# RIGHTS

In India you do not cast your vote; you vote your caste.
V. N. GADGiL, Congress politician, 1995

## I

IN THE SECOND WEEK of January 1957 India's leading anthropologist addressed the annual Science Congress in Calcutta on the subject of 'Caste in Modern India'. 'My main aim in this address', began M. N. Srinivas,

> is to marshal evidence before you to prove that in the last century or more, caste has become much more powerful in certain respects, than it ever was in pre-British times. Universal adult franchise and the provision of safeguards for backward groups in our Constitution have strengthened caste appreciably. The recent strengthening of caste contrasts with the aim of bringing about a 'caste and classless society' which most political parties, including the Indian National Congress, profess.

Srinivas then went on to show how Indian politics was shot through with caste rivalries. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, one major peasant caste, the Kammas, usually supported the Communist Party of India (prompting the witticism that the party's ideology was really 'Kammanist'), whereas its rival Reddy caste backed the Congress. In neighbouring Mysore, where the Congress was in power, the Lingayats and Okkaligas fought for control of the party. In Maharashtra and Madras, the main axis of political conflict was Brahmin versus non-Brahmin. In Bihar, the landowning castes, Bhumihars and Rajputs, battled with the literate Kayasths for the top jobs in the Congress organization. In neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, where the lower castes were better organized, 'the tussle between the Rajputs and Chamars for political power is likely to get keener in the near future'.

While the constitution of India pledged itself to a casteless society, said Srinivas, in fact 'the power and activity of caste has increased in proportion as political power passed increasingly to the people from the rulers'. Thus caste was 'everywhere the unit of social action'. There were, however, some regional variations. It was 'not unlikely that the absence of powerful Brahmin groups in the North has prevented the rising of an anti-Brahmin movement and this has probably led to the popular impression that caste is more powerful south of the Vindhyas than to the north'. But, as Srinivas continued, 'there are signs, however, that caste is becoming stronger in the North. Whether caste conflict will ever become as strong as it is in the South today, remains to be seen.' [1]

Srinivas's talk was delivered in absentia, since the anthropologist himself was away in the United States. Withal, it attracted a stream of excited commentary in the English-language press. For the second general election was just round the corner. Would voters exercise their franchise according to their individual preference, as democratic theory urged them to do? Or would they instead validate the anthropologist by simply voting according to their caste?[2]

# II

The subsequent decades were to provide resounding confirmation of M. N. Srinivas's thesis. Far from disappearing with democracy and modernization, caste continued to have a determining influence in (and on) Indian society. In town or village, at leisure or at work, most Indians were defined by the endogamous group into which they were born.

True, the caste system was by no means unaffected by the economic and social changes unleashed by Independence. Inter-dining, once strictly prohibited, was quite common in the cities, and among the professional classes there were now many marriages contracted between members of different castes. The association between caste and occupation, once so rigid, was also weakening.[3]

Set against this was the growing salience of caste and caste identity in the modern domain of electoral politics. The most striking feature of Indian politics in the 1960s and 70s was the rise of the 'backward castes', of those groups intermediate between the Scheduled Castes at the bottom and the Brahmins and Rajputs at the top. Yadavs in UP and Bihar, Jats in Punjab and Haryana, Marathas in Maharashtra, Vokkaligas in Karnataka and Gounders in Tamil Nadu – these were, in Srinivas's phrase, the 'dominant caste' in their localities: large in numbers, well organized, exercising economic and social power. At election time – to use another of the anthropologist's concepts – they acted as a 'vote bank', lining up solidly behind a politician of their caste.

In Indian law these groups are known as the Other Backward Castes (or Classes), to distinguish them from the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. It was these OBCs who formed the social base and provided the leadership of the parties that were successfully to challenge the dominance of the Congress Party. The DMK, which came to power in Madras after the 1967 elections, as well as the SVD governments of the states in the north, were in essence OBC parties. Ten years later, these backward castes asserted themselves emphatically on the national stage. At least two of the four components of the Janata collective – the Lok Dal and the Socialist Party – were also, in essence, OBC parties.[4]

Economic power had come to the OBCs through land reforms and the Green Revolution; political power through the ballot box. What was lacking was administrative power. It was thus that the Janata government had appointed the Backward Classes Commission, known then, and ever after, as the Mandal Commission after its proactive chairman. The Commission concluded that caste was still the main indicator of 'backwardness'. It identified, on the basis of state surveys, as many as 3,743 specific castes which were still backward. These, it estimated, collectively constituted in excess of 50 per cent of the Indian population. Yet these castes were very poorly represented in the administration, especially at the higher levels. By the Commission's calculations, circa 1980 OBCs filled only 12.55 per cent of all posts in central government, and a mere 4.83 per cent of Class I jobs.

To redress this anomaly the Mandal Commission recommended that 27 per cent of all posts in central government be reserved for these castes, to add to the 22.5 per cent already set apart for Scheduled Castes and Tribes. For, said the Commission,

> we must recognise that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people. In India Government service has always been looked upon as a symbol of prestige and power. By increasing the representation of OBCs in Government services, we give them an immediate feeling of participation in the governance of this country. When a backward caste candidate becomes a Collector or Superintendent of Police, the material

> benefits accruing from his position are limited to the members of his family only. But the psychological spin-off of this phenomenon is tremendous; the entire community of that backward class candidate feels elevated. Even when no tangible benefits flow to the community at large, the feeling that now it has its ‘own man’ in the ‘corridors of power’ acts as morale booster.[5]

By the time the Mandal Commission submitted its report the Janata government had fallen. The Congress regimes that followed, headed by Indira and Rajiv Gandhi respectively, sought to give it a quiet burial. But when a National Front government came to power after the general election of 1989 the report was disinterred. The new prime minister, V. P. Singh, was sensible of the rising political power of the OBCs, and of his less-than-solid position as head of a minority coalition. Thus on 13 August was issued a four-paragraph government order implementing the basic recommendation of the Mandal Report. Henceforth, 27 per cent of all vacancies in the government of India would be reserved for candidates from the ‘socially and educationally backward classes identified by the Commission.

The order sparked a lively debate in intellectual circles. Some scholars argued that the criteria for job reservation should be family income, rather than membership of a particular caste. Others deplored the extension of affirmative action in the first place; by allocating one job in two on considerations other than merit, the efficacy and reliability of public institutions was being put at risk. However, there were also scholars who welcomed the implementation of the Mandal recommendations as a corrective to the dominance of upper castes, and especially Brahmins, in the public services. They pointed to the states of south India, where more than two-thirds of government jobs were allocated on the basis of caste, without (it was argued) affecting the efficiency of the administration.[6]

In September 1990 a case was brought before the Supreme Court of India, contesting the constitutional validity of the Mandal Commission’s recommendations. Three principal arguments were made by the petitioner: that the extension of reservation violated the constitutional guarantee of equality of opportunity; that caste was not a reliable indicator of backwardness; and that the efficiency of public institutions was at risk. While it deliberated on the case, the bench issued a stay of execution on the government order of 13 August.

