16 March – Attachment 16).

However, the SGPC chief Avtar Singh opposed the idea, accusing the Congress Party of attempting to divide the Sikh community “in the garb of a separate Gurudwara panel” (‘Sikhs in Haryana battle for separate Gurudwara panel’ (undated), *Gurgaon News* website <http://gurgaoncitynews.com/350/sikhs-in-haryana-battle-for-separate-gurudwara-panel.html> – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 17).

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ISYS

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