Voices of Resistance: Peacebuilding Efforts by the Women in the Left Movement during Militancy in Punjab

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This paper examines the role of women's activism in the Punjab Istree Sabha (PIS) – a Left-leaning movement in Punjab - during the decade of militancy (1980s–early 1990s). The research utilises oral history and archives, including newspaper articles, interviews, and reports, to explore how women resisted violence, mobilised communities, and employed cultural and religious idioms to promote peace. The study reveals how PIS used strategies such as theatre, scripture-based messaging for peacebuilding, political resistance and grassroots relief work. The paper offers insights into gendered forms of activism and the significance of women's agency in conflict transformation.

Keywords: Punjab militancy, Resistance, Women's activism, Left movement, Punjab Istree Sabha

Introduction

The decade of militancy in Punjab, spanning from 1980 to the early 1990s, remains one of the most violent and polarising chapters of Independent India. The Khalistan movement was demanding a separate Sikh homeland. This movement rapidly escalated into armed conflict, resulting in over 25,000 deaths.[1] The Operation Blue Star in June 1984 was a watershed moment, not only in the history of Punjab, but the entire country. The desecration of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army, coupled with the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to avenge the desecration of their holiest shrine and the subsequent anti-Sikh pogroms, entrenched cycles of fear, resentment, and violence across Punjab.

[1] Kristina Roessler Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 16, no. 2 (2009): 975.

Scholarship on this period often emphasises state repression, militant mobilisation, and diaspora networks. However, counter-movements that resisted both communalism and authoritarianism have received limited attention. Among these, the role played by the Punjab Istree Sabha (PIS), a women's organisation affiliated with the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW),[2] is particularly significant and remains largely unexplored. PIS used both communist principles and teachings from Sikh traditions to mobilise women, organise protests, provide relief, and disseminate messages of peace and communal harmony.

The involvement of PIS demonstrates how women, often positioned as the worst sufferers of conflict, also acted as active agents of resistance. Through protests, relief work, cultural interventions, and strategies rooted in both Marxist and Sikh egalitarian ideals, PIS members emphasised alternative visions of peace and justice. They confronted militants in public, risking their own lives offered solidarity to bereaved families, collaborated with artists and writers, and established institutional mechanisms like the Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust (PISRT) to support victims of militancy as well as police excesses in Punjab. This paper seeks to document and analyse these contributions, drawing upon archival records, oral histories, and cultural texts. By situating PIS within the broader framework of women's political activism and resistance, the study highlights how gendered forms of agency provide a more nuanced approach to an otherwise dominant understanding of militancy and its aftermath in Punjab.

Methodology

The details of the significant work undertaken by the women from PIS have not been documented or researched. Few historical accounts, even those of the women's movement in the country, capture the history of women in the communist movement in organising working-class women.[3] Consequently,

[2] The National Federation of Indian Women is a women's organisation in India, the women's wing of the Communist Party of India.

[3] Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (London: Routledge, 2018); Parvathi Menon, "Breaking Barriers: Official Life Histories of Communist Women Leaders," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 43 (2005): 4601–4609.

this research relies primarily on archival sources and oral history interviews as its key methodologies.

The primary materials include regional newspaper articles, NFIW publications, conference proceedings, and oral history interviews of women leaders accessed from the archives of Nehru Memorial Library. Interviews were conducted with women who were involved in the PIS during the militancy period. Songs and poems form a rich source of insight into the sociocultural context of the time. Although many were never formally documented, they survive in the memories of those who experienced that era. Many of these slogans and protest songs were composed and sung by women during the militancy. Kannabiran et al posit that, these stories and songs that resist power structures, and describe incidents of fighting against injustice, are ways for women to communicate those "stories that never saw the light of the more public modes of patriarchal cultures".[4] Since these stories have been marginalised in the written culture traditionally, oral history becomes very relevant. Documenting these rich traditions is of crucial importance as it brings those aspects of history into light which are otherwise in danger of being "condemned to historical silence by archival absence".[5]

An overview of the militancy in Punjab

From 1980 to 1992, the state of Punjab was "riven by an internecine, anti-state conflict involving a movement to establish a separate independent Sikh state of Khalistan. It is estimated that upward of 25,000 people were killed in this time period, the majority of whom, despite the communal rhetoric of the movement, were Sikhs".[6] A lot of research has been done to delve deeper into the historical, political, social, and cultural factors that were instrumental in causing strife in the state of Punjab.[7] The moment of rupture was Operation

[4] Vasantha Kannabiran et al., *"We Were Making History": Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle* (Hyderabad: Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1993), 28.

[5] Janaki Nair, *The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61.

[6] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement," 975.

[7] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Harjot Singh Oberoi, *From Punjab to Khalistan: Territoriality and Metacommentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985).

Blue Star, in which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave orders to the Indian army to march inside the Golden Temple to oust the militants and their leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, who had been residing there for months. Curfew was imposed in Amritsar, and the public awaited with trepidation what would follow. Soon after, the army entered the Golden Temple, where Bhindranwale was housed. Some 40 other shrines (gurdwaras) were attacked by the Army, where militants were suspected to be hiding.[8] This included shrines in Patiala, Tarn Taran, and Moga.[9] The siege of the Golden Temple lasted until 6 June. These dates were controversial since 5 June is Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom day, and many devotees were flocking to the Golden Temple at that time. The siege, apart from the death of Bhindranwale and his followers, also led to the demise of many innocent civilians as well as army officials.