As is so often the case in India, arguments about public policy were conducted in newspapers and courts, and also spilled over into the streets. On 19 September a Delhi University student named Rajiv Goswami set himself on fire in protest against the acceptance of the Mandal Commission report. He was badly burnt, but survived. Other students were inspired to follow his example. These self-immolators were all upper-caste Indians whose own hopes for obtaining a government job were now being undermined. Altogether, there were nearly 200 suicide attempts – of these, sixty-two were successful.

Other protests were collective. Across northern India groups of students organized rallies and demonstrations, shut down schools, colleges and shops, attacked government buildings and engaged in battle with the police. The guardians of the law sought to defend themselves, sometimes to deadly effect. Incidents of police firing were reported from six states of the Union, these claiming more than fifty lives.[7]

The conflicts sparked by the Mandal Commission recommendations were far more intense in northern India. For one thing, affirmative action programmes had long been in existence in the south. For another, that region also had a thriving industrial sector; thus educated young men were no longer as dependent on government employment. Again, while in the south the upper castes constituted less than 10 per cent of the population, the figure in the north was in excess of 20 per cent. Since there was more at stake all round, the battles, naturally, were fiercer.

Among the strongest supporters of the Mandal Commission were two rising politicians. These were Mulayam Singh Yadav, who had become chief minister of Uttar Pradesh late in 1989, and Lalu Prasad Yadav, who became chief minister of Bihar early in 1990. Both were born in poor peasant households, both became politically active at university, joining the then still influential socialist movement. Both were jailed during the emergency, and both joined the Janata Party after it was over.

As their common surname indicated, Mulayam and Lalu were from the same caste of farmer-herders scattered across north and western India. In colonial times Yadavs had often acted as the *lathials* (strongmen) of upper-caste landlords. After Independence, now with lands of their own, they had steadily gained in economic strength, social prestige and political power. Both Mulayam and Lalu actively reached out to the Muslims, another very numerous (if much poorer) community in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The arithmetic of this move was electoral, for Yadavs and Muslims each comprised about 10 per cent of the population. In multiway contests – the norm in India – 40 per cent of the vote was usually enough. So any candidate who had sewn up both the Yadav and Muslim votes and persuaded sections of other backward groups to join up had a very good chance of winning.[8]

As India’s most populous states, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh together sent 139 members to Parliament. General elections were often decided here. In the first four elections the Congress won a majority of seats in UP and Bihar. In 1977, following the emergency, the party was wiped out, but in 1980 and 1984 it recovered, winning 81 and 131 seats respectively. The last was an aberration, a consequence of the martyrdom of Indira Gandhi. In 1989 the Congress fared disastrously, winning a mere nineteen seats in the two states. When mid-term elections were held two years later, it fared even worse, winning just five seats in UP and only one in Bihar.

When V. P. Singh announced the implementation of the Mandal Report the Congress, then in opposition, was lukewarm. The elections of 1991 saw the party return to power, its poor showing in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar compensated by a strong performance in the south. Now, the numbers set out in the preceding paragraph forced a swift reassessment. Were the Congress ever to regain ground in the north, it had to woo back the backward castes. Accordingly, the new Congress prime minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, issued afresh government order on 26 September 1991, endorsing the Mandal Report but adding the ‘rider that in allotting 27 per cent of jobs to OBCs preference shall be given to candidates belonging to poorer sections’ among them.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court continued its hearings on the petition placed before it. It finally gave its verdict on 16 November 1992. Seven judges dismissed the petition, upholding the constitutional validity of the Mandal Commission and the orders which sought to implement it. Three others dissented. The judgements were characteristically prolix, filling nearly 500 closely printed pages. The dissenting judges argued that caste-collectivity’ was ‘unconstitutional’; that in deciding on who was disadvantaged, impersonal criteria such as income should be used instead. On the otherside, speaking for the majority, Justice Jeevan Reddy referred to past judgements where caste had been used as a proxy for backwardness. He invoked the example of affirmative action for black sin the United States, a precedent worthy of emulation in the present case. For,

> it goes without saying that in the Indian context, social backwardness leads to educational backwardness and both of them together lead to poverty – which in turn breeds and perpetuates the social and educational backwardness. They feed upon each other constituting a vicious circle. It is a well-known fact that till independence the administrative apparatus was manned

almost exclusively by members of the 'upper' castes. The Shudras, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and other similar backward social groups among Muslims and Christians had practically no entry into the administrative apparatus. It was this imbalance which was sought to be redressed by providing for reservation in favour of such backward classes.[9]

In upholding the government orders the Supreme Court added two caveats: that reservations should not exceed 50 per cent of the jobs in government, and that caste criteria would apply only in recruitment, not in promotions.

It was the Janata Party that had constituted the Mandal Commission in 1978; it was its new avatar, the Janata Dal, that implemented its recommendations in 1990. Its enthusiasm was not at first shared by rival parties. For the CPI and CPM traditionally saw class, not caste, as the major axis of political mobilization. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accorded pride of place to (the Hindu) religion. As for the Congress, it presumed to speak for the nation as a whole. However, by the time the Supreme Court passed its judgement, these parties were all prepared to endorse it. For they very quickly realized the political implications of the Mandal Commission Report, and the political costs of opposing it.

The controversy surrounding the Mandal Commission is reminiscent in some ways of the debate, conducted back in the 1950s, around the report of the States Reorganization Commission. As a marker of identity, caste was as primordial as language – as likely to be deplored by modernizing intellectuals, as prone to be successfully used for social and political mobilization. Then, as now, the force of argument was found powerless when faced with the logic of numbers. Then, as now, what began as a contentious and many-sided debate ended with an all-party consensus.

Most reports commissioned by the government of India are read by few people and discussed by even fewer. The reports of the States Reorganization Commission and the Mandal Commission were altogether exceptional. They were read by many, debated by many more, and actually even implemented. They may even be – if only because of the number of people they affected – the two most influential reports ever commissioned by a government anywhere.

The influence exercised by the States Reorganization Commission was direct: it led to the redrawing of the administrative map of India on linguistic lines. The Mandal Commission's influence, however, was mostly indirect. By its terms only a few thousand government jobs came up for allotment to OBCs. But the debate the Report sparked, and its eventual acceptance, provided a tremendous fillip to OBC pride and solidarity. Among the beneficiaries were the two Yadavs, Lalu and Mulayam. Both left the Janata Dal and setup their own parties, and very successfully too. Lalu's Rashtriya Janata Dal stayed in power in Bihar for more than a decade (until 2005); Mulayam's Samajwadi Party was in power in Uttar Pradesh for much of the 1990s, and he is once more chief minister of the state as I write in 2007.

