

# The Transformation Of Ethno-Nationalist Movements Into Secessionist Movements: A Case Study Of The Khalistan Movement

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## Abstract

This article reviews the literature on the evolution of ethno-nationalist movements and the factors that contribute to the transformation of such movements into secessionist or separatist movements by analyzing the Indian Punjab Crisis of 1980 or more popularly known as the Khalistan Movement. The Khalistan Movement is the classical example of the armed ethnic conflict which saw a continuous evolution over a century and ups and downs relative to the transformation of the domestic political and economic landscape which can be categorized as a transitional phenomenon peculiar to the evolutionary nation-building process in young democracies like it was the case of India in the 1980s. The article critically reviews and analyzes the ground realities related to the issue and academia's views on the rise and finally death of the cause of the Khalistan Movement and hence identifies and overviews the distinct variables that can be used as the reference point to draw out a conclusive study. This text will further go on to question some of the basic questions related to the Khalistan Movement regarding the interrelation of politico-economic factors behind the movement. The theoretical framework being used is the Political Economy of Ethno-Nationalist Movements and their subtle transformation into Secessionist Movements.

**Keywords:** Ethno-Nationalist Movements, Secessionist Movements, Khalistan Movements, Sikhism

## Introduction

India, since its inception, has seen many ethno-nationalist movements throughout its landscape spanning from North-East to North-West and in the South. Khalistan Movement has been categorically attributed as the most powerful secessionist movement right in the heart of India i.e Punjab. It was an unforeseen development on account of many various reasons and yet it took the form of a very grave crisis that hindered the nation-building process in the prime years of the biggest nascent democracy on the globe. Not only did it endanger the political legitimacy of the state and government establishment, but it was also

one of the biggest smears on the secular image of India.

Punjab is one of the most populous and very well-integrated states of the country despite it sharing a border with India's arch-nemesis, Pakistan. The nationalist sentiments of the Sikhs were never questionable given the background of their struggle in the nationalist independence struggle. Punjab singlehandedly paid the highest price for the Partition of the subcontinent that marked the cessation of Colonial rule in South Asia. Given the nationalist credentials of the Sikh population of Punjab, the Punjab crisis of the 1980s presented a unique problem and still forms one of

the enigmas which scholars and academia pursue to unravel to date.

Nationalist movements fashioned around the ethnic and racial foundations seek their very genesis in the development of a distinct identity among a specific ethnic group. These ethno-nationalist movements, however, differ concerning the ends that can be described in the form of goals, claims, and activities. Ethno-nationalist movements are different from the mainstream ethnic and racial movements in the specific regard of having the demands that claim the legitimate rights of authority and sovereignty over a specified territory which puts such a group in conflict with the status quo or simplistically, the state administration which is, in essence, an extension of the international system. The political and sociological theories that explain the rise, gradual evolution, persistence, and decline of such ethno-nationalist movements differ and vary in respect of the emphasis that they place on the cognitive, instrumentalist, and rational motives of the movements. These theories analyze the means and the ends of these ethno-nationalist movements and the degree to which these movements put a certain community in conflict with the state machinery. (Olzak, 2015)

### **Establishment of an Ethno-Nationalist Movement**

Ethnic, racial, and nationalist movements are categorized separately in the literature and are hence analyzed in segregation but they overlap in the demands of rights of racial/ethnic integrity in association with sovereignty. However, these social movements differ discreetly. Race is a biological phenomenon and an inherited trait whereas ethnicity refers to acquired cultural traits like religion, language, and traditions. One is a classic example of a primordial trait while the other appears to be in alignment with the constructionist theory.

Social movements tend to generate the motives behind a collective action that advocates significant alteration in the existing political and economic alignments and patterns within a society. These aforementioned social movements constitute a persistent stream of action that is independent of time and space while the collective action that it puts forward might be momentary. Academia believes that the community involved in a social movement holds and supports a comprehensive identity-defining ideology.

