

# Counter Terrorism in the Indian Punjab: Assessing the ‘Cat’ System

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This paper examines the evolution and efficacy of the ‘cat’ system of Police counter-terrorist operations developed during the Punjab militancy.

The ‘cat’ system was the use of pseudo-terrorist techniques to infiltrate terrorist groups. It involved the use of specially recruited infiltrators and systematically turned captured terrorists as intelligence assets for tracking down listed terrorists. These ‘cats’ on making contact with active terrorists, provided actionable intelligence which helped the security forces engage otherwise elusive targets. This paper shall demonstrate that the ‘cat’ system, when standardized into a key attritional weapon for counter-terrorism, dealt heavy, though not crippling, blows to the Punjab terrorists’ morale as well as operational capability.

The origins of the term ‘Cat’ cannot be attributed to K.P.S Gill, the legendary Police officer most associated with counter-terrorism in Punjab, as suggested by some sections of the Indian media.<sup>1</sup> Most likely it was a colloquialism coined in 1986 by

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<sup>1</sup> Interview of K.P.S. Gill, New Delhi, January 3, 2005.

Police officers in Amritsar District, in the context of pseudo-terrorist gangs that were formed to help locate real gangs. The term was drawn from the analogy of using a 'cat' to seek out mice, with counter-terrorism being viewed as a cat and mouse game.

The spectacular success of Indian counter-terrorism in Punjab was due to sheer attrition of the terrorist movement, while political efforts were repeatedly made to reach a respectable compromise. The 'cat' system was a tactical-operational instrument of considerable short, medium and long-term utility within this much broader attritional strategy. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the 'cat' system, when viewed through the prism of the pseudo-terrorist concept, emerges as an effective tool used to root out terrorism in Punjab.

## **The Pseudo-Terrorist Concept**

Within the spectrum of counter-terrorist concepts, the 'cat' system falls squarely in the range of activities covered by the term 'pseudo-terrorist operations'. Pseudo-terrorist operations essentially involve dispatching security force (SF) personnel masquerading as terrorists into areas of high terrorist activity, to make contact with real terrorist cadres. The SF personnel need to be schooled in terrorist terminology and armed with terrorist weaponry in order to masquerade convincingly as terrorists and so learn the latter's whereabouts from their supporters in the local population. Once the real terrorists are situated accurately in terms of time and space, they can be surgically neutralized with minimal disruption to the local populace; this would not be possible if large, indiscriminate sweeps were used to locate them. Such pseudo-terrorist gangs would ideally include former terrorists who, upon capture, have been turned against their colleagues by a combined offer of reward and escape from

punishment, should they co-operate. These 'turned terrorists' are different from those who are turned while still within a terrorist group, and who thus become clandestinely recruited informers-in-place. The pseudo-gang's turned terrorists mainly help the masquerading SF personnel bluff their way into making contact with the real terrorists. They function not as informers, since they no longer occupy a place in their original gang's ranks from which they can secretly feed information, but as established members of the pseudo-gangs.

The secretive nature of pseudo-terrorist operations leaves them open to speculation and criticism. This is especially true when the mass media is manipulated into being an instrument of propaganda. In the case of Punjab, the terrorists alleged that Police sponsored pseudo-gangs carried out massacres of innocents in order to defame the terrorist movement. When the victims of terrorist attacks came to be the families of Policemen, the terrorists alleged that central intelligence services carried out the attacks. When, as the deaths mounted, this argument too began wearing thin, the terrorists claimed that the massacres of Police families were a response to Police atrocities.<sup>2</sup> However, the original propaganda of Police sponsored death squads indulging in deniable operations continues to attract the odd conspiracy theorist.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Satypal Dang, *Terrorism in Punjab*, New Delhi: Gyan, 2000, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> A prime example is Patricia Gossman, who embarrassed Indian human rights groups after using them to investigate the 'cat' system and then publishing reports of Government-sponsored 'death squads'. Interview, Inder Malhotra, New Delhi, January 4, 2005.

## The Early Years (1984-1988)

### The Collection and Exploitation of Strategic Intelligence

In the pioneering case of pseudo-operations in Kenya (1954), unconventional tactics were adopted to locate terrorists due to the fact that the intelligence units assigned to gather terrorism-related information could only provide strategic intelligence.<sup>4</sup> Real time contact information needed by the military units to pinpoint the location of terrorist cadres was hard to obtain. The gap between strategic intelligence and contact information was effectively bridged by using pseudo-gangs. They would infiltrate an area that strategic intelligence had identified as live, operating there until they touched base with real terrorists. The key to the whole endeavour, however, was having a fairly detailed strategic intelligence picture in the first place.

Until September 1984, the Punjab Police did not maintain any records of terrorist activities or of the measures being taken to combat these.<sup>5</sup> This was partly due to the nebulous nature of the terrorist movement itself, and the fact that no Indian Police force had previously faced such a phenomenon. Initially, some terrorist activity was confused with violent organized crime, some with political violence and the remainder with communal hooliganism. Only in late 1983, was it realized that a serious subversive threat existed. The ruthlessness of targeted assassinations carried out by the terrorists from their sanctuary in the Golden Temple initially paralysed the Police.

The assumption of a firmly offensive posture following the storming of the Golden Temple (*Operation Blue Star*, June 1984) marked the beginning of a concerted attempt to work out a

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five*, London: Faber & Faber, 1977, pp. 31-35.

<sup>5</sup> K.P.S Gill, "Endgame in Punjab" in K.P.S Gill and Ajai Sahni, eds., *Terror and Containment: Perspectives on India's Internal Security*, New Delhi: Gyan, pp. 27-28.

counter-terrorist response. With help from the central paramilitary forces and the intelligence services, the Police built up a fairly comprehensive database on the most prominent terrorists and their groups in the state. One of the peculiarities of the Punjab terrorists, noticed by Police intelligence officers at this stage, was their relationship with the local criminal mafia.