The incident shook the people of Punjab. Until Operation Blue Star, Sikhs had mixed opinions about Khalistan or the demands made by Bhindranwale. But the desecration of their holiest shrine did not sit well with the Sikh community. Tully & Jacob argue that one of the most controversial incidents of the entire operation was the burning of the Golden Temple Library, which housed invaluable manuscripts, including copies of the Guru Granth Sahib handwritten by some of the Gurus.[10] The Sikhs went into a state of unrest. Many resignations from official posts were tendered. There were rebellions by the Sikh army officials in their battalions in several regions across the country. The soldiers who had occupied the Golden Temple reportedly smoked and consumed alcohol within the complex, thereby disrespecting the ritual customs of the shrine, which created further antagonism among the people.[11] The police also committed a lot of human rights violations in the state, in the name of curbing militant activities.[12]

Militant activities continued in Punjab unabashedly despite the death of their leader, Bhindranwale. On 31 October 1984, the Indian Prime Minister, Indira

[8] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2004.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 1985.

[11] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2004.

[12] Amnesty International, *India: Break the Cycle of Impunity and Torture in Punjab* (London: Amnesty International, 2003).

Gandhi, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards at her residence. The incident shook the entire country. As a result of this act, a pogrom[13] against Sikhs was launched in New Delhi, with its repercussions seen across the country. It led to the death of thousands of people in a span of two to three days.[14]

In 1986, the formal call for Khalistan gained renewed momentum within Punjab and across the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. These organisations collected money to help procure arms and ammunition for the militant outfits in Punjab.[15] Through the draconian use of power by the state, militancy was finally curbed by the year 1992. However, it left an indelible mark on the history of Punjab and its people. Counterinsurgency operations resulted in widespread violence, with several thousand losing their lives, and excesses committed by both the militants and the police. Reports by Amnesty International (2003) and Human Rights Watch (2007) document human rights excesses, including extrajudicial killings and disappearances of thousands of men. These operations were most common in the border districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Ferozepur.[16] This period was marked with pervasive violence and fear as people suffered at the hands of militancy as well as the police-led counterinsurgency movements of the state. However, many movements and individuals continued to work towards unity and peace in the state and helped those who were in need. The genesis of PIS can be traced to pre-independence Punjab, during the independence struggle.[17] It was also one of the first organisations in Punjab to initiate work

[13] A violent riot against the people and property of a religious, racial or national minority.

[14] Tully & Jacob note that "The government itself admits that throughout India more than 2,717 people were killed in the anti-Sikh riots. Almost all of them were Sikhs. Some 2,150 died in Delhi. According to official estimates, 50,000 Sikhs fled from the capital of their country to Punjab for safety. Another 50,000 took refuge in special camps set up by the government and voluntary organisations." Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 7.

[15] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2004.

[16] Amnesty International, *India: Break the Cycle of Impunity and Torture in Punjab*, 2003; Human Rights Watch, *Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007).

[17] See Aastha Dang, "Were the 1950s–70s Really the 'Dead Decades' of the Indian Women's Movement? Understanding the Work of Punjab Istree Sabha through an Alternate History Perspective," *Research Journal (Arts)* 21.

against militancy and coordinate relief work for the families who had suffered due to it.

Role played by the Punjab Istree Sabha during the militancy

Vimla Dang (the then president of PIS and founding member of NFIW) and her fellow members realised that when a society suffers from militancy or any violent activities, it is the women who are the worst sufferers. Examples from across the world are proof of this. Anderlini says that in times of war and strife, women are among the first to speak out collectively against it to prevent things from going out of hand. This is also because women are aware of the cost they and their families have to pay for the war and the crisis it entails.[18] Thus, women employ non-violent strategies to advocate for peace. Women often establish independent organisations to strengthen such efforts, creating spaces that reflect their own ideals and strategies, distinct from those shaped under male leadership.[19]

These aspects were seen in the case of Punjab during militancy as well. Glimpses of some of these efforts by women were found in the NFIW conference proceedings and publications. For instance, the NFIW (1986) highlights the role of women in fighting communalism. The editorial refers to the demand of Khalistan among other such issues, and says,

> Today, women of all communities are equally victims of various aspects of religious fundamentalism. The propagandists of this ideology claim roots in old cultural traditions and religious practices. By misquoting the scripture or quoting them out of context, they deny women the right to equality, dignity, and freedom, which they have won after hard struggles for several centuries.[20]

Thus, it is important to view the efforts of PIS in strife-torn Punjab in the 1980s and early 1990s in this context. Women from PIS were the first ones to reach

[18] Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).

[19] Cynthia Cockburn, "Gender in Armed Conflict and Peace Processes," *Cyprus Review* 13, no. 1 (2001): 53–72.