The distinctive defining features of any ethnic or racial social movement are the demands that emerge from the ideological understanding of identity and boundary which manifests itself in the form of different identity markers like skin color or ancestry as primordialism suggests or a collective historical experience of a community like discrimination based on religion or marginalization on the grounds of languages etc. (Barth, 1969) However, contemporary research puts racial and ethnic movements both in the category of ethnicity.

The degree of the challenge posed by any ethnic or racial movement rests upon the degree of the unity of purpose and action of the group. Hence the two decisive factors contributing to the vitality of any such social movement can be identified: ethnic solidarity and mobilization capacity. It is equally necessary to set the two concepts apart. Ethnic solidarity prescribes the conscious sense of identification and degree of commitment of any ethnic group. Whereas mobilization refers to the capacity of any faction of the society to harness the resources at its disposal to achieve any said goal. (Brubaker, 2004)

Ethnic and Racial movements make a common shared identity the foundation of collective action that's translated into an outward expression of loyalty to the cause by involvement in actions like celebrations or violations of rights of other ethnic

groups which may or may not be a minority. These movements are labeled as nationalist movements when they make a territorial claim. The nationalist movements purposefully convey the demands of self-determination and the legitimacy of authority over a specific territorial jurisdiction. Hence it can be inferred that an ethno-nationalist movement refers to the fact that these demands of self-determination and self-governance stem from a shared ethnic identity. An ethno-nationalist movement refers to the ideology of a shared identity as a reference to these demands. (Hetcher, 2000)

It is these demands translating to the actions in pursuit of sovereignty rights that provoke the conflict between the ethnic group resorting to an ethno-nationalist movement and the state. This conflict can then take the form of guerilla warfare, civil war, militant activities, and sometimes terrorist activities depending upon the regime's actions and the inside and outside support and resources harnessed by the community. (J. Fearon, 1997)

### **Transformation of an Ethno-Nationalist Movement into a Secessionist Movement**

Two different approaches can be adopted in the analysis of ethnic secession and separatism. The first one caters to the question referring to the factors and forces responsible for the upsurge in the secessionist movements while the second one deals with the motives behind a group to attempt to leave the state whereas other groups, regionally concentrated make no such attempt. (Horowitz, 1981) The global upsurge in secession as a phenomenon can be attributed to the diffusion of the doctrine of national self-determination. (Connor, 1967) As it can be traced back to nineteenth-century Europe and was witnessed again as it reformed the map of Eastern Europe after World War I and yet again after World War II as it reformed the international landscape with the end of colonial rule and new nation-states emerging on the map. The doctrine of Self-

determination legitimizes the ideology of ethnic separatism. (Horowitz, 1981) Utilitarian theories account for the variable propensity of secession as they identify the changes in the overall balance of advantages in any particular period. (Birch, 1978) If the balance of advantages is understood in terms of economic progress and assured security from external threats, the consensus has shifted to the disadvantage of the sizable state as it might indicate the direction of implicit inducement of secessionism. (Horowitz, 1981) Simplistically, if a multi-ethnic state is not economically prosperous and impermeable to security problems, it is expected to see an upsurge in the secessionist movements demanding to opt-out.

While racing the patterns of the separatist movements, it is far easier to start with the identification of variables spread across space rather than time. Especially the variables that translate the group dynamics like that of the feelings of anxiety or anger common to the people, their interaction, and the calculation of group interest. It is often observed that certain groups opt for secession when their interest is not fulfilled by this choice. These decisions to secede are a result of "group interest alloyed with enmity and offset by apprehension" and their roots are in the texture of group relations. (Horowitz, 1981)

And hence a general assumption can be made that domestic politics determine the emergence of any secessionist movement as it regulates the relations between groups and regions within the state. Whereas the secessionist movement's fate – success or decline, depends on international politics characterized by the balance of interests that extend beyond the territories. In the case of a federation like India, these interests extend to the existence and survival of the nation-state as Khalistan Movement is closely linked to the Kashmir Issue and the six sister states.