## III

The 1990s also witnessed an upsurge by Dalits, as the former Untouchable castes were now known. This was led by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which was founded by a brilliant political entrepreneur named Kanshi Ram.

After the death of Dr B. R. Ambedkar in 1956, the most prominent Untouchable leader was

Jagjivan Ram. He was in the Congress, and it was in good part because of him that the lowest castes were regarded as a captive 'vote bank' by the party. The claim was challenged only in Maharashtra, first by the Republican Party which Ambedkar had founded, and later by the militant Dalit Panther organization. One consequence was that 'Dalit', meaning 'oppressed', replaced the official 'Scheduled Caste or the Gandhian 'Harijan' as the preferred self-appellation for the low castes. But, from the 1950s to the 1980s, they mostly voted for the Congress nonetheless.

For decades Jagjivan Ram had 'carried the banner of the downtrodden and stood for their interests'. His death in 1988, said an obituarist, 'left a void' which would be almost impossible to fill. 'Scattered, unorganised, leaderless and oppressed, the fate of the scheduled castes, who form 15 per cent of the country's population ... hangs precariously in the balance.'[10]

As it happened, by this time Kanshi Ram (no relation) had been active for more than a decade. Born in 1932 in the Punjab, he joined government service after university, working in a laboratory in Maharashtra, where he was introduced to the writings of B. R. Ambedkar. Thus radicalized, he quit his job in 1971 and formed an organization to represent government employees from a disadvantaged background. This was called the All-India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF). For the next decade Kanshi Ram travelled across India, building district and state chapters of the organization. By the early 1980s BAMCEF had a membership of 200,000, many of them graduates and postgraduates. This was a trade union of the Scheduled Caste elite, which, in the leader's words, would form the 'think tank', 'talent bank' and 'financial bank' for the depressed classes as awhole.[11]

BAMCEF's growth area was north India, and particularly Uttar Pradesh, where its rallies regularly attracted audiences of 100,000 and more. The organization's success emboldened Kanshi Ram to start a political party. Several names were considered, but finally it came to be called the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), 'Bahujan' being amore inclusive category than 'Dalit'. Whereas the latter represented the Scheduled Castes or former Untouchables, the former contained within it backward castes and Muslims as well.

Four decades of affirmative action had created a strong and articulate middle class among the Scheduled Castes. In the beginning, the SCs were mainly recruited at the bottom of the state machinery, filling menial jobs; over time, they came to be better represented at the higher levels, working as Class I magistrates and officers in the secretariat. The numbers in Table 26.1 are telling indeed.

A government job provided both economic security and social prestige. By 1995 more than 2 million Dalits were thus advantaged. Of course, the majority of their ilk continued to live lives that were economically impoverished as well as socially degrading – working as agricultural labourers, sweepers and construction workers.[12] Still, there was now a sizeable middle class to take their case forward. This was the class which staffed BAMCEF, and which then assumed leading roles in Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party. In this respect, the path they followed was very nearly the reverse of the OBCs. Having tasted political power, the OBCs sought to claim administrative power through the Mandal Report. The SCs, however, first acquired a stake in the administration, before seeking a greater role in party politics.

*Table 26.1 – Employment profile of Scheduled Castes in the government of India*

*No. of Scheduled castes employed SC job as % of total jobs*

| Group | 1965 | 1995 | 1965 | 1995 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Class I | 318 | 6,637 | 1.64 | 10.12 |
| Class II | 864 | 13,797 | 2.82 | 12.67 |
| Class III | 96,114 | 378,172 | 8.88 | 16.15 |
| Class IV | 101,073 | 2,221,380 | 17.75 | 21.60 |
| *Total* | *198,369* | *2,619,986* | *13.17* | *17.43* |

SOURCE: Niraja Gopal Jayal, ('Social Inequality and Institutional Remedies: A Study of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes'), paper presented at NETSAPPE Conference, Bangalore, June 2003.

The BSP made its debut in the 1984 general election. It garnered more than a million votes, but won no seats. In subsequent elections it was more successful, winning, for example, eleven seats in 1996 and fourteen in 1999. But where it really made an impression was in state elections in Uttar Pradesh. Here, the party activists successfully wooed the Dalit masses, warning them that the Congress wanted only pliant *chamchas* (sycophants) from their ranks. The BSP, on the other hand, stood for 'social justice', even 'social transformation'. Only a party of their own could enhance the dignity, pride and prospects of the Dalits.[13]

The message was carried by Dalit lawyers, teachers and officers to their less privileged brethren. Apart from holding meetings and rallies, these intellectuals published a series of tracts providing the lower castes with a heroic history of their own. These were driven by the conviction that 'till now Indian history is mostly written by Brahmins'. Now, an alternate narrative was constructed, which claimed that it was actually the Dalits who 'created cultures such as Harappa and Mohenjodaro'. But then the invading Aryans 'took away their land, alienated them forcibly, hijacked their culture, and subjected them to a state of slavery'. Throughout history this suppression had been stoutly resisted, by Dalit workers, peasants, singers and poets. Their deeds – real as well as mythical – were commemorated in booklets printed and distributed in the hundreds of thousands in the Uttar Pradesh of the 1990s.[14]

Political organization and the evolution of social conscience, working hand in hand, enabled the BSP to take impressive strides in Uttar Pradesh. Between 1989 and 2002 five assembly elections were held in the state. The number of seats won in these polls by the BSP was, successively, 13, 12, 69, 67 and 98. By the end it was garnering a steady 20 per cent of the popular vote. The BSP's gains were mostly at the expense of the Congress. This party powered by Dalits had emerged as one of the three major political groups in the state, the others being Mulayam's Samajwadi Party and the Hindu-oriented Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

By this time, Kanshi Ram had been supplanted as the BSP's main leader by a one-time protégée. Hername was Mayawati. She was born in 1956 in New Delhi, the daughter of a government clerk. Her ambition was to join the prestigious Indian Administrative Service, but an encounter with Kanshi Ram at a BAMCEF rally made her enter politics instead. At public meetings she attracted attention by her oratorical skills, with her slashing wit aimed mostly at the rival Congress Party. By the early 1990s she had become the public face of the party. Realizing that the Dalits could never come to power on their own, she sought to build cross-caste and cross-party alliances. She enjoyed three brief spells as chief minister, heading coalition governments formed in collaboration either with the Samajwadi Party or the BJP.[15]