[20] National Federation of Indian Women, *Congress Report* (1986), 2.

out to the families of the victims of militancy, as well as the police led counterinsurgency. They would travel across Punjab in case of any death or violence. Sometimes they would hold protests in support of the family that had lost their loved ones. This was a mark of solidarity and a defiance of the militants' dictate. Normally, after a death, most people would refrain from establishing contact with the family, since it could "endanger" them, too. But the women in PIS did the opposite to show their solidarity with the family and their courage and resistance to such violence. Following Indira Gandhi's assassination and the subsequent riots in Delhi, the PIS was one of the earliest organisations to arrive at the sites of violence. Vimla Dang, describes in her interview the extent of the "massacre that happened in Faridabad and Delhi". The delegation of women from PIS went to Delhi, in areas like Sultanpuri, Mangolpuri, Shahdra, where mass killings happened. Aruna Asaf Ali[21] led a campaign, the AISF did a peace mission.[22]

Official documents provided insights into the proceedings and broad work undertaken by the PIS. However, these records do not delve into the personal experience of the people involved in those struggles within the context of their times. In this quest, I turned to the method of interviews. Kumud Sharma posits that the term "oral history embraces a range of practices and attempts to bring alive a past that the written words have failed to capture."[23] This research draws on interviews with second-generation members of the PIS in Chheharta (Amritsar) and Chandigarh, whose recollections—based on stories told by their parents—provided rich contextual insights. A few of them had been involved in the anti-militancy movement in Punjab during the 1980s and were able to share their own first-hand experiences of those times. During an interview with Comrade Pali, one of the members of PIS, she remembered how they would continue to hold meetings in the militancy-affected villages,

[21] Aruna Asaf Ali was an influential Indian independence activist, educator, and politician, renowned as the "Grand Old Lady of Indian Independence" for her pivotal role in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and her work in advocating for social reforms. She was also the founding member and President of the NFIW in India.

[22] These oral history interviews were found in the archive section of the Nehru Memorial Library. Most of these leaders had passed away by the time this research was conducted. G. Chibbar, "Vimla Dang: Oral History Interview Transcript," Oral History Project, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2006.

[23] Kumud Sharma, *Memory Frames: Oral Narratives of Four First Generation Women's Studies Scholars* (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 2005), 7.

despite the lurking threat to their lives. She recalled that in one of the meetings in Jallalabad village, the tensions were palpable due to the militant presence as they assembled the people for a convening.[24] PIS decided to conduct a conference for women there. They travelled by bus. During the conference, militants stood nearby with weapons, observing throughout. The PIS members spoke against militancy without direct provocation, often quoting sermons and verses from the *Guru Granth Sahib* that condemned such violence. Vimla Dang, along with others, had arranged the meeting. Their meeting ended, and the people went back. While they were waiting for the bus, militants passed in front of them, chanting that they (the militants) had won.

During this period, a slogan coined by one of the PIS members became widely popular, echoing through rallies organised by women activists, trade union members, and left leaders across Punjab. The slogan went as follows, "*Addwad Wakhwad Murdabad, Na Hindu Raj, Na Khalistan, Jug Jug Jive Hindustan*".[25] It means they didn't want a Hindu-ruled land *or* a Sikh-ruled land; they only wanted a long and happy life for their country, India.

Another incident recalled by a respondent was when a family suffered a major blow by the militants, who killed almost everyone, except for a boy in class nine. Although the respondent was a government schoolteacher, she took a month's leave to care for him. Her association with the PIS often placed her in danger. On one occasion, militants arrived at her school and threatened to kill her if she did not end her activities. She recalled another instance during a *bandh* announced by militant groups, when a Hindi examination was scheduled. Although the militants discouraged the use of Hindi, she went to school to help conduct the exam. They confronted her again, warning her to stop her work with the organisation. She reiterated her stance that she was not doing anything wrong, and finally asked them—How many languages does Gurbaksh Singh[26] know? In challenging the militants' attempts to silence them,

[24] Interview with Comrade Pali, member of the Punjab Istree Sabha (PIS) in Chheharta, Amritsar, 15 October, 2017.

[25] Chibbar, "Vimla Dang Oral History Interview," 2006.

[26] Gurbaksh Singh was born in Sialkot in 1895. He obtained a diploma in Civil Engineering from Thomason College, Roorkee, before securing an engineering degree from Michigan University. He returned to India to serve the motherland and joined the Indian Railways. His landmark achievements included his contribution in the construction of Gurdwara Panja Sahib in 1935 and the establishment of the Punjabi literary magazine *Preet*

the respondent invoked Punjab's reformist past, citing social reformers whose transformative work was being eroded by the regressive ideology and violent actions of the militants.

Communist activists and PIS women strategically employed Sikh scriptures and teachings to frame their appeals for peace, unity, and communal harmony within culturally resonant idioms. One of the leaders of the PIS composed a song with reference to Guru Tegh Bahadur saving Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmiri Muslims. The song achieved wide circulation, becoming a fixture at PIS meetings and community gatherings in villages most affected by militancy, where it served as a cultural expression of resistance and hope. These included areas like Tarn Taran in the Majha district and Amritsar. Some of the lines from the song are as follows:

Ghata kaliyan chaiyan ne, Ghata kaliyan chaiyan ne,
Desh Punjab mere nu, kisne nazara laiyan ne,
Phulan vich gulab da naa (naam)
Saara jag jaana hain, Mere sone Punjab da naa (naam)
Hanju cham cham vagde ne,
Hanju cham cham vagde ne,
Vaidyan toh sun pai gai, Mele madiyan vich lagde ne,
Mele madiyan vich lagde ne.