## **Approaches to Study Ethno-Nationalist Movements**

Perspectives on approaches to studying the ethno-nationalist movements explain their rise and emergence, their evolution and growth over a given timespan, and their decline. And in explaining the transition of these social movements, these perspectives emphasize one or more processes that led to the change in the preexisting economic, political and social conditions. Each approach has introduced a number of empirical studies which have overlapping regions of concepts and mechanisms.

### **Colonialism and Ethnicity:**

The literature on post-colonialism and looking into the colonial history of the regions provides valuable insight into understanding the patterns of emergence, growth, and decline of social movements. The territories and boundaries were mostly drawn out in the colonial era and the study of colonial policies also supports the fact that colonialism encouraged ethnic cleavages and differences and most of the independence movements were based on ethnonationalism.

In the duration preceding the state formation, the independence movements often adopted an ethnic character. The ethno-nationalist movements stem from the legends and myths which are perceived as history and shape different group identities which in turn essentially influenced the quest for independence. The process of state formation was normally characterized by a negotiation procedure between opponents, nation-builders, and external participants. Following the norms of self-determination, the colonials wielded unprecedented political power compensating for the practice of “illegitimate power” over the indigenous population during colonial rule. (Olzak, 2015)

### **State and Nation-Building Processes:**

Understanding the nation-building process helps us in identifying the reasons for attempts of reconciliation made by the ethno-nationalist movements to cater to the lack of coherence between the state boundaries and the nation's identity. (Anderson, 1991)

Very few nation-states are homogenous entities and hence not only do they encompass many different ethnicities, ethnonationalism movements can exist without any goals of espousing statehood but merely for demarcation of the boundaries of nationhood and this highlights multiculturalism (Hetcher, 2000). If a specific nation or ethnic group demarcates itself by a self-identified boundary that transcends the territorial bounds of nation-states, it might result in a movement that might at some juncture express its ambitions of the creation of a new nation-state fashioned around a common national identity. The existing states resist and these resistances often take the form of state-sponsored violence. Hence it can be concluded that such ethno-nationalist movements undermine the primacy of the state and hence hinder the state-building process. (Fearson & Laitin, 2003)

Hence in light of the existing literature, it can be concluded that such ethno-nationalist movements take a violent turn during the starting years of state formation. The outcomes of any movement depend upon the complicated balance of power among different stakeholders. The starting years of any movement or state-formation process play a pivotal role in determining the nature of the identity of the imagined ‘nation’. Hence the process of nation-building is prone to conflicts based on the historic cleavages. (Anderson, 1991)

### **Economic and Instrumental Approaches:**

These approaches rest on the assumption that the emergence and growth of ethno-nationalist movements are best understood by analyzing the political and economic demands of the group rather than the primordial process of the

formation of ethnic identity. ( Blattman & Miguel, 2007)

This approach has two basic premises. One is that the ethno-nationalist movements are caused by the economic inequalities between different ethnic groups. The other premise suggests that social leaders use ethnicity to salvage political power at their disposal.

### **The Khalistan Movement: A Case Study**

The Khalistan Movement or the Punjab Crisis was a very popular and powerful secessionist movement in Punjab. It was an unprecedented development that took place right at the core of new democracy. Even after Indian support to the separatist movement in East Pakistan, India was not ready to address such a crisis of political legitimacy and governance within its own territory.

All three approaches that have been discussed above can help us understand the ethno-nationalist movement and its transformation into a violent secessionist movement which raged on for almost a decade before seeing an early decline. As the first two explain the identity formation process and the role played by the Sikh population in the state formation and building, the third approach explains the ground realities that contributed to the momentous rage that the Sikh ethno-nationalist movement in the 1980s. This article narrows down the scope of the study to the decade in which the Khalistan Movement was at its peak.

As had been discussed earlier, there was no doubt regarding the nationalist credentials of the Sikh population that was mostly concentrated in the province of Punjab which was the border state of the Indian republic. Punjab along with Bengal was one of the two states that fell victim to the Partition of the subcontinent and paid the highest price not only as they were divided but also, in terms of facing the refugee crisis followed by

years of violence that marred the region amidst the partition in 1947.