Criminal syndicates were essential to the continued survival and growth of the terrorist movement since its inception in 1980. The demand for a separate Sikh homeland called *Khalistan* was essentially an imported concept that originated among marginalized Sikh expatriates in the West.<sup>6</sup> It lacked an indigenous support base within Punjab itself.

In the absence of strong popular support, the separatists relied heavily on transnational smuggling networks for logistics support. The strategic intelligence available on the logistics support and financial operations of terrorist groups suggested an extremely close working relationship between terrorists and the mafia. Weapons' recoveries showed that despite limited supply of sophisticated small arms from Pakistan, the bulk of the terrorists' arsenal was sourced through non-state actors in the form of smuggling networks.<sup>7</sup> Enough intelligence had also been collected on terrorist recruitment patterns to establish that the underworld presented an excellent pool of hardened manpower to the terrorist leaders.

By mid-1985, the Police database on existing terrorist groups was sufficient to identify the measures to be taken to gain more specific information. The links of the terrorist movement with the underworld being so strong, it was logical that Police efforts to

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<sup>6</sup> Interview of B. Raman, Chennai, December 28, 2004. Raman, a former Government of India counter-terrorism analyst, emphasized that the essentially imported nature of terrorism negated the claim that it had a popular support base.

<sup>7</sup> Tara Kartha, *Tools of Terror*, New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2000, pp. 174-176.

infiltrate terrorist gangs should involve using mercenary elements among the smuggling community.

### **The Introduction of Unorthodox Tactics**

In the second half of 1986, the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) in Amritsar began recruiting select Policemen into a special task force intended for hot pursuit of particularly notorious terrorists. Priority was given to individuals with a strong knowledge of the workings of the local underworld. These individuals were instructed to activate sources in the common link – the mafia, and collect information, which would allow the Police to apprehend the main leaders.<sup>8</sup> By 1987, the experiment had been replicated across Punjab with considerable success. The authorities thus acquired a means to challenge the terrorists' monopoly over the underworld as an operational logistics and recruitment arm. In late 1986, the term 'cat' made its appearance in reference to Police undercover operations intended to identify and neutralize hardcore terrorists.

The SSP of Amritsar developed a plan to beat the free run the terrorists enjoyed of the Golden Temple. The Temple had remained off bounds to even the predominantly Sikh Police force in deference to the sensitivity of the larger Sikh population. The terrorists, having previously been ejected in 1984, again came to hold the Sikh community's desire to preserve the sanctity of the Temple as hostage. Intensifying their activities, they made the Temple their command and control centre, as well as a convenient screen for recruitment and fundraising through extortion of wealthy businessmen who would be summoned there. The Police were unable to develop an intelligence system whereby they could become aware of a top terrorist's visit to the Temple in real

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<sup>8</sup> Vipul Mudgal, 'The Underground Army', *India Today*, New Delhi, September 15, 1988.

time and intercept him as he left.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge of such visits came in the form of background information that had little practical value to local officers tasked with controlling terrorist violence.

The SSP's plan involved the use of former criminals previously known to the Police to identify the terrorists among the large numbers of devotees who visited the Temple daily. The chosen criminals would form pseudo-gangs and make surreptitious contact with terrorist sympathizers in the Temple complex. Being well versed in the tradecraft of subterfuge, they could convey a realistic impression of being genuine terrorists. Their bluff would also be supported by the intimate relationship the terrorist movement had with the local mafia. Once fingered by such infiltrators, Police teams stationed nearby picked up the terrorists.<sup>10</sup>

This method generated immediate results: the Police arrested four top terrorists in August 1986. These were either chiefs of terrorist groups, or members of the so-called Panthic Committee, or both. The Panthic Committee had been established in January 1986 to co-ordinate the activities of the various terrorist groups in bringing about the creation of a separate Sikh state. The Police believed that the decisions taken by its five members bore a direct causal relationship with major outrages like assassinations or communal massacres. Converging for meetings in the Golden Temple, the Committee's members were protected from Police action. Working through a reconstituted intelligence system, the Police arrested Amrik Singh, Manbir Singh Chehru (founder chief of the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) – a particularly vicious group), his deputy Tarsem Singh Kohar, and Dhanna Singh. The last was considered "the real brain behind the terrorist movement in Punjab".<sup>11</sup> All of these were arrested on the basis of HUMINT

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<sup>9</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, New Delhi: Sage 2002, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> Julio Ribeiro, *Bullet for Bullet*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1998, p. 349.

<sup>11</sup> Manoj Joshi, 'Managing a Crisis', *Frontline*, Chennai, December 27-January 9, 1986.

provided by special assets dedicated to tracking terrorists based in the Temple.

Constable Dalbir Singh was one of the Policemen recruited to infiltrate terrorist groups through the common link with the underworld. His own knowledge of the *modus operandi* of the local mafia marked him as a pseudo-operator. After operating for a few months in Amritsar District, he was relocated to Patiala, once his usefulness began to get compromised as a result of previous operations. In Patiala, Dalbir and his team of undercover Policemen participated in a number of sting operations, combining infiltration of a terrorist group with carrying out direct action, once inside, if that proved necessary. The potency of the pseudo-operations or 'cat' concept was proved by the results generated. A number of notorious terrorists were arrested in Patiala by the 'cats'. They scored a significant success when they shot dead two particularly notorious KCF terrorists in nearby Chandigarh. As an institutional check against impropriety, an inquiry was conducted to establish whether excessive force had been used. It was ascertained that the 'cats' had attempted to arrest the terrorists first, but were forced to fire due to circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

Conceptually, the decision to infiltrate terrorist gangs through criminal connections already known to the Police was sound and methodical. As advocated by McCuen,<sup>13</sup> it represented counter-organisation by security forces against the systematic use of the underworld by the terrorists. It proved more fruitful to roll up the criminal-terrorist nexus through recruiting persons familiar with the underworld to infiltrate terrorist groups than through interrogating captured terrorists.

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<sup>12</sup> Vipul Mudgal, *India Today*, New Delhi, September 15, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> John J. McCuen, "The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency," Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1966.