[Black clouds have gathered all around,
Who has cursed my Punjab, just like among flowers,
The name of Rose is acclaimed, in a similar way,
The name of my Punjab is acclaimed throughout the world,
Tears drop from my eyes,
Tears drop from my eyes,
Courtyards have become desolate, and

Lari as well as Preet Nagar, a Mecca to progressive thinkers and writers. Celebrated thinkers like Mulk Raj Anand, Balraj Sahni, Shobha Singh, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi, to name a few, either lived in or frequented Preet Nagar Gurbaksh Singh, being a literary connoisseur, also knew various languages. By quoting his example, the point being made was that Gurbaksh Singh, one of the most well-respected personalities in Punjab, was someone who knew various languages, respected and facilitated writings in these languages. By using this logic, the respondent was countering the militants' logic that, as a Sikh, one should not be promoting or facilitating other languages within the state (Sharma 2019).

> Fairs (people collectivising) are happening in the graveyards.][27]

Vimla Dang, in her oral history interview, says,

> The technique of using scriptures was employed to create a feeling of humanity among the people. When they would say these words from the Guru Granth, the women who would be listening to these words would cover their heads with the chunni. Using these techniques, they requested not to use places of religion to spread militant activities.[28]

PIS engaged in close collaboration with poets and theatre artists, using performances and literary platforms as tools to foster critical awareness and collective reflection on the violence of militancy. For instance, Amrita Pritam, veteran novelist, activist, and the first prominent female poet in Punjabi, had composed a song during India's partition in 1947. This composition is a plea to the 18th-century Sufi poet Waris Shah (of the Heer Ranjha fame) to speak from his grave and capture the tragedy of Punjab, a land ravaged by violence, blood and corpses. PIS members used this poem as a response to the violence of militancy and the growing secessionist movement for Khalistan. Some of its lines are as follows

> *Aj akhan Waris Shah nu ti kon kabran vichon bol*
> *Te aj ki tabe ishq da koi agla var ka phol*
> *Ik roi sidhii Punjab dii tu likh-likh mare vain*
> *Aj lakkhan dheeyan rondian tainuu n Waris Shah noon kahan*
> *Uth dard mandaan diya dardiya*
> *Uth tak apna Punjab!*
> *Aj bele laashaan bichiyaan*
> *Tey lahu dii bhari Chenab!*
>
> [I say to Waris Shah today, speak from your grave,
> And add a new page to your book of love.
> Once, a daughter of Punjab wept, and you wrote your long saga.
> Today, thousands weep, calling to you, Waris Shah,

[27] Translation from Nakul Singh Sawhney, dir., *Once Upon a Time in Chheharta*, feature-length documentary (India, 2007).

[28] Chibbar, 2006.

Arise, o friend of the afflicted.
Arise and see the state of Punjab,
Corpses strewn on fields,
And the Chenab flowing with much blood.] (translation mine)

Gursharan Singh, a leading playwright and theatre activist, revolutionised Punjab's cultural landscape by reimagining theatre as a tool of political consciousness. Beginning in the 1960s, when theatrical activity was minimal, he took his performances to rural areas in 1969, defying the notion—widely held among artists and writers—that theatre could not resonate with rural audiences. He worked tirelessly for the cause of the working class, farmers, labourers, women, Dalits, and anyone who was oppressed, through his courageous plays. During militancy, PIS members also acted in some of these plays. They also used this platform to spread messages of peacebuilding among the people of Punjab. These plays were performed in remote villages of Punjab, which were impacted by the militancy. In an interview, his daughter, Navcharan, reflected that her father consciously created space for women's participation in rural theatre. He did this by refusing to begin performances until the women were free from their domestic chores and could join the audience—an act that subtly challenged prevailing gender norms. Parul, in her article, writes, "During the days of militancy in Punjab, he staged a play, *Hit List*, a direct attack on terrorists who had him on their hit list".[29]

Such actions are indicative of the layered nature of resistance within the movement. By ensuring the attendance of women in these performances, activists contested entrenched gender norms even as they resisted the broader climate of insurgency and militant violence in Punjab. Rajan posits that "'Resistance' is a term that has a range of meanings, from describing an intransigent attitude or behaviour; a deliberate course of oppositional action; a 'natural' counterforce to an organised collective movement for change ('activism') by individuals and people subjected to various kinds of domination. Increasingly, any 'agency' is treated as synonymous with resistant agency. It is not (yet) a revolutionary term since, as we notice, it is a praxis that is reactive to domination rather than one that initiates a

[29] Parul, "Ode to a Revolutionary," *The Indian Express*, June 30, 2019, 7.

transformation".[30] Resistance within the anti-militancy movement took multiple, intersecting forms. It was evident in theatre performances that advocated communal harmony; in women's defiance of militant dress codes; in the determined journeys of PIS leaders who cycled through Amritsar at the epitome of violence; and in Pash's revolutionary poetry, which challenged militancy despite the mortal danger he faced. Each act embodied everyday defiance against violence - both ideological and physical.