Continuing the tradition of the pre-partition colonial era, Punjab performed well economically after independence as well. Following the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s Punjab alone solved the vexing problem of food security in India. Punjab covers only 1.6% of the total land area and yet produces almost a quarter of total food-grain production by India. Additionally, Punjab contributes almost two-thirds of the entire central food grain pool. Punjab is also the most prosperous state of the Indian republic with the highest per-capita income.

The economic well-doing of Punjab certainly made it a success story and a model that could be followed and applied to the other states of India. Given these credentials of success and seemingly no economic deprivation in comparison to other states, the rise of a violent secessionist movement was an enigmatic problem. The decade of the 1980's witnessed a violent political agitation by Sikhs in Punjab where it claimed around 25,000 lives and abroad where it resulted in incidents like the bombing of an Air India Jetliner in June 1985 in Canada. (Purewal, 2000).

There are three very intricate causal factors involved in the conversion of political conflict in the Indian state of Punjab into a convoluted and cumbersome communal conflict. First, the economic factor which is closely tied to the Green Revolution and its consequent unbalanced economic development in Punjab, and second, the growing centralization of state power in India which is embroiled with the economic factor. The third is the religious sentiment, which was triggered by the increased complications in the first two factors. Therefore, the Khalistan movement presents an interesting case to study where political and economic insecurities and religious sentiment were spelled out to launch a strong movement. Here Political issues laid down the basis and economic discontent

crystallized the overall Sikh sentiment for their ethnic identification.

The Indian Sikh community was aspiring for a separate state since the partition of the Indian Subcontinent (Biswas, 2004). However, their dream was dashed to the ground with the division of Punjab into two separate states. From the mid-Sixties onwards, the real political issue that led to growing discontent in the coming years was the demand for more political autonomy. The division of the state of Punjab into two separate states Punjab and Haryana, although gave them a Sikh majority states of Punjab with an effort to satisfy their desire for a separate province and their ethnic fervor. With Punjabi as an official language. Yet 46% of its Hindu population showed no enthusiasm for the Punjabi language (Jetly, 2008).

Even though the Indian Punjab was one of the prosperous states of India, yet it experienced a wave of separatism revolving around ethnic and religious symbols demanding more economic & political rights. Punjab was considered one of the most prosperous provinces in Punjab. Its per capita income during 1985-86 was considered one of the highest in India as compared to other Indian states (Gill, 2017). The main reason behind this was the spectacular progress Punjab made during the Green Revolution. Punjab's agricultural share in the whole of India grew tremendously and it emerged as the food basket of India. Its wheat production covered almost 25% of Indian wheat production (Sidhu & Bhullar, 2004). Despite such phenomenal strides, a general dissatisfaction prevailed, as the benefits of the Green revolution could not reach the peasants, and the income gaps between the rural and urban society expanded in Punjab. The high yield of the green Revolution could not be sustained for a longer period. With the increased availability of fertilizers and pesticides, the peasant community came under increasing financial constraints. Unfortunately, Green

Revolution brought an imbalance in the sectoral development strategy in Punjab. With an over-focused on agriculture, the industrial sector could not gain much attention. Consequently, Punjab's peasants who were already suffering and could not reap the full benefits of the Green Revolution were not able to secure employment in the industrial sector as well (Singh, 1984). This became a big cause of growing unemployment in Punjab. The government did not pay considerable attention to the industrial infrastructure led the youth of Punjab to move elsewhere in search of economic opportunities and brought a lot of unskilled labor inside the state. This movement was more evident in the case of educated Sikh youth. It was a parallel flow of educated youth from Punjab to outside as well as the outflow of their resources and especially the benefits of the Green Revolution. These economic grievances became an additional factor of discontent among Sikhs and fueled political anxieties as the situation turned into a violent movement. This took almost a whole decade for these economic grievances to add to the political unrest and militancy during the 1980s.

