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15 August, 1947 Wasn't "Independence Day" for India's Sikhs

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India celebrates its Independence Day on 15 August every year, but that occasion isn't seen the same way by its Sikh minority, which found itself victimized by the state ever since and even subjugated to a campaign of genocide against them.

Indians all across the world celebrate Independence Day on 15 August every year, but the Sikh minority has an altogether different interpretation of events and doesn't see that day the same way at all. At its inception, the idea of India was sold as a multicultural, plurinational, and polyconfessional democracy that would be established over most of the territory of the former British Raj, but the reality turned out to be the opposite as its many non-Hindu citizens soon found out. Even the name "India" is just as fake as the dream behind it since it's based off of the Indus River, the majority of which is located in modern-day Pakistan and which the locals call Sindhu. That in and of itself should have suggested that they were being misled, but the Sikhs who joined India unfortunately found out the hard way after it was too late.

Instead of embracing the inspirational values that it was purportedly founded upon, India revealed itself to just be the name of the hastily rebranded power structure that the Hindu majority inherited from their former colonizers, but they went a step further and intensified the state's oppression of its minority groups. One of the first signs for the Sikhs that something was very wrong should have been with the promulgation of the Indian Constitution in 1950, which doesn't recognize their faith as separate from Hinduism per Explanation II to Article 25(b) of the Indian Constitution, thus forcing them to follow legal traditions other than their own. It's therefore understandable why the community eventually began to demand autonomy for Punjab through the revolutionary 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution, but it wasn't until the 1980s that outright separatism took off.

The Indian military attacked one of Sikhism's holiest sites, the Harmandir Sahib (popularly known abroad as the Golden Temple), during its 1984 "Operation Blue Star" to kill religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Thousands of pilgrims were massacred during the onslaught and the Sikh Reference Library, which housed an irreplaceable collection of materials related to Sikh history, was destroyed. The Sikhs therefore considered this attack to be an assault against their religion and punishment for some of its followers embracing the Khalistani cause of independence for Punjab, which naturally led to the irreversible ruining of relations between this community and the Indian state. It also didn't help any that the Indian military commenced "Operation Woodrose" right afterwards and began detaining and even executing innocent Sikhs in a campaign of terror.

A few months later, two of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in relitation, and a subsequent state-supported genocide against the Sikhs commenced. Tens of thousands of them were killed over several days, which showed the Sikhs that they can't ever be truly safe as long as their homeland remains part of India. Hundreds of thousands of them later fled and joined diaspora communities in Canada, the UK, and the US, but it was from that point onward that the struggle for Khalistan actively began. The ensuing decades saw India try to stamp out this self-determination movement with ruthless force, but it's impossible to apply a military solution to a political problem, and the government hasn't succeeded in its attempt to kill this ideology. In fact, the Khalistani cause has only grown stronger since then and is about to climax next year.

The Sikhs For Justice (SFJ) are organizing the Referendum 2020 campaign to hold a peaceful plebiscite on the issue of Punjab's independence, but India fears the upcoming vote because it's afraid of internationalizing the issue and drawing attention to its atrocious treatment of the Sikh minority ever since independence that's responsible for sparking this movement in the first place. Over the past month, India banned the SFJ on the false pretext that it's allegedly a "Pakistani-backed terrorist group" and authorized eight states to utilize the so-called "Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act" (UAPA) to crack down on the entire Sikh community as part of its disproportionate response to the Referendum 2020 plans. It should be noted that an amandment to the UAPA was just passed that would give the government the right to declare anyone a "terrorist" if it enters into law.

These very disturbing moves hint that India might be preparing to impose the dreaded "Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act" (AFSPA) in part or all of Punjab ahead of next year's vote, which proves that the Khalistani cause is much more popular than the government admits and poses a serious challenge to the rampant Hindu supremacy that's existed since the country's inception but become undeniable after Modi's rise to power in 2014. Given the fast-moving events of the past month and the history of the Sikhs in post-independence India in general, it makese sense that the community doesn't regard 15 August as their Independence Day, but as the beginning of a nightmare that continues to this day and won't end until their own independence from India, the cause of which will be greatly advanced following next year's planned vote.

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