These plays were unique in their dialogic form, as theatre artists directly engaged with audiences. This strategy was pivotal in ensuring that the message of peace and solidarity was both accessible and powerful. Despite the constant threat of violence, women, children, and the elderly gathered to witness these plays, transforming theatre into a collective act of both courage and resistance. In urban Punjab, this performative resistance extended to a wider sphere through street theatre. Through these performances, they discussed the issues of militancy, killings by the militants, excesses being committed by the state police, etc. Across Punjab's villages, protest marches brought together PIS members, left political groups, and cultural activists. By invoking the philosophy of Bhagat Singh, these processions transformed public spaces into arenas of political education, using his ideals to counter communal polarisation and promote social consciousness. This was also done to counter the appropriation of Bhagat Singh by some militant and political forces, who were using his teachings to spread misinformation.[31]

It was not just the women in PIS, but also other leaders who deployed the strategy of using holy scriptures to propagate the message of peace. Comrade Darshan Singh Canadian, killed by the militants on 25 September 1986, also used this strategy. In one of his most famous speeches, in which he addressed a gathering, he clearly articulated that Guru Nanak rejected reactionary views. He said that the tenth Guru describes Khalsa as "the one who protects the interests of the people. The terrorists track down each opponent of Khalistan, try to kill him and, if possible, his family, too. The readers should judge for themselves whether these Sikhs are those of the Gurus or do they belong to

[30] Rekha S. Rajan, "Feminism and the Politics of Resistance," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 154.

[31] Anand Patwardhan, *In Memory of Friends*, documentary film (1990).

Aurangzeb".[32] Darshan Singh used these teachings to denounce the propagation of the militants and their narrow view of the "Khalsa" or Sikh land. These lectures exerted a significant influence, as they strategically employed religious teachings to contest the militants' appropriation of Sikh identity and their self-ascribed authority as its guardians. Dilbaag, a member of the CPI, in his interview, said that when the militants confronted Darshan Singh Canadian on the fateful day of his death, they did not kill him instantly. There was an argument for 45 minutes on religion and how it is interpreted. When they were unable to win the argument on theological lines, they killed him. A procession was taken out the next day, extolling Darshan Singh's work and protesting the merciless killing.[33] Vimla Dang especially remembers the spirit of his wife, Banso, even in that time of grief. Vimla writes,

> I remember just how, before the cremation, Banso had mounted the van decorated with the red flags on which the martyr's body had been placed, and, as it drove at the head of the funeral procession from Langeri to Mahipalpur, how she had stood in the front, shouting vociferously, 'Down with Extremism and Separatism', 'Hindu-Sikh Ekta Zindabad', 'Comrade Canadian Lal Salaam'... It required great courage for a woman in her situation to do that.[34]

There were some individual incidents as well, where women showed a lot of grit in the face of death and violence. One such incident involved Bibi Jaswant Kaur, wife of Comrade Harnam Singh. The incident has been described in the NFIW Bulletin in the following words:

> 9 April 1988 was a day like any other for Dr Harnam Singh, MLA, his wife, Jaswant Kaur, and their family, who lived in the village of Shahbad in Haryana. At 8.15 in the evening, there was a loud rapping at the front door. Dr Harnam Singh opened the door to find a stranger standing before him. He was quick to spot the pistol in the stranger's hand and bit his hand hard. The pistol fell. A struggle ensued, and two

[32] Satyapal Dang, *Darshan Singh "Canadian": Terrorism in Punjab* (New Delhi: Patriot, 1987), 49.

[33] Interview with Dilbaag (member of the Communist Party of India), Chandigarh, Punjab, 20 February, 2018.

[34] Ibid., 94, n.p

> more people emerged from the dark. In the meantime, Jaswant Kaur, her son, daughter-in-law, and a nephew had also come out from the inner room to see what the matter was. Jaswant Kaur caught hold of the first assailant, named Gurjaint Singh (a dreaded terrorist), by his hair. In the ensuing fight, Dr Harnam Singh broke an arm, and his son, daughter-in-law, and nephew lost their lives. The two men then tried to get to Jaswant Kaur and free their companion. She bravely restrained her captor with her bare hands, refusing to release him even as bullets struck her and her family lay dead or wounded around her. Finally, unable to free their companion, the other two shot him dead and escaped.[35]

For this act of courage, the Haryana government awarded Rs 50,000 each to Jaswant Kaur and her husband. The lane on which their house stood has been renamed "*Shaheedon ki Gali"* (The Martyrs' Lane) to honour those of her family who died fighting the extremists.[36] This also shows how the state's token gestures through compensation or symbolic recognition of victims operate as mechanisms of self-exoneration. They allow the state to project empathy while evading accountability and suppressing uncomfortable political questions. Responding to these questions has the potential to expose the realities and, in turn, blur the boundaries of good and evil that are created by the state.[37]

These incidents served as a stark reminder to leaders and women involved in the left movement and the PIS of their constant exposure to danger within a deeply volatile political environment. In Chheharta, the Communist Party comrades and workers devised a strategy to ensure their safety. In most cases, the men were involved in the trade union movement of left political parties such as the CPI, while their wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law became active in the PIS. While many leaders went underground under threat from militants, their partners continued the relief work and agitation through PIS. However, the uncertainty was not easy to live with. This is demonstrated through the following incident. One of the leaders of the PIS, Vimla Dang's

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[35] National Federation of Indian Women, *NFIW Bulletin on Militancy and Relief Work in Punjab* (New Delhi, 1988).