## Assessing the Early Operations

### Gains

From mid-1986 to September 1987, the Police enjoyed a series of successes against the terrorists, capturing many of the founder-chiefs of terrorist groups. The loss of consensus builders among the groups' leadership hierarchies strained interpersonal relations among those who came to contend for succession. A series of simultaneous losses among the terrorists helped factionalise and fragment the ideological cohesion of the terrorist movement. The Panthic Committee was eventually broken up into five Panthic Committees, all ostensibly working towards establishing *Khalistan* while remaining distrustful of each other.

By July 1987, the Punjab Police were averaging a kill/arrest rate of one hardcore terrorist every three days. The total number of terrorists listed in the 'hardcore' category at this stage was only 168. The Punjab Police, who had begun to appreciate the growth dynamics of terrorism, did not anticipate an improvement in the overall situation, as the terrorist movement was still in the ascendant.<sup>14</sup> The massive induction of Kalashnikov assault rifles into the terrorist arsenal in May 1987 had escalated the conflict to a qualitatively new level. Civilian casualties shot up as the effect of such weapons in the terrorists' hands immediately made itself felt.

However, the success rate of the Punjab Police in the period 1986-1987 in neutralizing terrorists was more than double that of the fatalities inflicted by terrorists either on non-combatants or the Police.<sup>15</sup> While a large number of these successes was due to a more proactive ethos towards confronting terrorists in general, innovation in existing information-collection methods also

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<sup>14</sup> V.N. Narayanan, *Tryst With Terror: Punjab's Turbulent Decade*, New Delhi: Ajanta, 1996, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60.

contributed to the steep rise in terrorist losses. In particular, success in apprehending hardcore killers was the result of the Police consciously choosing to focus on neutralizing this particular level within the terrorist hierarchy. The 'cats' therefore, were primarily targeted at locating those individuals who had been identified as particularly vicious or active killers in Police files.

Alarmed by the fact that the Police had developed an intelligence capability that allowed them to locate and neutralise top terrorist leaders, various terrorist groups charted out a joint strategy to deal ruthlessly with Police informers and undercover officers. This was effective, if only because it was systematic.<sup>16</sup> The strategy allowed for the killing of an informer's family as well, whenever this was possible.

### **Limitations**

The ideological content of the terrorist movement until 1987 made turning terrorists a difficult process; exploiting ideological factionalism was useful only as a long-term strategy. The considerable rivalry between the rest of the Panthic Committee-aligned gangs and the breakaway faction led by Committee member Aroor Singh, for instance, could not be exploited by the Police since it was mere rivalry. Approaching the Aroor Singh group would not have yielded results for the Police, as both sides were only fighting to score points and remained fundamentally opposed to the state. This was demonstrated when Aroor Singh's group killed 24 Hindu bus passengers in a bid to prove its potency as an independent force fighting the state.<sup>17</sup>

The difficulty of turning terrorists at this point in the movement forced the Police into an uneasily close relationship

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<sup>16</sup> Manoj Joshi, "In a war like this there are ups and downs", *Frontline*, December 27-January 9, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Manoj Joshi, "Managing a Crisis", *Frontline*, December 27-January 9, 1986.

with criminal elements who exploited their usefulness to the hilt. A number of embarrassing reports appeared in the media about criminals apparently carrying out petty crime and robbery with the Police remaining passive.<sup>18</sup> The nature of the source-handler equation itself, where the Police had only recruited former criminals as pseudo-operators to make up for their own operational constraints, lent the system to misuse. Many professional Police handlers were inclined to ignore misconduct or minor offences by a valuable source. In some cases, they might have proactively worked to assist the source in escaping punishment by using influence within the Police force.<sup>19</sup>

In a bid to correct deviant behaviour, the Police introduced a screening programme for potential 'cats'. Remuneration scales were also increased so as to establish a better control over their activities and 'internalize' pseudo-operations. It became increasingly clear that these operations were too essential to discard. As far as possible the Police tried to rely on their own operatives to carry out the actual infiltration of terrorist gangs, thus minimizing the role of former criminals to facilitating the initial introduction.<sup>20</sup>

## Net Assessment

The 'cat' system, by helping the Police neutralise the top leadership of various terrorist groups, did not, however, deal a fatal blow to the terrorist movement in these years. This was because the Police overestimated the importance of several senior terrorists they had focused on tracking down and fundamentally misread the nature of the terrorist movement. What was thought to be basically an indigenously directed terrorist movement

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<sup>18</sup> Mudgal, *India Today*, New Delhi, September 15, 1988.

<sup>19</sup> James Morton, *Supergrasses And Informers: An Informal History Of Undercover Police Work*, United Kingdom: Little Brown, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Ribeiro, *Bullet for Bullet*, pp. 349-50.

became revealed, as time wore on, to be state-directed. The Panthic Committee, which the Police focused on breaking up, was not the movement's brains' trust, as had been thought. It emerged after *Operation Black Thunder* (the highly successful assault that once again cleared the Golden Temple of terrorists in 1988) that the terrorists were 'remote controlled'. Contrary to previous Police assessments, it was found that all major terrorist actions were planned and sanctioned by "shadowy figures in Pakistan unknown to the terrorists."<sup>21</sup>

Interrogation of 50 hardcore terrorists captured during *Operation Black Thunder* revealed that the Panthic Committee was being used to rubber-stamp actions carried out under a well-planned proxy war. Since 1983, the Indian Government had suspected that Pakistan would not be able to resist the temptation to get involved in the terrorist movement in Punjab. Until 1986, the Pakistani factor was marginal in explaining the deterioration in the situation. During 1986, it became obvious that, at the very least, the Pakistani authorities were willing to ignore the terrorists' use of their territory as a sanctuary from hot pursuit.<sup>22</sup> Until *Black Thunder*, however, the possibility of the movement being in effect a proxy war was not easily supported by incontrovertible evidence. The strategic intelligence windfall from the operation revealed that a highly intricate courier system delivered instructions to each senior terrorist, and texts of political statements to be made. The courier trail was traced through various levels in the terrorists' hierarchy right to the Pakistan border.<sup>23</sup>