Writing in the 1970s, the journalist and old India hand James Cameron pointed out that the prominent women in Indian public life all came from upper-class, English-speaking backgrounds. ‘There is not and never has been a working-class woman with a function in Indian politics’, remarked Cameron, ‘and it is hard to say when there ever will be. Within two decades there was an answer, or perhaps one should say a refutation, when a lady born in a Dalit home became chief minister of India’s most populous state.[16]

In other parts of the country the Dalit voice was also being heard. The ‘most significant feature of the Scheduled Castes in contemporary India’, wrote the sociologist Andreé Béeteille, ‘is their increased visibility’ . They were ‘still exploited, oppressed and stigmatized; but their presence in Indian society could no longer be ignored’.[17]

Once submissive as well as suppressed, the Dalits now knew of their rights under the Indian Constitution, and were prepared to fight for them. Indeed, the man who piloted that constitution, B. R. Ambedkar, had become the symbol and inspiration for Dalits everywhere. One anthropologist writes that ‘across Tamil Nadu, statues, portraits, posters and nameplates bearing the image of Dr Ambedkar proliferate. Halls, schools and colleges named after him abound and even his ideological opponents feel obliged to reproduce his picture and lay claim to his legacy.’[18] Much the same was true of most other states of the Union. Wherever Dalits lived or worked, photographs of Ambedkar were ubiquitous: finely framed and lovingly garlanded, placed in prominent positions in hamlets, homes, shops and offices. Meanwhile, in response to pressure from Dalit groups, statues of Ambedkar were put up at public places in towns and cities – at major road intersections, outside railway stations, in parks. The leader was portrayed standing proud and erect, clutching in his right hand a copy of the constitution he had authored.

Fifty years after his death, B. R. Ambedkar is worshipped in parts of India which he never visited and where he was completely unknown in his own lifetime. Wherever there are Dalits – which is pretty well almost every district in India – Ambedkar is remembered and, more importantly, revered.[19]

## IV

The rising self-consciousness of the Dalits was accompanied by an escalation of caste conflict. Throughout the 1990s, there were a series of violent clashes in the countryside, in which Dalits were usually on the receiving end. The root of the conflict was material – the fact that it was the OBCs or upper castes who owned the land, and the Dalits who cultivated it. But the form in which it was expressed was often ideological. That Dalits could ask for better wages or for more humane treatment was seen by their presumed superiors as a sign that they needed to be quickly, and if necessary brutally, put back in their place.

One theatre of this conflict was the southernmost districts of the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The clashes here were between the Thevars, a rising middle caste of landowners, and the landless Dalits. They could be sparked by disputes over wages, or over pique that a community once condemned to scavenging was now sending members to the Indian Administrative Service. The Dalits, emboldened, were refusing to be served tea in a separate glass at village cafés (along-standing custom). And for each statue built by the Thevars of their revered leader Muthuramalinga Thevar(1908–65), the Dalits would build a statue of Ambedkar in reply. (Indeed, some of the bloodiest clashes were provoked by the demolition by one side of a statue erected by the other.) The rows were material as well as ideological, they were frequent, and they were costly. In a single decade, caste conflicts in Tamil Nadu resulted in more than a hundred deaths.[20]

There were also comparable conflicts in northern India. We may take as representative an incident in the Haryana village of Jhajhar where, on the evening of 15 October 2002, a group of Dalits were beaten to death. Earlier that day the victims were travelling to the market, to sell hides of dead cows that they had collected. According to one version, they were halted by the police, who asked them for proof of how they had come by the hides. By another account the Dalits themselves stopped to kill and then skin a cow walking by the road. It was this latter (and less likely) version that gained currency. The rumour that a cow had been slaughtered spread through the vicinity, sparking anger because the animal is regarded as holy by upper-caste Hindus. A large mob descended on the police station and dragged out the 'violators', the men in uniform looking on. They were flogged and killed right on the main road itself.[21]

Atrocities against Dalits were by no means the preserve of caste Hindus alone. In the Punjab, the landowning Jat Sikhs resented the growing self-confidence of the labouring and artisanal castes. From the early twentieth century Dalit Sikhs had struggled for a share of the land and access to shrines (both controlled by Jats). Some Dalits sought escape in a religion of their own, named Adi-Dharm. More recently, the prosperity fuelled by the Green Revolution had opened up new possibilities for low castes: work in towns and factories and opportunities to start their own businesses. There was also a growing Sikh diaspora, which sent money back to their kinsmen in the village.[22]

Again, one conflict may be taken as representative. This was over control of a shrine in the village of Talhan, on the outskirts of the industrial city of Jalandhar. The shrine was in memory of an artisan turned saint named Baba Nihal Singh. Sikhs of all castes worshipped there, and in such numbers that their offerings made the temple one of the richest in the whole district. (The collection was estimated at Rs50 million annually.) However, the temple committee was controlled by Jats. They decided how the money was to be spent, whether in the beautification of the shrine, in building roads to the village, or on feasts. The Dalits had long asked, and long been denied, representation in the management committee. At last they decided to take the matter to court. In January 2003, while the case was being heard, the Jats announced a social boycott of the Dalits. They in turn organized a series of protest strikes. Six months later the groups clashed violently at a village fair. The administration then intervened to work out a compromise; two Dalits were inducted into the management committee, but they had to maintain Sikh tradition by keeping their hair and beard unshorn.[23]

## V

Nowhere were the Dalits so oppressed as in the state of Bihar; nowhere were they better organized to resist; nowhere were caste conflicts so frequent, so bitter, or so bloody.

The agrarian system of eastern India had historically exhibited the grossest forms of feudalism. In neighbouring West Bengal these inequalities had been attenuated by land reforms, but in Bihar they persisted into the present. The middle and upper castes owned the land, and the Dalits tilled it. From the 1970s, however, Maoist radicals had taken up their case. Although they had more or less disappeared from West Bengal, where their movement had begun a decade previously, these Naxalites had steadily gathered strength in the districts of central Bihar. They formed agricultural labour fronts which demanded higher wages, shorter hours and an end to social coercion (which, in some areas, included the right of the landlord to a low-caste bride on her wedding night). They also demanded a share of village common land, and access to natural resources such as fresh-water fish, theoretically owned by the 'community' as a whole, but usually the preserve of the upper castes alone.[24]

Their mobilization by left-wing radicals had instilled a great deal of self-respect among the lowliest in central Bihar. Travelling through the state in 1999, the journalist Mukul noticed a newfound confidence among the Dalits. Visitors were treated as social equals, and met with the salutation '*Namaskar, bhaijee*' (Greetings, brother). Unlike in the past, the Dalits 'do not fold their hands. They do not bend their body. They do not call anybody "huzur", "sahib", "sir", or anything like this. This newfound word [*bhaijee*], is heard repeated all over the region in village after village and haunts the heart.'[25]

The anthropologist Bela Bhatia writes that 'this sense of dignity is one of the principal achievements of the Naxalite movement'. Other achievements included an end to forced labour and a significant enhancement of the wage rate. Normally paid in kind, this had doubled; besides, the quality of the grain was much better than before. Once made to work twelve hours non-stop, labourers were now allowed regular breaks. And, for the first time in recorded or unrecorded history, women were both paid and treated the same as men.