[36] Ibid.

[37] Yasmin Saikia, "Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh," *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004).

husband, Satyapal Dang, was also under threat and thus had to go underground for several months.

Vimla Dang continued to stay in their one-room set above the Chheharta party office. Some security guards were deputed at the party office, where Vimla Dang resided. Since her room was on the terrace, the surrounding walls were raised to protect her from potential sniper attacks. The routes Satyapal was to travel across Punjab were kept undisclosed—even from him—for security reasons. It was a period of great uncertainty. Vimla, in one of her diaries, has written about the challenges they faced in that period. At one point, when the killings of communist leaders were rampant, Satyapal's life was also at great risk. He went underground, and his whereabouts were unknown to her. She continued to remain in Chheharta throughout the period, steadfastly organising PIS activities and sustaining the organisation's presence at the local level. However, internally, she was in a state of turmoil as she feared for the safety of her partner. They exchanged brief notes through their lunch box, which became her only assurance of his safety.

Members of PIS and the NFIW also suffered huge losses during this period in Punjab. An active member of the NFIW, along with her husband and brother-in-law, was gunned down by the militants due to the work they were doing to maintain Hindu–Sikh unity. Many other members also lost their near and dear ones.[38] Activists and people from literary circles, who used their writings, poetry, and plays to counter the militants, were also not spared. A stalwart who was killed in the year 1988 was Avtar Singh Sandhu (better known by his pen name, Pash).[39] Murphy posits that Pash, like Darshan Singh Canadian, invoked the teachings of the Gurus in his opposition to separatism.[40] He was a vocal critic of Hindu nationalist forces as well as of the excesses committed

[38] NFIW, *Congress Report* (1986), 2.

[39] Pash was a famous poet of Punjabi literature in the 1970s and 1980s. He was inspired by the Naxalite movement and known for his poetry of resistance. The four volumes of his poetry—*Loh Katha*, *Udadiyan Bazan Magar*, *Saddey Sameyaan Vich*, and *Khilre Hoye Warke*—have been translated into several languages. He was gunned down by militants on 23 March 1988 at the age of 38, along with his friend, right outside his house, in the fields. He was to leave for the US the next day since his life was under threat, and he was in India to get his visa renewed. Winkle Sandhu, "Pash, My Father," *The Tribune*, May 24, 2020.

[40] Anne Murphy, "Writing Punjabi Across Borders," *South Asian History and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2018): 8.

by the police. In his work, Pash consistently engaged with themes of inequality and oppression, underscoring his belief that the gravest threat to humanity emerges when individuals lose critical consciousness—when they cease to question structures of power or relinquish the capacity to imagine and strive for a more just and inclusive world. With an increase in deaths and atrocities committed by the militants, the police also increased the rampage against them. In this process, they committed a lot of atrocities against the civilians on the grounds of suspicion.

Women were the worst sufferers, as they lost their family members to terrorist deaths or to police custody. Excesses like rapes and physical violence were also committed by the police in huge numbers, and there was no place for reprieve.[41] It was in this context that PIS intensified the campaign against all these atrocities and brought national leadership of the NFIW to the fore in the fight against militancy. At the peak of militancy, Aruna Asaf Ali visited Amritsar, and from there the PIS launched "*Aman* van", a peaceful procession. To build national solidarity against the escalating militancy and violence in Punjab, NFIW leaders organised a countrywide tour from Delhi, in which PIS members and leaders also took part. The delegation travelled through interior regions across India—from Kashmir and Rajasthan to Punjab, the North-East, and Bengal—linking diverse borderlands and conflict zones. The procession's success lay in its inclusivity, uniting women's organisations, trade union activists, and prominent cultural figures in a collective assertion of peace and secularism. These peacekeeping processions included the likes of poet Kaifi Azmi[42], his daughter, Shabana Azmi, and actress Dina Pathak.[43] By participating in these events organised by PIS on the issue of Khalistan, they not only lent support to the movement but also helped it gain traction. In

[41] Laws and Lacopino say that "Punjab police retaliated with systematic torture and summary executions. In addition, police arrested, detained without charges, systematically tortured and killed thousands of Sikhs who were perceived to be sympathetic to the militant movement. One recent report documented that more than 2,000 persons killed in police custody were cremated illegally in one district of Punjab alone". Ami Laws and Vincent Iacopino, "Police Torture in Punjab, India: An Extended Survey," *Health and Human Rights* 6 (2002): 197.