Three top terrorists who were based for a number of years in Pakistan, later bitterly criticized Pakistani intelligence officials for having usurped the Khalistan movement as a means to embarrass India. They admitted afterwards that the illogical and random

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<sup>21</sup> Vipul Mudgal, "Remote Control Terrorism", *India Today*, July 15, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Inderjit Badhwar, "The Pakistan Hand," *India Today*, May 15, 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Mudgal, *India Today*, July 15, 1988.

violence, which came to characterize the terrorist movement after 1989, was primarily a Pakistani stratagem to create an impression of chaos prevailing within India.<sup>24</sup> In any case, the advisory support Pakistani intelligence extended, even if it did not amount to direct control of the movement, helped the terrorists weather what would have been otherwise crippling leadership losses.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Second Phase (1989-1991)**

### **The Increasing Use of Turned Terrorists**

The success, which the Punjab Police had in capturing terrorists during the period 1987-1988 (total number captured: 7,632), allowed the Police to switch focus from using criminal elements as pseudo-terrorists to turning captured terrorists.<sup>26</sup> Even when ideological motivation was high among the terrorists in 1986, there were a few who proved susceptible to financial incentives to co-operate with the Police, once captured. These were used as spotters, primarily in Amritsar District, which was the area of highest terrorist activity. The turned terrorists were driven around in cars with tinted windows and so anonymously identified terrorists.<sup>27</sup> The use of turned terrorists began to become more systematic and widespread in the post-*Black Thunder* phase.

The demoralization from a humiliating surrender at the Golden Temple, the resulting loss of public sympathy, and the casualties inflicted by the Police, all combined to strain the

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<sup>24</sup> Manraj Grewal, *Dreams After Darkness*, New Delhi: Rupa, 2004, p. 121 and p. 139. Also see Shekhar Gupta's interview with the self-styled 'President of Khalistan' J.S Chouhan, "Pakis Exploited the Sikhs", *India Today*, December 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Sean Winchell, "Pakistan's ISI: The Invisible Government," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 16, No. 3, July-September 2003, pp. 375-80.

<sup>26</sup> Narayanan, *Tryst With Terror*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Ribeiro, *Bullet for Bullet*, p. 353.

secessionist movement's viability. During 1989, under the dynamic leadership of 'the phenomenon called KPS Gill', a revitalized Punjab Police inflicted a far greater degree of damage on the terrorists than previously.<sup>28</sup> Against a 45 per cent increase in the level of Police casualties from the previous year, terrorist losses increased by 100 per cent. What is remarkable is the fact that the sustained pressure, which the Police put on the terrorists, actually led to a near-halving of civilian casualties.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the pressure imposed by the Police, terrorists were growing increasingly disillusioned with their organizational chiefs in Pakistan who, they felt, were not sharing their risks.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, under the short-lived Benazir Bhutto Government, Pakistan imposed some curbs on the terrorists and co-operated with the Indian Government, leading to further demoralization. In light of this, a strong sense prevailed that the movement was doomed. Turning terrorists, consequently, was not as difficult as before. In fact, many hardcore terrorists began secretly negotiating surrenders.

The Punjab Police, in collaboration with the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), compiled a database of all the known terrorists, which was run by the CBI's Co-ordination Cell at Chandigarh. The database pooled background information into a centralized system that recorded the names of a particular terrorist's associates, relatives, known harbourers and location of hideouts. In addition, his physical descriptive roll, fingerprints and available photographs would also be stored in the database.<sup>31</sup> The information was disseminated downwards and laterally to other agencies as deemed necessary. In the process of building up dossiers on the terrorist hardcore, the Police were able to compile

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<sup>28</sup> Dang, *Terrorism in Punjab*, p. 276.

<sup>29</sup> Narayanan, *Tryst With Terror*, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, New Delhi: Sage, 2002, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> Ranjit Pachanda, *Terrorism and Response to Terrorist Threat*, New Delhi: UBSPD, 2002, p. 189.

a great deal of information which helped them ascertain who would be susceptible to switching sides if pressured. The Police collected background information, which included photographs of terrorists in different poses and clothes styles, as well as intricate details such as gait and mannerisms. They, for instance, knew which terrorist talked to himself while alone, which terrorist reflexively rubbed his nose constantly and other such banal details. Admittedly, such effort was only expended to track hardcore terrorists who had been active for a while, since the information had to be collected through time-consuming investigative processes. In addition to the state level database, local Police officers were encouraged to maintain parallel databases at their own operational level, to minimize turnaround time for information needed.<sup>32</sup>

Specially chosen officers who attempted to ascertain the degree to which a terrorist was committed to the separatist cause carried out interrogations of captured terrorists.<sup>33</sup> By 1990-1991, practically every captured terrorist had no knowledge of what a separate Sikh state was to look like, or even the rationale for establishing one.<sup>34</sup> A major factor therefore – the ideological motivation of terrorists, fell to such marginal levels as to remove a significant obstacle from the process of turning them. In addition to eliciting sensitive information from a captive, the interrogators attempted to win him over to the extent possible. The relentless pace of lengthy interrogations and the draining effect these had on the prisoner, systematically eroded his resistance, obviating the need for torture. The Police officers who carried out the interrogations did not have it any easier however,

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, former Police official, New Delhi, January 2, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, p. 232.