The long-term aim of these radicals, however, was the overthrow of the Indian state. Open and hidden, legal and illegal, activities were carried on side by side: processions and strikes on the one hand, the collection of weapons and attacks on their enemies on the other. The Naxalites had their own Lal Sena (Red Army), whose members were trained in the use of rifles, grenades and land mines. They also had their *safaya* (clean-up) squads, whose marksmen were trained to assassinate particularly oppressive landlords.[26]

In response, the ruling elites had formed *senas* of their own. Each of the landowning castes maintained its own private army. The Bhumihars had their Ranbir Sena, the Kurmis their Bhoomi Sena, the Rajputs their Kunwar Sena, the Yadavs their Lorik Sena. The modern history of Bihar, circa 1980 to the present (2007), is peppered with gruesome massacres perpetuated by one caste/class group upon another. Sometimes, a Bhumihar or Yadav *sena* would round up and burn a group of Dalits. At other times Naxalites would raid an upper-caste hamlet and shoot its inhabitants. According to one (and certainly incomplete) list, in the years 1996 and 1997 there were thirteen such incidents, in which more than 150 individuals perished.[27] Behind this violence lay a savage and sometimes almost incomprehensible hatred. '*Mera itihaas mazdooron ki chita par likhi hogi'*, claimed one Bhumihar landlord – My biography will be written around the funeral pyres of [Dalit] labourers. '*Aath ka badla assi se lenge*!' shouted the Naxalites – If you kill eight of ours we will kill eighty in revenge.[28]

By the mid-1990s, in much of Bihar the state had no visible presence at all. As one upper-caste gunman told a visiting journalist: 'The police are *hijras* [hermaphrodites]. They should wear bangles and saris ... If a murder took place in front of their eyes anywhere hereabouts, they wouldn't have the guts to file an FIR [First Information Report]. There is no government or police. Just us Ranvirs and the M-Lvadis [i.e. Naxalites].'[29]

The growing power of the Naxalites in Bihar was spectacularly underlined by an attack on the town of Jehanabad in November 2005. Hundreds of gunmen stormed the town, rained down bombs on government offices and attacked the jail. They freed 200 inmates, mostly of their own party, among them their area commander. The operation was made easier by the fact that a large chunk of the district police force was away on election duty. Still, the act highlighted the fragility of the legally constituted state in Bihar. For Jehanabad is a mere forty miles from the provincial capital, Patna.[30]

# VI

The Naxalites were also active among the Scheduled Tribes (or adivasis), the other group recognized by the Indian Constitution as historically disadvantaged. The adivasis lived in the most resource-rich areas of India – with the best forests, the most valuable minerals, and the freest-flowing rivers. Over the years they had lost many of these resources to the state or to outsiders, and struggled hard to retain what remained.

A particular target of tribal ire was the Forest Department, which restricted their access to wood and to non-timber forest produce such as honey and herbs, which they collected and sold for a living. In the state of Madhya Pradesh, the trade in tendu leaves (used for making *bidis, or* cheroots) was particularly lucrative. The government had handed over the trade to private contractors, but the actual collection was done by the tribals. The rates were niggardly: Rs30 for 5,000 leaves. In the early 1990s the tribals demanded higher rates; when this was denied, they set up roadblocks on the state's major routes.[31]

A variety of activists were working in adivasi areas, some Gandhian in orientation, others Marxist. The causes they embraced included access to land and forests and the provision of decent schools and hospitals. These were, surely, the groups most neglected by the Indian state, and also the most condescended to. The colonial regime had designated an array of tribal communities as being 'criminal', their crime being that they lived not in settled villages but moved around in search of a living. After Independence these tribes had been formally 'denotified', but the prejudice against them remained. Officials posted in tribal districts were known for their disdain towards those whom they were paid to serve. Once quiescent, under activist influence the tribals were now moved to protest; the consequence was a series of clashes withthepolice.[32]

The most celebrated of tribal assertions in the 1990s was the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement). Its leader was a woman named Medha Patkar, who was not herself a tribal but a social worker raised and radicalized in Bombay. The movement aimed at stopping a massive dam on the Narmada river which would render homeless some 200,000 people, the majority of them adivasi in origin. Patkar organized the tribals in a series of colourful marches: to the dam site in Gujarat, to the city of Bhopal (capital of Madhya Pradesh, the state to which most of those affected belonged), to the national capital, Delhi, there to demand justice from the mighty government of India. The leader herself engaged in several long fasts to draw attention to the sufferings of her flock.[33]

Patkar's struggle was unsuccessful in stopping this particular dam, but it did draw wide attention to the government's disgraceful record in resettling the millions displaced by development projects. Official acknowledgement of the long history of adivasi suffering, meanwhile, came through the creation in 2000 of two new states of the Union, named Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, carved out of the tribal districts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh respectively. Also formed was the state of Uttarakhand, from the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh, likewise rich in natural resources and likewise subject to exploitation by powerful external interests.

# VII

From conflicts in the heartland of India we now move to conflicts in the extremities. Pre-eminent here was that old sore spot, Kashmir. After a quiet decade or two, the Valley erupted in the first months of

1989. In November of that year Rajiv Gandhi was replaced as prime minister by V. P. Singh. Singh appointed a 'mainstream' Kashmiri politician, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, to the powerful position of home minister. This was a gesture meant to please the Muslims of India in general and the Muslims of the Valley in particular. With one of their kind in charge of law and order, surely the police would bear down on them less heavily than before?

