

Key concepts

- In 1799, Ranjit Singh captured Lahore and, in 1801, established the Punjab as an independent state. Although a devout Sikh, he took part in religious acts with Muslims and Hindus as well.
- After Ranjit Singh died in 1839, the Sikh state crumbled, damaged by vicious internal battles for the leadership. Between 1845 and 1846 troops of the British Empire defeated the Sikh armies, and took over much Sikh territory.

- The Sikhs got on well with the British partly because they came to think of themselves less as subjects of the Raj than as partners of the British. Good relations between Sikhs and British came to an end in 1919 with the Vaisakhi massacre. In April 1919, British troops commanded by General E H Dyer opened fire without warning on 10,000 people who were holding a protest meeting. The troops killed about 400 people and wounded 1,000.
- When British India gained its independence in 1947, it was divided between India and the Islamic state of Pakistan. The Sikhs felt badly treated and reluctantly chose to join India. The Sikhs were unable to demand their own state because there were too few of them to resist Pakistan's claim to the Punjab. Only by siding with India were they able to keep part of the Punjab, although not before an appalling loss of life in communal massacres. Sikhs lost many of their privileges, much of their land, and were deeply discontented.

- The Sikh ambition for a state of their own was something that India would not concede. However, in 1966, after years of Sikh demands, India divided the Punjab into three, recreating Punjab as a state with a Sikh majority. This was not enough to stop Sikh anger at what they saw as continuing oppression and the unfair way in which they thought India had set the boundaries of the new state. As Sikh discontent grew, the conflict gradually changed from a purely political conflict into a confrontation between Hindus and Sikhs; and then to real violence.

- In June 1984, Indian troops launched 'Operation Bluestar'. They attacked the Golden Temple Complex, killing many of those inside, and seriously damaging the buildings. This invasion of the holiest place of the Sikhs infuriated many Sikhs, even the non-militant.



Key quotes

"Neither must Sikhs oppress nor neither should they live under oppression." (Gyani Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale)

"For the Sikh faith I am ready to sacrifice everything I have... For the safeguard and protection of the Sikh religion we must all be united... I can die but I cannot see the desecration of my religion." (Gyani Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale)

"There's also a feeling amongst Sikhs that we are sovereign. And that comes from a long history of the Sikh faith." (Dr Pritam Singh)

"With the BJP coming to power, those ideologically committed to the Khalistan movement feel that their demand now has greater legitimacy than before." (Dr Pritam Singh)

Operation Bluestar was a "massive, deliberate and planned onslaught to the life, property and honour of a comparatively small, but easily identifiable minority community." (S.M. Sikri, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India)

Key words

Ranjit Singh	Lahore	Pakistan	Punjab	British Empire
massacre	Vaisakhi	state	Hindus	oppression
India	Golden Temple	political	Operation Bluestar	violence
General E.H.Dyer				

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that Sikhism is a religion shaped by persecution, while others would argue that there are other factors for the development of Sikhism.

Some would argue that adapting to persecution is the most important influence on the development of Sikhism.

Key questions

To what extent is the aspiration for Khalistan important to Sikhs today?

Is the Punjabi language and culture important in the Sikh diaspora?

Are there any alternative explanations or conclusions to be drawn from the debate?