<sup>34</sup> Kanwar Sandhu, "Spawning Rampant Criminality," *India Today*, October 15, 1990.

and the strain of long hours of questioning sometimes temporarily incapacitated them.<sup>35</sup>

The Police also introduced a system of rewards for the capture of top terrorists. This facilitated the turning of captured terrorists and enabled the expansion of the 'cat' system. Until 1988, Superintendents of Police were allocated only INR 150 for intelligence collection. Small wonder, then, that they had to allow smugglers and petty criminals some leeway in their operations. They quite simply did not have the funds to make spying for the security forces a means of livelihood for these elements. In 1988, this changed when a hardcore terrorist called Gurjit Singh bribed his way out of custody, in the process managing to persuade a Police constable to defect with him. It emerged that Gurjit had paid INR 500,000 to the Police personnel at his interrogation centre, and had thereafter merely walked out. The size of the bribe was higher than the entire state Police force's annual intelligence budget. K.P.S Gill thus made a strong case for acquiring additional funds for intelligence collection; these were soon made available by a bureaucratic system that understood its priorities remarkably well. Thereafter, SSPs received intelligence funds to the tune of INR 50,000.<sup>36</sup>

At a stroke, further, the expanded reward system motivated Police handlers to recruit more 'cats' who could help track down the wanted terrorists, just as captured terrorists were induced to turn. Nearly all the senior terrorists killed or arrested in 1988-89 had heavy cash prizes on their heads.<sup>37</sup> Informal deals were worked out between turncoat terrorists who were making clandestine approaches to the local Police, and an agreement reached about the amount of the reward they were entitled to.

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<sup>35</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, p. 232.

<sup>36</sup> Harinder Baweja and Ramesh Vinayak, "Slush Funds: Pay-off Secrets," *India Today*, February 15, 1995.

<sup>37</sup> S.S. Chawla, "The Punjab Quagmire," *Frontline*, March 4-17, 1989.



What was unique about the reward system was the vague and apparently mercenary nature of its operation. While officially, an INR 100,000 reward was placed on category 'A' terrorists, the actual bounty could go up to twenty times as much, depending on the particular terrorist to be nabbed.<sup>38</sup> The shadowy nature of the payment, allegedly made in cash-filled suitcases, contributed to the impression of underhandedness in the whole process. In fact, such subterfuge seemed necessary to ensure the anonymity of the involved Policemen, since the more senior a killed terrorist, the more certain the possibility of violent retaliation. When Sukhdev Singh Dasuwal, head of the most powerful terrorist group in Punjab, the Babbar Khalsa, was killed in August 1992, the Babbars massacred 63 family members of Police personnel in retaliation.

It was in this phase that the Police increasingly began integrating turned terrorists with pseudo-gangs of plainclothes Policemen. The pseudo-terrorists would roam the rural areas dressed like the actual terrorists, complete with captured Kalashnikovs bearing the motifs of the prominent terrorist gangs.<sup>39</sup> The lure of large rewards galvanized the Police rank and file into infiltrating terrorist groups at own peril, adopting highly risky pseudo-gang tactics for doing so. To close in with terrorists, increasing numbers of Policemen turned to recruiting 'cats'.

The employment of 'cats' had a cascading effect, with fresh captures, if in fact hardcore terrorists allowed themselves to be captured, becoming potential 'cats'. An example is Santokh Singh Kala, a Police constable who had joined a terrorist group in the early 1980s. Two former criminals, Satwinder Singh and Parminder Singh, helped the Police arrest Kala in the mid-1980s. Kala quickly agreed to change sides, and became a particularly effective infiltrator in Amritsar. When he started to get

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<sup>38</sup> Shekhar Gupta, "The Rule of the Gun," *India Today*, January 15, 1991.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

compromised, he was shifted to Jalandhar District, where he reported to handlers in the local Police. In all, Kala was responsible for helping the Police neutralize 98 hardcore killers before being gunned down by terrorists. Another hardcore terrorist arrested on information provided by Satwinder and Parminder was Bhinda, who also agreed to switch sides without hesitation.<sup>40</sup> The increasing susceptibility of prisoners to change sides was a reflection of a broader and ominous change in the terrorist movement: criminalisation.

### **Criminalisation and Chaos**

It was when it became clear to the terrorists and their sponsors that the Khalistan movement was doomed, that the really brutal phase of the conflict began. The loss of the Golden Temple deprived the terrorists of a safe haven for conducting extortion, and passing off such extortion under a religious façade. Fund-raising, thereafter, became openly criminal in nature, as terrorists went about in small bands, demanding ‘contributions’ at the gunpoint. The criminalisation of terrorist fund collection served to encourage large numbers of unemployed youth in Punjab, who had always been on the fringes of the terrorist movement, to take to violent crime, using militancy as an ideological cover. A large number of small-time criminals and illicit distillers began to switch to extortionist activities while masquerading as *bona fide* Khalistani terrorists. Terrorism provided these petty criminals an opportunity to make a windfall, collecting ‘donations’ under the garb of separatism. After 1988, nearly all the major terrorist gangs operating in Punjab were, in fact, reconstituted professional crime syndicates either already specializing in extortion or keen to do so.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Cats face wrath of Police Officials,” *Tribune*, Chandigarh, September 19, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, pp.199-200.

The net result of criminalisation was a massive increase in the strength of those who could broadly be classified as 'terrorists'. Terrorist recruitment drives practically came aboveground. In Amritsar city, meetings of terrorists were held in broad daylight in a public garden while, in the rural areas, youth actually queued up to join terrorist gangs.<sup>42</sup> In the vast majority of cases, the newly recruited terrorists joined up merely to make money through extortion, while the state existed in a condition of turmoil and weapons could be easily sourced from smuggling rings operating along a still unsealed border.

The open blandishment of material incentives, such as monthly 'salaries' ranging from INR 3000 to INR 5000 and the promise of power from wielding a Kalashnikov assault rifle, swelled the terrorists' ranks.<sup>43</sup> The benefits of terrorism became obvious even to unemployed and criminally inclined Punjabi Hindus, who began joining what was supposed to be a religious separatist movement of Sikhs.<sup>44</sup> In these circumstances, infiltrating terrorist gangs became relatively easy, once the Police intelligence system was expanded to cope with the escalated violence. Setting up additional pseudo-gangs to locate the most active of the rapidly multiplying dacoit gangs became critical to minimizing the impression of general collapse. Among the other measures adopted by the Punjab Police to deal with the burgeoning crime rates in the State, was the expansion of the system of using 'identifiers' for targeting the top terrorists. Further measures included strengthening border surveillance, increasing the number of village self-defence forces, creating rapid response units in the worst-affected areas and increasing the number of sophisticated rifles available for operations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Dang, *Terrorism in Punjab*, p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> K.P.S. Gill, "Endgame in Punjab," p. 61.