The experiment was very soon put to the test. On 8December 1989 a young woman doctor was kidnapped as she walked to work in Srinagar. But this was no ordinary medic; the lady was Rubaiya Sayeed, the daughter of the Union home minister. She had been abducted by militants of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). They demanded that, in exchange for her release, five specified JKLF activists be freed from detention. The chief minister, Farooq Abdullah, did not want to yield to the threat. He was overruled by the prime minister in Delhi. On the 13th, the jailed militants were released; a large crowd welcomed them and marched them triumphantly through the streets of Srinagar. Among the slogans they shouted, one was especially ominous: '*Jo kare khuda ka kauf,utha le Kalashnikov'* – If you wish to do God's work, go pick up a Kalashnikov. Later that day, Rubaiya Sayeed was reunited with herfamily.[34]

The government's capitulation was regarded as a major victory by the militants. Further kidnappings followed: of a BBC reporter, of a senior official, of another daughter of a prominent politician. There was also a series of assassinations: those killed included the vice-chancellor of Kashmir University and the head of the local television station.[35]

At this stage, circa 1989–90, Indian intelligence reported as many as thirty-two separatist groups active in the Valley. Of these two were especially important. The first was the JKLF, which stood for an independent, non-denominational state of Jammu and Kashmir, in which Hindus and Sikhs would have the same rights as Muslims. Its goal was captured in the popular cry, *Hame kya chhaiye? Azaadi! Azaadi!* (What do we want? Freedom! Freedom!). The second was the Hizb-ul Mujahideen, which (as its name suggests) veered more towards an Islamic regime and was not averse to a merger of the state with Pakistan. The Hizb-ul was led by Syed Salauddin, the *nom de guerre* of a once democratic politician who had contested the 1987 elections but been denied victory by blatant vote rigging. It was then that he turned to the gun, and to Pakistan, taking many other young men withhim.[36]

Both the JKLF and Hizb-ul had amassed a wide variety of arms. With these they killed soft and hard targets, looted banks and dropped grenades in front of police posts. Their acts grew more daring; in November 1990 they even launched a rocket at the studios of All-India Radio. The government now decided to take a tougher stance, moving in paramilitary forces and some army units to help maintain order. By 1990 there were as many as 80,000 Indians in uniform in the Valley. Thus, 'the attempt to find apolitical solution was put a side in favour of a policy of repression'.[37]

The situation in Kashmir is tellingly reflected in this series of newspaper headlines, all from the year 1990:

Youth to the fore in secession bid
Blasts rock Kashmir Kashmiri
militants hang policeman in Srinagar
Pakistan blamed for rebellion in Jammu and Kashmir
Army joins battle against militants in Kashmir
Troops called out in Anantnag, curfew imposed
Security forces kill 81 militants
3 die in firing on J&K procession

Total bandh in Kashmir, headless bodies found
J and K trouble claims 1,044 [lives] till Sept[ember]
'People Power' in Srinagar: Curfew lifted, shops shut
Tricolour burnt at UN office
5 lakh attend J&K 'freedom'rally
'Independence alone can heal Kashmir's wounds'[38]

The inhabitants of the Kashmir Valley were caught in the cross-fire, although, as the last few headlines suggest, their sympathies lay more with the militants than the security forces. Those who might have been neutral were persuaded to take sides following the murder in May 1990 of the respected cleric Mirwaiz Mohammed Farooq. A massive crowd of mourners accompanied his body to the burial ground. Somewhere, somehow – the details remain murky – they got into an altercation with a platoon of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The CRPF men, in panic, fired on the mourners, killing thirty and injuring at least 300 others. The Mirwaiz's assassins were apparently in the pay of Pakistan, but by day's end the propaganda war had been decisively lost by India.[39] The alienation of the Kashmiris was deepened by the behaviour of those sent apparently to protect them. Indian soldiers, and more particularly the CRPF men, were prone to treat most civilians as terrorist sympathizers. Their actions were documented by Amnesty International,[40] but also by Indian human rights activists. In the spring of 1990 a team led by the respected jurist V. M. Tarkunde travelled through the Valley, talking to government officials, militants and ordinary villagers. Many cases of police and army excesses' were reported: beatings (sometimes of children), torture (of men innocent of any crime), extrajudicial (or 'encounter') killings, and the violation of women. 'It is not possible to list all the cases which were brought to our notice', commented Tarkunde's team,

> but the broad pattern is clear. The militants stage stray incidents and the security forces retaliate. In this process large numbers of innocent people get manhandled, beaten up, molested and killed. In some cases the victims were caught in cross-fire and in many more cases they were totally uninvolved and there was no cross-firing. This tends to alienate people further. The Muslims allege that they are being killed and destroyed because they are Muslims.[41]

# VIII

In 1990, as in 1950, radicals in Kashmir were giving politicians in Delhi a severe headache. So too, and perhaps predictably, were radicals in the north-east.

There was good news from the largest state in the region, Assam. An accord had been reached with the Bodos, allowing for an 'autonomous council' to be formed in those districts where that community was in amajority.[42] The bad news was that the secessionist United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was very active. Some parts of the state were securely under the control of the official administration whereas in other parts it was the writ of ULFA that ran. Practically every tea plantation paid an annual sum to the rebels, this based on the numbers of workers the estate employed and on its profitability. To further augment their coffers the insurgents mounted raids on banks. Army units were sent in to restore order; they captured and killed some top ULFA cadres, and others fled over the border into Bangladesh.[43]

The 1990s were also a turbulent decade for the state of Tripura. Armed groups fighting for tribal rights regularly attacked settlements of immigrant Bengalis. Here, too, insurgency was sometimes hard to distinguish from sheer criminality. As one researcher wrote in 2001, 'innocent deaths, kidnappings and extortions are a regular part of life in Tripura and have been for many years now'. Nearly 2,000 killings were reported between 1993 and 2000 – of security men, insurgents and, most numerous of all, civilians.[44]

The gun was also ubiquitous in Manipur, another tiny state that had once been an independent chiefdom. The violence was chiefly a product of ethnic rivalries. The majority Meiteis, who lived in the valley, clashed with the tribals in the uplands. In the hills too there were divisions, principally between the Thangkul Nagas and the Kukis. In May 1992 Naga militants burnt Kuki villages, starting a deadly cycle of massacres and counter-massacres. While fighting among themselves, these groups were all opposed to the Indian state. Some Kukis, and more Thangkuls and Meities, dreamt of forming independent nations of their own.[45]

In several towns in the region separatists had banned the screening of Hindi films, that hugely popular conduit of the culture of the subcontinent. This was part of a defiant definition of themselves as '*not*-Indian'. In this negative identification, ULFA, the Tripura National Volunteers, the Kuki National Army and the Meitei rebels all took inspiration from the Nagas, creators of the mother of insurgencies in the north-east. In 1962 one Naga faction had made its peace with the government of India, as had another faction in 1975. But there remained a group stubbornly committed to the idea of an independent and sovereign Nagaland. This was the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, led by Isaak Swu and T. Muivah.

The NSCN had a solid core of several thousand well-trained fighters. They operated from bases in Burma, making raids across the border and engaging the Indian army. Within Nagaland the rebels commanded support, respect and perhaps also fear. At any rate, they were sustained by collections made from the public. Even government officials paid a monthly 'tax' to the underground, this a curious if typically Indian paradox, the subsidizing by the state of a group committed to its destruction.