Another factor that fueled the Sikh sentiment was Punjab's internal politics and their tussle with the central government. Punjab politics has always been an intermingling of political economic and religious symbolism used by the oppressed and the oppressor both. To curb the Sikh sentiment aggravating, the Indian ruling party Congress which has been in power since partition used political maneuvering as an instrument to choke a political sentiment, which had other ways to be satisfied. One of the major reasons behind this could be traced to the centralization of political power in India (Alam, 1986). This centralization of power is a catalyst in nature that often erode the process of democratization and results in the weakening of democratic institutions and democratic tendencies to manage such sentiment as appeared in the case of the Sikh community and Khalistan movement. Such erosion of

democratic tendencies in reaction appears in layering the political, religious, and economic discontent and might lead to violence. This is what happened in the case of the Indian Punjab. Instead of paying attention to the root cause or applying an appeasing policy, Congress maneuvering by bringing Jarnail Singh Bhindrawalen to the limelight to counter Akali Dal proved counterproductive. Akali Dal the soul Sikh representative party could never take advantage of being the only Sikh representative party. The ruling Congress party exploited its weak political stature in Punjab. A highly authoritative approach to controlling the Sikh sentiment with the use of religious sentiments by launching Jarnail Singh Bhindrawalen in the politics of Punjab temporarily gave a further edge to Congress politics (Chawla, 2017).

The aggressive use of nationalist tendencies in the 1984 election by the central government of Congress fueled the crisis towards a more violent form (Dyke, 2009). The use of force in operation “Blue Star” was a temporary solution to calm the tides. The movement reemerged after a decade and made noticeable advancements.

The emergence of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to control the Sikh sentiment and create a division between them was a classic example of Central governments of Congress maneuverability. It gave the Congress government some advantage but the rise of Bhindranwale later created problems for both central and state governments and Akali Dal the mainstream Sikh political party. The growing political irrelevance of the Akali Dal in front of Bhindranwale's rise pushed them to raise the economic concerns of the community. It was actually the rise of Bhindrawalen, which combined the economic and political anxieties of the Sikh community with a religious narrative directed against the central government. This finally led to militancy in Punjab.

Political and economic dissatisfaction finally assimilated with the religious connotations of the Sikh community. Up until now the religious sentiments of the Sikh community have become so much radicalized that they just erupted in violence all over the province of Punjab. It ultimately led the government of the Congress party to use force, which aggravated the situation and resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Indra Gandhi. The military operation temporarily crushed the militant movement and the situation remained under control but it could not eliminate the Sikh movement permanently. It also disclosed some of the gross miscalculations and wrong policy matters on the part of the government as well. The Khalistan movement will remain a crucial chapter of Indian history, which will continue to stir debates about the handling of ethno-nationalist movements in India.

These political events in Punjab during the 1980s had “far-reaching implications for the ideological structures of the Indian nation-state.” Apart from it being a crisis of governability, it challenged some of the basic premises that underlined the nation-building process of independent India. (Jhoka, 2001)

Understanding of the political economy of Punjab traces the crisis of the 1980s back to the economic inequalities generated by the Green Revolution. These economic inequalities are in clear contradiction with the cultural and religious ethos of Sikhs which demands an economic system based on equal distribution of wealth and resources. This egalitarian impulse within the Sikh tradition made the voice of redistributive justice more compelling in Sikhs. (Oberoi, 1994)

The Marxist and Politico-Economic approaches are also in a similar direction as it also deems the political economy of the Green Revolution to be responsible for the Punjab Crisis. This approach helps us understand Oberoi's thesis of how the religious ethos of Sikhism didn't align with the

outcomes of the Green Revolution and how this aspect of identity became hegemonic at that particular juncture of history.

The questions of Sikh identity were also raised by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at that juncture, it led to the transformation of a Non-Hindu Sikh identity. However, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it took the form of an Anti-Hindu Sikh identity. This transformation of identity can be best explained by studying of formation of ethno-nationalist identity by taking into account the material aspects.