<sup>44</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, p. 262.

<sup>45</sup> Kanwar Sandhu, "Tough Tack," *India Today*, April 30, 1990.

In this situation, the Punjab Police were compelled, once again, to recruit criminally inclined elements as pseudo-operators. Saroop Singh was a one such petty criminal in a village in Amritsar District who was recruited to help track down terrorists. He was given a weapon and recruited a gang of his own, which indulged in non-lethal criminal activity such as extortion and intimidation. At the same time, he was able to make contact with the actual gangs and so help the local Police arrest a number of killer-terrorists.<sup>46</sup>

There has been criticism of the Punjab Police for using the services of wanted terrorists and granting them immunity from prosecution for past crimes in the bargain.<sup>47</sup> This essentially purist argument is divorced from reality since pseudo-operations in Kenya, Malaya and Rhodesia have involved doing just this. Furthermore, even ordinary informers tasked to collect criminal intelligence almost invariably extract some degree of protection or tolerance for continuing with illegal activity from their handlers. Terrorists are not likely to turn unless simultaneously faced with a sufficiently attractive carrot and a sufficiently heavy stick. If it is not the one that will come in for criticism, it will almost certainly be the other.

Michael Walzer justifies even the most extreme of strategies in his seminal work *Just and Unjust Wars*, provided they are carried out in instances of 'supreme emergency'.<sup>48</sup> The terrorists killed 1,949 noncombatants in 1988. With much effort, the Police managed to limit the corresponding figure for 1989 to 1,176, at great personal risk to their own officers and men. Despite this, the criminalisation of terrorism caused civilian casualties in 1990 to more than double to 2,437, while Police losses tripled. Terrorist losses (deaths plus arrests) on the other hand, remained almost

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<sup>46</sup> Dang, *Terrorism in Punjab*, pp. 237-241.

<sup>47</sup> Ramesh Vinayak, "Prowling for a Living," *India Today*, December 15, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books, 1977, pp. 251-268.

static at 1989 levels. In 1991, civilian deaths reached a peak of 2,618.<sup>49</sup> Reducing the level of civilian casualties would justify the use of Walzer's 'supreme emergency' argument. Recruiting criminals for the sake of saving not just a few lives, but an aggregate of thousands of lives threatened by the terrorists, by all reasonable logic, was an excellent bargain.

Admittedly, the low observance of operational security within terrorist gangs led to amateurish breaches, which made security forces operations much easier. The new crop of young macho men itching to prove their toughness set bad examples for terrorist cadres. For instance, terrorists planning a strike would announce their intentions with requisite fanfare amongst their colleagues, who would include turned terrorists as well as undercover operatives.<sup>50</sup> Obtaining access to the core of a terrorist group thus became less important, as access even to second- or third-level operatives proved good enough for the Police. Furthermore, after 1990, the terrorists would generally claim responsibility for their crimes in order to demonstrate their striking power relative to each other, making investigations and pursuit much easier.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout 1990 and 1991, therefore, the Punjab Police, despite being subjected to the horrific spectacle of widespread assassinations of Police officers' families, stayed on the offensive. The majority of encounters between SFs and terrorists during this period took place on the basis of precise HUMINT pinpointing terrorist hideouts.<sup>52</sup> In June 1990, the monthly tally of the number of terrorists killed crossed the 100 mark, and thereafter kept rising. A close observer of the counter-terrorist struggle later

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<sup>49</sup> Narayanan, *Tryst With Terror*, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> D. C. Pathak, *Intelligence: A Security Weapon*, New Delhi: Manas 2003, p. 125.

<sup>51</sup> K.P.S Gill, "Endgame in Punjab," p. 84.

<sup>52</sup> Subhash Chander Arora, *Strategies to Combat Terrorism: A Case Study of Punjab*, New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1999, p. 158.

observed that it was “the battles of 1990 [that] put us on the path to ultimate victory against the militants.”<sup>53</sup>

The demonstrative power of targeting the terrorist hardcore was proved during this period. A spate of top terrorists/dacoits being arrested had an immediate effect on crime rates. Following the massive deployment of the Army in the State for static duties in November 1991, the Police was freed to launch target-specific pursuit operations. In November and December, they tracked down and neutralised 24 and 30 hardcore terrorists respectively. The number of extortion and kidnapping cases immediately declined in the State.<sup>54</sup> Earlier, reeling from a focused assault on their leadership, the terrorists had been driven out of Amritsar District, traditionally the heartland of the movement. Crime in Amritsar, as a result, declined permanently, while rising elsewhere in Punjab, as the surviving terrorists found new areas of operation.

## **The Final Offensive (1992-1993)**

### **Money: The Asymmetric Advantage**

To some degree, the terrorist movement had been tolerated by the Central Government in New Delhi, keen to seek a negotiated settlement and redress popular grievances.<sup>55</sup> The atrocities of 1990-1991 and their criminal motivations, made it amply clear that the terrorists were neither popular nor did they have any legitimate grievances to be redressed. The original *Khalistani* ideologues had been completely marginalized by the dacoits who ran rampant, masquerading as religious separatists. In

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<sup>53</sup> Sarabjit Singh, *Operation Black Thunder*, p. 236.

<sup>54</sup> Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, “For another round,” *Frontline*, December 20, 1991.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, senior ex-Government of India official, Bangalore, August 12, 2004.

light of this, the Centre began taking a hardline position. The simultaneous worsening of the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, where another terrorist problem was emerging, made Indian security officials worry about having to manage two major threats simultaneously.<sup>56</sup>

Post-1991, consequently, the Centre liberally bankrolled the Punjab Police's intelligence efforts. Money became the key asset to ensure a swift and decisive victory. The mercenary motivations of active terrorists at this time made them doubly susceptible to the logic of force and the lure of money. The Police, therefore, made money power the central plank of their strategy to terminate the movement. 'Cats' consequently became the centerpiece of the final counter-terrorist offensive, since the increased intelligence budget had little purpose, if not to buy off captured terrorists.