In the mid-1990s, however, a collective of church groups and civil society organizations called the Naga HoHo persuaded the rebels and the government to declare a ceasefire. In 1997 the guns fell silent and the two sides began to talk. At first the conversations were held in Bangkok and Amsterdam, but eventually Muivah and Swu agreed to visit India. They met the prime minister and travelled to the north-east, but failed to clinch an agreement. There were two stumbling blocks: the rebels' insistence that a settlement had to be outside the framework of the Indian Constitution and their demand that parts of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, where Naga tribes lived, be merged with the existing state of Nagaland into a Greater Nagalim.

By July 2008 the ceasefire had held for nearly eleven years. Yet a mutually satisfactory solution remains, if not out of reach, at least out of sight. The government of India says it will give the Nagas the fullest possible autonomy, but with in the terms of the Indian Constitution. The NSCN insists that any solution must acknowledge Naga sovereignty, for – it claims – 'Nagaland was never a part of India either by conquest by India or by consent of the Nagas'.[46] It also asks for the retention of a separate Naga army. Anything less would be a betrayal of the memory of those who died for the cause. In Phizo's native village there is a stone memorial bearing the inscription 'These men and women of Khonoma gave their lives for the vision of a Free Naga Nation. We remember them and still hold fast to their vision'.[47]

The calls for a Greater Nagalim have been resisted by states who would have to cede territory to this new entity. The Meities of Manipur have militantly opposed the proposal, claiming that their state had existed as an independent and integrated territory for over a thousand years. In the summer of 2001 Meitei radicals torched government buildings and attacked police posts in protest against talks with the Nagas. Posters were pasted on the walls of homes and offices, proclaiming: 'Do not Break Manipur/No Compromise on Our Territory'.[48]

The north-east is a region of violence and conflict, and hence also of migration. Some of it is a cross national borders, as in the continuing immigration from Bangladesh. Others move within the region, some in search of jobs, some fleeing ethnic persecution. There is also a growing number of 'environmental refugees'. In the 1960s a high dam in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of East Pakistan displaced some 60,000 Chakmas. Since they were second-class citizens anyway (as Buddhists in a state dominated by Muslims), they sought refuge in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, where they live on, still second-class, denied passports by the Indian government. Meanwhile, a series of dams being built in Arunachal and Nagaland will render homeless up to 100,000 villagers. These too will have to move elsewhere, in search of that essential resource so very scarce everywhere in South Asia, cultivable land.[49]

There is a massive military presence in the north-east. The states of the region variously border China, with whom India has fought a costly war, Bangladesh, with whom India has a profoundly ambivalent relationship, and Burma. But it is not merely for external security that the Indian army has so many men here. They are also needed to maintain the flow of essential goods and services, protect road and rail links, and, not least, suppress rebellion and insurgency. 'We have no say vis-à-vis the army', says along-serving Manipur chief minister: 'They have their own way of working, they will not tell us or listen to us, although they are supposed to be aiding the civil administration.'[50]

In the north-east the army operates under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (APSPA), which gives its officers and soldiers immunity from prosecution by civil courts, unless specifically permitted by the central government. Since the Act also grants permission to 'fire upon or otherwise use force even to the extent of causing death' anyone suspected of breaching the law, it has acted as an incentive to aggressive behaviour.

For many years now human rights groups have asked for the repeal of the APSPA. In the lead are the women of Manipur, long active in opposing male violence of all kinds. The state has dozens of local Meira Paibis (Women Torch Bearers) groups. These campaigned successfully against alcoholism before turning their attention to the excesses of the security forces. The Meira Paibis have demanded that troops leave schools and marketplaces, that they stop detaining young boys at will and that they open up their prisons and detention centres to public scrutiny.[51]

These demands were renewed in July 2004, when a Manipuri housewife was picked up from her home on the charge of abetting terrorism. She was tortured, raped and killed, and her body left to rot by the roadside. The incident sparked a wave of angry protests in the Manipur valley. A group of women marched to the army base in Imphal, where they took off their clothes and covered themselves with a white banner carrying the legend 'Indian Army, Take our Flesh'. A student leader set himself on fire on Independence Day, leaving a note which read: 'It is better to self-immolate than die at the hands of security forces under this Act. With this conviction I am marching ahead of the people as a human torch.' A girl student went on an indefinite fast; taken to hospital, she still refused to eat. Several years later she lay in her bed, force-fed by the state because she said she would rather die than live under a regime run by the military.[52]

# XI

In May 2000 the population of India reached one billion. The government chose a girl born in Delhi as the official 'billionth baby'. Aastha Arora's arrival was greeted by an excited mob of press and television cameramen who clambered onto beds and tables to get a better shot. 'The billionth baby', noted one reporter wryly, 'was greeted by a zillion flashlights and doctors say her skin could have been affected'.[53]

The choice of Aastha was politically correct, since the United Nations had recently observed the Year of the Girl Child. Yet it was flagrantly at odds with how girls – born or unborn – were treated in many parts of India, not least the countryside around Delhi. Throughout the preceding century the sex ratio had been steadily falling – from 972 females to 1,000 males in the year 1901 it had dropped to 947 by 1951 and 927 by 1991. Child mortality was highly variable by gender. In most Indian homes boys were treated better than girls – provided more nutritious food, better access to health care and sent to school while their sisters laboured in field and forest. From the 1980s advances in medical technology had worked to make more lethal an already deadly prejudice. Thus, the new sex-determination test allowed parents to abort female fetuses. Although illegal in India, the test was widely available in clinics throughout the country.

By the turn of the century demographers were releasing data that was chilling indeed. For the period 1981-2001, and the age group 0–6 years, the number of females born per 1,000 males had fallen from 992 to 964 in Andhra Pradesh, 974 to 949 in Karnataka, 967 to 939 in Tamil Nadu and 970 to 963 in Kerala. The changes were more dramatic in northern India. In Haryana the ratio had fallen from 902 to 820 between 1981 and 2001. In Punjab, the fall had been even greater, from 908 to 793.[54]

The falling sex ratio in Haryana and Punjab had led to a 'crisis of masculinity'. According to the traditional rules of marriage, one's spouse had to be from one's caste and linguistic group, though not usually from one's village. As boys grew into men, an increasing number found that brides were simply unavailable in the locality. So they contracted unions with girls from hundreds of miles away, belonging to other states, castes and linguistic groups. During the 1990s and beyond, women from the states of Assam, Bihar and West Bengal were being sought – and, occasionally, bought – by men from Haryana and Punjab. These 'cross-region' liaisons were sometimes informal, at other times legitimated through the ritual of marriage. Questions remained about how the offspring of these highly unusual unions would be treated by a society still bound, in most other respects, by the ties of caste and kinship.[55]

The variations in gender relations were spatial as well as cultural.[56] Indian women were treated better (or less badly) in the south and in the cities. In the urban context they were somewhat more free to go to school, take a job and choose their life partner. There was a rising class of women professionals making their mark – sometimes a considerable mark – in the law courts, hospitals and universities. Successful women entrepreneurs were running advertising agencies and pharmaceutical companies.