[42] Kaifi Azmi was an active member of IPTA and a Communist Party member

[43] A veteran actress, Dina Pathak, was also a member of IPTA and in the executive council of the NFIW.

addition, it significantly contributed to raising funds for the victims of militancy, for whom the PIS was actively undertaking relief work.[44]

In an interview, Ameera Sultana, a daughter of a PIS member recounted the moving speeches by PIS leaders that highlighted the suffering of women and children in Punjab during the militancy. Many times, these women started crying while giving the speeches, which also moved the crowds to tears. Collective mourning in a public space is both a political act and a way of resistance. Shared emotions consolidate the collective identity, along with being therapeutic.[45] De Volo also points out that this act of collective mourning is very much gendered too, as "collective public expressions of mourning might have a better public reception if those grieving are women".[46] Ather Zia describes the political importance of collective acts of mourning or grief by women in places like Kashmir. She says these acts go beyond formal modes of resistance and, in a way, subvert social expectations.[47] These women from PIS use emotions to connect with the people and create a sense of collective identity. This act of connecting with people in a way that resonates with their most vulnerable aspects goes a long way in building and showing solidarity. As Zia says, these are crucial ways in which women operate in the public and political sphere and offer their resistance.[48]

Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust

A major achievement of the PIS was the establishment of the Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust (PISRT) in 1989. This awareness emerged as PIS undertook its peace operations, during which the organisation became deeply conscious of the harsh socio-economic realities faced by people on the ground, particularly women and children. When the members interacted with family members of the deceased due to militancy or during the counterinsurgency operations by the police, they were struck by the realisation that apart from

[44] Shared by Ameera Sultana in an interview during the fieldwork conducted by the author at Chheharta, Amritsar on 17 February 2018.

[45] Lorraine De Volo, "Collective Mourning and Public Memory: Gendered Practices of Grief," *Sociological Perspectives* 49, no. 4 (2006): 462.

[46] Ibid., 462.

[47] Ather Zia, "'Their Wounds Are Our Wounds': A Case for Affective Solidarity between Palestine and Kashmir," *Identities* 27, no. 3 (2020): 357.

[48] Ibid., 357.

emotional upheaval, this also led to economic stress. Such a situation would lead to children dropping out of school and entering the workforce, and with this would come all their vulnerability to child labour. Although the government offered Rs 20,000 to the families of the deceased, it was not enough to support the families through the crisis. On many occasions, this compensation was delayed due to administrative hurdles, compounding the suffering of these families. The editorial of the NFIW (1988) discusses this issue, stating,

> Women have been the worst sufferers in this situation. Hundreds of women have lost their husbands; thousands of children have become orphans. The memory of murderous assaults haunts those who saw their dear ones being dragged out of their homes, made to stand in a row and shot dead. And then there are numerous examples of entire families having been wiped out, kerosene sprinkled on their dead bodies, and homes set on fire.[49]

PIS advocated with the government to increase the quantum of compensation, given the economic hardships the families were facing. They also demanded an increase in the pension for widows (fixed at Rs 250 per month) who were not keen to take up a government job. PIS demanded that this sum be increased to Rs 500.[50] Many widows, whether affected by militancy or police violence, also faced disputes with their in-laws over their late husbands' property and were often entangled in prolonged litigation. To address this, PIS recommended that the Deputy Commissioner establish a committee of officers to resolve such cases promptly.[51]

In the year 1984, after the anti-Sikh pogrom, the PIS workers started a campaign to collect clothes, utensils, and money for the victims and their families. They managed to raise an additional Rs 30,000, over and above other collected items, which was distributed to the victims through the NFIW. PIS also set up a scholarship fund for orphaned children in Punjab through which scholarships were provided to around 65 children till 1988. They initiated a solidarity movement across states, organising meetings, cinema shows, and

[49] *NFIW Bulletin* (1988), 01.
[50] Ibid., 02.
[51] Ibid., 02.

youth festivals to raise funds through other NFIW members.[52] The movement was a resounding success.

Recognising the success of this initiative and the transparency in allocating funds to the victims, CPI MP Gurudas Dasgupta contributed Rs 6 lakhs, which he had received as a reward for exposing a multinational company. It was this contribution that led to the inception of the PISRT on 17 January 1989. The primary objective of the trust was to support families—particularly women and children—who had been affected by militancy, such as those who had lost their main breadwinner. The money from the trust was used for various activities, depending on the needs of the people—capacitating women in some skills to ensure a livelihood for them; awarding scholarships to children, including money for books, so that their education could continue; ensuring provision of rations and medicines for family members if required. However, the trust's foremost aim was to ensure that children from such families could continue their education, despite financial difficulties or other hardships at home.

The PISRT funded education through scholarships for children whose families had lost the breadwinner, whether to militants or to police. It also helped the families of militants or suspected militants who were killed during this period by the police under their counterinsurgency operations. PISRT worked across Punjab, but its central office, as well as the focus of work, was in Chheharta, Amritsar. Their aim was to assist families affected by violence (both from the militancy as well as the police), irrespective of which side of the spectrum they belonged to. Over the years, this trust has supported the education of several children, especially orphans. The trust received funds from people across the country due to the excellent reputation it had earned, as noted by several donors to the PISRT during the interview. This was possible due to the trust's impeccable record-keeping, painstakingly maintained by the PIS leadership. The detailed notes and meticulous records of expenditures, found in the diaries during fieldwork, were invaluable in understanding the work and activism undertaken, which would otherwise have remained undocumented. Each donor received a letter detailing exactly how their contribution had been utilised. Preparing these records required considerable manual effort, to

[52] Ibid., 03.

which the leadership devoted several hours on a regular basis. This also highlights how the life of an activist encompasses multiple dimensions, extending far beyond agitations and on-the-ground politics