As the funds available for running 'cats' increased, so did their numbers. From being focused on the most notorious terrorists, the Police diluted the emphasis of 'cat' operations to include tracking less important killers as well. Depending on whom they nabbed, 'cats' and their handlers shared rewards ranging between INR 40,000 and INR 500,000. Each claim for intelligence funds to pay a 'cat' who helped arrest a terrorist, was subjected to thorough scrutiny by the State Police intelligence wing to prevent fraud by District Police Officers. It was these Officers who received the funds, which were held centrally by Police intelligence and disbursed on a case-by-case basis.<sup>57</sup>

Those turned terrorists who proved to be naturals at infiltrating new terrorist gangs and compromising them were able to get relatively rich on the basis of the rewards they received. Some, such as Fateh Singh, were caught and turned very soon after they joined terrorist groups, thereafter spending most of their lives as pseudo-terrorists, locating real terrorists for the Police to

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<sup>56</sup> Interview, Inder Malhotra, New Delhi, January 6, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Kanwar Sandhu, "Official Excesses," *India Today*, October 15, 1992.

arrest. Working as a 'cat' became a source of livelihood for Fateh Singh and other youth like him, who came into the job market without any skills to earn a living, and so took to crime in the garb of terrorism. The reward system itself helped convince terrorists, who were in a position to provide actionable intelligence about their leaders' whereabouts, to do so. The rewards were often enormous. While cash was most commonly used, some 'cats' were provided help with setting up legitimate businesses, while the most valuable ones were sent abroad when their lives were put in danger. Often, however, the degree of leniency shown to a turned terrorist was dependent upon the handler's wishes.<sup>58</sup>

Promotions into the official Police hierarchy were awarded to 'cats' on the basis of results shown, if the handler felt that the turned terrorist had proven his worth sufficiently. This allowed Police officers to ensure that a former terrorist, once he had proved his loyalty, could hold down a regular job and avoid taking to crime or returning to terrorist activity. Gurmeet Singh was one such 'cat'. A terrorist who was turned by the Police, probably through the lure of money or freedom from a life on the run, he became a particularly effective infiltrator. His information allowed the Police to track down and efficiently neutralize a large number of terrorists. First promoted from being a 'cat' (which was an unofficial position) to a Special Police Officer (which meant a recognized role in counter-terrorism), he helped the Police track down Jagtar Singh Hawara, a notorious Babbar Khalsa terrorist. Subsequently, Gurmeet Singh was recruited into the Police Force proper.<sup>59</sup>

From 1992, the Police began focusing disproportionately on locating the top-most tier of terrorist leaders. Instead of just being a fire-fighting measure intended to lower civilian casualty rates,

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<sup>58</sup> Ramesh Vinayak, *India Today*, December 15, 1995.

<sup>59</sup> "Cats a Law onto themselves?," *Tribune*, January 10, 2001.



'cat' operations returned to having a strategic purpose, as in 1986-1987. Decapitation of terrorist gangs through neutralizing the last of the ideologically motivated hardcore, who had so far managed to evade arrest, became the purpose of the 'cat' system. Analysis of information, painstakingly gathered, about the movements of top terrorists, had revealed that their activities remained confined mostly to a 15-20 kilometer radius of their home villages. Armed with background information relating to possible harbourers and hideouts, the Police were able to direct pseudo-operators to monitor the specific localities identified. Meanwhile, Police pursuit teams tracked down each terrorist, keeping him on the move until he was forced to pass under the scrutiny of a 'cat'. The strategy was spectacularly successful. 139 hardcore terrorists were arrested or killed in shootouts with the Police in 1992, including a dozen chiefs of terrorist groups.<sup>60</sup>

The case of Gurjant Singh Budhsinghwal (chief of the Khalistan Liberation Force) is an example of the relentless pursuit technique. Wanted for involvement in over 1,000 murders committed by terrorists operating under his command, he had been on the 'most wanted' list since 1986. In July 1992, a top terrorist working as a liaison between terrorist groups was arrested in Bombay (now Mumbai).<sup>61</sup> The arrest allowed the Police to narrow down their surveillance to a house in Chandigarh, and a 'cat' was activated to monitor Budhsinghwal's movements, leading up to the house. Within ten minutes of receiving information from the source, a Police response team moved in and engaged Budhsinghwal in a gun-battle, leading to his death. For his information in this case, the 'cat' was paid INR 500,000.<sup>62</sup> Almost certainly, he continued to be active for a few days longer, as Budhsinghwal's successor

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<sup>60</sup> K.P.S Gill, "Endgame in Punjab," pp. 78-79.

<sup>61</sup> Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, "Punjab's Chance," *Frontline*, August 28, 1992; Manoj Joshi, "Receding Terror", *Frontline*, April 23, 1993.

<sup>62</sup> Baweja and Vinayak, *India Today*, February 15, 1995.

was killed within three days of taking over, and the rest of the gang were simultaneously either arrested or killed in encounters.

Similarly, Sukhdev Singh Dasuwal, head of the Babbar Khalsa group, was killed after being trapped by a 'cat', who informed on him in exchange for a reward of INR 1,000,000.<sup>63</sup> The 'cat', according to one report, was a former Babbar terrorist who had grown disillusioned with the movement and surrendered to the Punjab Police. Thereafter, he helped trap Dasuwal by arranging a meeting of top Babbar terrorists, ostensibly to work out future strategy.<sup>64</sup> For helping neutralize the chief of the most fanatical and powerful terrorist group in the state, the turned terrorist received a full third of the reward on Dasuwal.

### **The Systemisation of 'Cat' Operations**

'Cats', according to one journalist, "formed the pivot of... post-1991 anti-terrorism strategy".<sup>65</sup> Under a relentless offensive by a Police force cleared to pursue operations to their logical conclusion, rather than just securing advantageous negotiating positions, the terrorists came under immense strain. It was in this period that 'cat' operations were used extensively enough to be developed as a 'system' of counter-terrorist operations, and not just an *ad hoc* measure.