There was also a vigorous feminist movement. This was based in the cities and led by writers and activists, who produced a steady stream of high-quality essays and books on the lives and struggles of women in modern India.[57] After years of lobbying politicians, these feminists were able to bring about a change in the law that would principally benefit their less fortunate, rural-based sisters. This was an amendment to the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which, for the first time, brought agricultural land under its purview, allowing women the same inheritance rights here as men. Another amendment brought female heirs on par with males with regard to Hindu joint families (where sons had previously had claim to a greater share than daughters). The economist Bina Agarwal, whose own work on gender and agriculture had been a critical influence, said of these changes that 'symbolically, this has been a major step in making[Hindu] women equal in the eyes of the law in every way'.[58] Sadly, social practice remained another matter.

# X

An old teacher of mine used to say that 'India is a land of grievance collectors'. The characterization is incomplete, for Indians do not merely collect grievances, they also articulate them. In the 1990s, as before, a variety of rights were being asserted by a variety of Indians, and in a variety of ways. However, as before, while some conflicts were being expressed in more intense and violent forms, other conflicts were being attenuated and even, at times, resolved.

There was, for instance, the return of peace to the state of Mizoram. The leaders of the Mizo National Front (MNF) had made a spectacularly successful transition; once insurgents in the jungle, they were now politicians in the Secretariat, put there by the ballot box. Peace had brought its own dividend in the form of water pipelines, roads and, above all, schools. By 1999 Mizoram had overtaken Kerala as India's most literate state. The integration with the mainland was proceeding apace; Mizos were learning the national language, Hindi, and watching and playing the national game, cricket. And since they also spoke fluent English (the state's own official language), young Mizos, men as well as women, found profitable employment in the growing service sector, in hotels and airlines in particular. Mizoram's chief minister, Zoramthanga, was speaking of making his territory the 'Switzerland of the East'. In this vision, tourists would come from Europe and the Indian mainland while the economy would be further boosted by trade with neighbouring Burma and Bangladesh. The Mizos would supply these countries with fruit and vegetables and buy fish and chicken in exchange. Zoramthanga was also canvassing for a larger role in bringing about a settlement between the government of India and the Naga and Assamese rebels. It was easy to forget that this visionary had once been a radical separatist, seeking independence from India when serving as the defence minister and vice-president of the Mizo government-in-exile.[59]

The troubles had also been resolved, more or less, in the state of Punjab. Here the process had been more tortuous. In 1987 President's Rule was imposed on the state, and repeatedly extended for six months at a time. Without elected politicians to report to, the police energetically chased the militants, by means fair and foul. Gun battles were common, quite often around police posts but also in the countryside. In 1990 the army was called in to help; a year later it was withdrawn. In 1992 elections were at last held to the state assembly. The Akali Dal boycotted the polls and the elected Congress chief minister, Beant Singh, was killed by a suicide bomber not long after he took office.

In 1993, however, the Akalis returned to democratic politics by taking part in elections to local village councils. Four years later they won an emphatic victory in the assembly polls. By this time militancy was perceptibly on the wane. Some terrorists had become extortionists, squeezing money from Sikh professionals and from ordinary peasants. The popular mood had turned away from the idea of a separate state of Khalistan. Sikhs once more saw the advantages of being part of India. Agricultural growth had slowed down, but trade was flourishing and the state's languishing industrial sector was being primed for revival.[60]

A sign of normality was that the Akalis, now in power, were fighting among themselves, individuals and factions vying for control of particularly prestigious or profitable ministries. The veteran chief minister Prakash Singh Badal sought to transcend these squabbles through a celebration of the 300th anniversary of the proclamation by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, of the Khalsa, or Sikh brotherhood.[61] His Government allotted Rs3,000 million for the festivities, and the centre chipped in with a further grant of Rs1,000 million. New memorials to Sikh heroes were built, along with new sports stadia, shrines and guest houses. At the great *gurdwara* of Anandpur Sahib, Sikh intellectuals and writers were honoured in a colourful ceremony attended by both the chief minister and the prime minister. One of those felicitated, the novelist and journalist Khushwant Singh, noted with satisfaction that this once 'alienated community' had 'regain[ed]its self-esteem and resume[d] its leading role in nation-building'.[62] The costs, however, had been heavy. By one reckoning, more than 20,000 lives were lost in the Punjab between 1981 and 1993 – 1,714 policemen, 7,946 terrorists and 11,690 civilians.[63]

In February 2005 I visited Punjab for the first time in three decades. At the time, the prime minister of India was a Sikh; so was the chief of army staff and the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission. That Sikhs commanded some of the most important jobs in the nation was widely hailed as a sign of Punjab's successful reconciliation with India. Travelling through the state myself, I could not tell that the insurgency had ever happened, that the troubles had lasted as long as they did. A spate of fresh investments suggested that things were now very stable indeed. There were signs everywhere of new schools, colleges, factories, even a spanking new 'heritage village' on the highway, serving traditional 'Punjabi food to the sound of Punjabi folk' music.

I drove the entire breadth of the state, from the town of Patiala to the city of Amritsar. My last stop, naturally, was the Golden Temple. The temple was as tranquil as a place of worship should be; spotlessly clean, with orderly queues of pilgrims whose eyes shone with devotion and wafts of music coming in from the great golden dome in the middle.

It was only when I entered the Museum of Sikh History, located above the main entrance to the temple, that I was reminded that this was, within living memory, a place where much blood had been shed. The several rooms of the museum run chronologically, the paintings depicting the sacrifices of the Sikhs through the ages. Plenty of martyrs are commemorated on its walls, the last of these being Shaheeds Satwant, Beant and Kehar Singh. Below them lies a picture of the Akal Takht in tatters, with the explanation that this was the result of a 'calculated move' of Indira Gandhi. The text notes the deaths of innocent pilgrims in the army action, and then adds: However, the Sikhs soon had their revenge'. What form this took is not spelt out in words, but in pictures: those of Satwant, Beant and Kehar.

To see the killers of Indira Gandhi so ennobled was unnerving. However, down below, in the temple proper, there were plenty of contrary indications, to the effect that the Sikhs were now thoroughly at ease with the government of India. A marble slab was paid for by a Hindu colonel, in grateful memory of the protection granted him and his men while serving in the holy city of Amritsar. Another slab was more meaningful still; this had been endowed by a Sikh colonel, on 'successful completion' of two years of service in the Kashmir Valley.