Summing up all the recent literature available on the Khalistan Movement, it can be concluded that the Crisis of the 1980s was the doing of a small but powerful and influential faction of capitalist farmers i.e the Kulaks. The kulaks benefitted the most from the Green Revolution technology and in their quest for domination over the industrial and commercial bourgeois of Punjab that was mostly Hindus, they invoked the Sikh identity to forge a strong bond with the marginalized Sikh peasantry. The two political documents available on the Khalistan Movement are the Anandpur Sahib Resolution and the Declaration of Khalistan. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution, upon implementation, would've strengthened their hold on the domestic market of Punjab. (Purewal, 2000)

The empirical studies have concluded that most of the Sikh militants came from villages and were landless Sikh peasants. They were mostly school dropouts and hence, illiterate. They were either working on small family landholdings or were unemployed. The militant brigade had its origin in the political economy of predatory capitalism and they fought staged battles against the government to defend the vested interests of the industrial and agricultural bourgeois.

Hence, it can be concluded in the light of the study conducted by Purewal that the Khalistan Movement was not fundamentalist in nature.

Rather it was in contradiction with the pro-poor and inclusionary policies as preached by the Sikh beliefs.

Only 10% of the Sikh Militants were committed to the cause of Khalistan. Most of these militants were killed in Police encounters or disappeared after arrests. The Khalistan Movement resulted in a significant degree of migration of Hindus out of Punjab or from rural Punjab to urban areas. The Punjab Crisis claimed the lives of around 30,000 people in 15 years and declined by the mid-1990s. The inclusion of the Sikh diaspora in state affairs has somehow compensated for their grievances however; the essence of the Khalistan movement in the form of hardening inter-identity boundaries lives on. And it is very difficult to predict its future.

Punjab is a viable entity economically but to become a state, it needs to cater to many other state-formation credentials as it will be sandwiched between Pakistan and India, the two arch nemeses. For now, any such demands of the Sikh ethnic-nationalist movement have been silenced. However, Akali Dal, the Sikh political party still has a stronghold within Punjab.

### **Conclusion**

The Khalistan movement in the Indian state of Punjab illuminates numerous important issues to study the ethno-nationalist movement. First, the historical dimension, explains that the grievances of the Sikh community have a colonial background. Their urge to achieve a Sikh majority state could not be fulfilled at the time of partition. The provincial boundaries demarcated by the colonial masters have often created concerns in ethnic groups in post-partition periods. Secondly, despite making strong economic progress, the rise of ethno-nationalist movements like the Khalistan movement points towards a very important aspect of the distributive nature of economic gains. The failure of the Green Revolution and its gains to address

the real concerns and improve the conditions of the Sikh community set the stage for the separatist movement. The whole scenario and the in-depth analysis of the Green Revolution suggest that the disadvantaged class of the Sikh community became the driving force for this movement. Second, Political anxieties also play an important role in ethno-nationalist movements. The failure on the part of the central government to address the concerns of the Sikh community was a major factor in this regard. Though the Sikh majority party Akali Dal was also not a success in preserving the political and economic rights of its community. This was used as an instrument of political maneuvering by setting the stage for the emergence of Jarnail Singh Bhindrawalen. The use of Bhindrawalen proved counterproductive and ignited the religious sentiment of the Sikh community. The use of force in Operation Blue Star was a fatal mistake. It demonstrates that in dealing with such movements in multiethnic countries like India, where there are multiple secessionist movements present and especially when economic, political, and religious sentiments of a community are involved, the use of brutal force proves to be disastrous. To sum up, multi-ethnic societies are an intricate blend of ethnicity, race, and religions, Khalistan movement was largely about economic disadvantages, political autonomy, and the struggle for identity formation of an ethnic community. In this situation, a dithering attitude toward a political resolution of the issue led to the isolation of the concerned community. This finally brings the element of force by both sides. Sikh sentiment finds its expression in militancy and central government towards the use of brutal force to crush the movement. This eventually sown the seed of extreme discontent. The inherent weaknesses of the Khalistan movement finally led to its weakening of the movement but the Khalistan movement sewed the seed of long-term discontentment in the state of Punjab and India.

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