Conclusion

The history of militancy in Punjab has often been narrated through binaries of militants versus the state, secessionism versus nationalism, or Sikhs versus Hindus. Yet, this research on PIS shows that the lived realities are far more nuanced. Women activists protested against both militant violence and the state's authoritarian excess, carving out a space for alternative political praxis. They undertook resistance through material support, public protests and using cultural idioms for resistance despite widespread fear and repression. The experiences of the Punjab Istree Sabha during this period reveal that resistance in Punjab was not confined to militants and the state but extended into grassroots spaces shaped by inter alia, women's activism. Far from being passive sufferers, PIS members asserted agency through protests, cultural work, and sustained relief operations. The women in the PIS used religious scriptures, poetry, and theatre as effective tools of protest and messaging for peace and unity across the length and breadth of Punjab. Even in the face of threats by the militants, they supported the bereaved families and relentlessly pursued the objective of peaceful solidarity.

The Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust was a crucial institution that became an emblem of not only providing financial support for victims, their families, and orphans but also symbolising their solidarity efforts. The alternative archives, oral history interviews and diaries of the women involved in the peacebuilding efforts reveal how memory unfolds, especially in the time the narratives are captured. Punjab, during the 1980s and 1990s, was hit by both militancy and counterinsurgency launched by the state apparatus to counter the militants. While the impact of the counterinsurgency has been widely documented and debated, official records and archival documents largely overlook it, offering only fleeting references.[53] The PISRT worked with the women and children who were impacted by both the militant and police excesses, yet specific incidents, at least in the documents, were only those of

[53] Sanam Sutirath Wazir, *The Kaurs of 1984: The Untold, Unheard Stories of Sikh Women* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2024).

militant killings. It was only during a few interviews conducted during this research that the incidents of police excesses, sexual violence inflicted on women by them and the impact on families were mentioned. Grewal and Sabherwal argue that the prevailing perception of the period of violence in Punjab is that it was ultimately subdued by the state apparatus.[54] While the police excesses under the garb of draconian laws like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) enabled violence, "people's memories did not organise themselves around these legal dimensions".[55]

During an interview with one of the women from Punjab Istree Sabha, she did mention that while their initial focus was to rehabilitate families impacted by militancy, they soon realised the magnitude of violence by the police on the "militants" and the impact on their families. Thus, the broader objective of PISRT was to work towards the rehabilitation of anyone impacted by violence. However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many leaders of the leftist movement viewed the state's counterinsurgency measures as regrettable, yet necessary. This can probably be attributed to the significantKaura losses the left movement in Punjab had to face due to militant activity. Murphy notes that, although many within the CPI opposed the formation of Khalistan and the actions of the militants, they did not hold the state accountable for the excesses it committed. In contrast, figures such as the poet Pash highlighted the brutalities perpetrated by both sides through their literary and artistic works.[56]

This paper attempted to research and document the voices of women involved in political movements during a tumultuous period in Punjab. It raises various questions which can benefit from a more detailed study, such as the intersection of communism with theism. The members of PIS propagated their political viewpoint through cultural and social symbolism, which people, especially women, could relate to. They even used religious scripts from the Guru Granth Sahib during militancy to propagate the message of peace and harmony. And although communism historically strives to stay away from

[54] Inderpal Grewal and Sharanjit Sabherwal, "Slow Violence in Post-1984 Punjab: Remembering, Forgetting and Refusals," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 344.

[55] Ibid., 345.

[56] Murphy, "Writing Punjabi Across Borders," 2018.

religion, rather denouncing it, the traditions of Sikhism are embedded within the overall work of PIS, especially during the period of militancy. This was critical in both contextualising and relating their overall messages to the people of the region. In this context, a potential area for research is the way communism, or any political movement, negotiates everyday beliefs and religious practices while maintaining its core principles

Another potential area for research. A critical area of research is to understand the role and experiences of women in larger political and leftist movements in India. Future research should particularly examine the experiences of women associated with these movements through their kinship with male members, as their narratives may reveal both their contributions to the movement and the domestic as well as organisational challenges they faced. These issues are critical to explore, which remain largely invisible in current scholarship. Understanding these experiences is essential for exploring the gendered nature of contemporary Indian politics, as well as the contributions of women to broader socio-political contexts. Music has historically served as a medium of political communication, critiquing existing social norms and mobilising protest.[57] Despite this long-standing relationship between music and politics, it has received limited attention in academic and social-science research. While this study does not explore the topic in full depth, it documents numerous protest songs from the 1980s that offer a rich insight into the culture of political protest.

Many of these songs remain undocumented, surviving only in women's memories, sometimes passed to subsequent generations, often losing words and nuances in the process. In conclusion, the research reiterates that oral narratives, songs, and diaries serve as crucial methodological tools for reconstructing and understanding the experiences of women and marginalised communities. These sources complicate the silences of official records, positioning women's memories as critical archives of resistance. Situating the work of PIS and the experiences of its members during militancy provides insights which otherwise remain lost and confined to only those who experienced it. It underscores that women, through everyday acts of courage and care, reshaped the terrain of conflict. Reflecting on the contributions of

[57] Sumangala Damodaran, "Protest and Music," in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*, ed. William R. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

these women activists not only enriches the historiography of militancy but also affirms the relevance of feminist and left movements in envisioning peace and social justice during times of rupture.

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