The effect of continuous attrition, which had chipped away the core of many terrorist groups, made the survivors appreciate that surrender was the least distasteful option. A number of unpublicized surrenders took place, some of which could have been a 'coming aboveground' process for turned terrorists who had outlived their usefulness as 'cats'. The lack of publicity led to sections of the Press alleging that the Police staged the surrenders

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> 'Militants vowed revenge for Temple attack', [http://www.punjabilok.com/news\\_files/kan\\_militvowed.htm](http://www.punjabilok.com/news_files/kan_militvowed.htm).

<sup>65</sup> Ramesh Vinayak, *India Today*, December 15, 1995.

as a psychological warfare tactic. A large number of petty criminals who had drifted into terrorism now drifted out, returning to their original activities. Even these, however, were in a position to provide actionable intelligence on tightly knit groups like the Khalistan Commando Force and the Babbars.<sup>66</sup> Given that, within terrorist groups, priority for 'promotion' was given to those terrorists with criminal backgrounds, once this rung of operators began defecting, the Police were provided with an intelligence bonanza.<sup>67</sup>

A method used by the Police to communicate with terrorists wishing to surrender was through their families. Many terrorists were in fact the progeny of former dacoits, smugglers or thieves. These former criminals were contacted by retired Police officers whom they knew from before and persuaded to act as intermediaries in surrender negotiations. As a result, large numbers of disillusioned young terrorists looking to return to normal lives were clandestinely recruited as 'cats'.<sup>68</sup> The large number of such infiltrators during 1992-1993 meant that recruitment was done by local Police officials, rather than by specialized intelligence handlers. The 'cat' system was informally maintained and key details, like the number of 'cats' and their identities, were committed to memory rather than to paper.<sup>69</sup>

In the case of terrorists who were captured, the system operated differently. Initially, coercion seems to have been the primary motivator to switch sides, but subsequently a monthly retainer sweetened the package.<sup>70</sup> 'Cats' were paid according to a two-scale model of their results. In addition to receiving payments for general information picked up during their tracking efforts, they shared with their handlers the rewards on top terrorists if

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<sup>66</sup> Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, "State of Despair," *Frontline*, September 25, 1992.

<sup>67</sup> K.P.S Gill, *Profiles of Terror*, New Delhi: Roli, 2002, p. x.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Inder Malhotra, New Delhi, January 6, 2005.

<sup>69</sup> "There was no policy on "cats", says DGP," *Tribune*, January 12, 2001.

<sup>70</sup> "Cat system comes into Question," *Tribune*, March 28, 1999.

they helped locate them. Subject to their utility and depending upon the attitude of their handlers, 'cats' were also absorbed into the Police or quietly paid off and rehabilitated to lead anonymous lives.<sup>71</sup>

Turned terrorists, once recruited, were not declared to be in custody, and depending upon their importance continued to be listed as absconding, or were declared killed in encounters. The less valuable 'cats' were simply given a change of identity, while the more important ones 'disappeared', living a completely anonymous existence as pseudo-operators, while everyone thought them dead. In some cases, the Police even declared a captured hardcore terrorist dead before he had been turned, if he was thought to be susceptible to being bought off. Once declared dead, even a hardcore terrorist could be gradually pressured to cooperate on the grounds that he would have little credibility if he re-emerged to claim a position within his group. With no life and no identity to return to, working full-time for the Police and earning a steady income plus large bonuses in case of particular operations, appeared more attractive. Furthermore, the higher the number of 'killed' terrorists, the more the surviving members of their gangs were demoralized by the seemingly relentless losses at the hands of an apparently ruthless Police force. Lastly, declaring a turned terrorist dead helped protect his life, as he went about locating active terrorists for the Police, since the terrorists would remain confused as to the pseudo-operator's identity.<sup>72</sup>

The 'disappearing' of a terrorist was only done in the case of a top terrorist who was thought likely to be of immense use. The Police would declare such terrorists to have escaped from custody, which the media took to mean they had been executed illegally. In fact, the truth was neither. The escape story would be disseminated to make the media and the public forget about a

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<sup>71</sup> Ramesh Vinayak, *India Today*, December 15, 1995.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

particular terrorist, allowing him to operate in anonymity. The number of terrorists who thus 'escaped' the scrutiny of the public and the media in the early 1990s was anywhere between two and three hundred, most of who were held in detention centres guarded by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), where they would be gradually induced to co-operate with the Police in counter-terrorist operations until judged trustworthy enough to be 'launched'. Knowledge of these field intelligence centres leaked out when a terrorist who actually escaped from Police custody told Pressmen how he had seen a number of terrorists who he thought had been killed.<sup>73</sup>

A particularly spectacular success of such a terrorist turned 'cat' was that of Aroor Singh. This was the same Aroor Singh who, on breaking away from the Panthic Committee in 1986, had ordered or carried out a number of massacres to demonstrate his independence. In 1987, he was captured and declared to have escaped from custody while being transported to Delhi for interrogation. The press inferred from the Police statement that Aroor had been shot dead, execution style. In fact, Aroor had been won over while in custody to switch sides and become a high-level 'cat' working with the Police. Aroor Singh operated without excessive Police restraint on his movements, with only a few of his relatives in his remote native village knowing that he had not been killed illegally, as was widely assumed.<sup>74</sup>

Harpreet Singh was an example of a terrorist who switched sides when the movement was obviously collapsing, and therefore appears not to have benefited greatly from working as a 'cat'. He had been a wanted Babbar Khalsa terrorist involved in over 150 murders and with an INR 1,000,000 reward on his head. In November 1992, he was declared shot dead in a Police encounter and his family even performed the last rites. In fact, Harpreet

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<sup>73</sup> Kanwar Sandhu, "Official Excesses," *India Today*, October 15, 1992.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

agreed to turn upon being captured and his death was faked in order to mislead those of his gang who still found time to follow the news, when not being followed by the Police.<sup>75</sup> When his usefulness declined, he was allowed to take up work in Chennai as a labourer.

Admittedly tragic errors could and did take place. When a 'cat' identified a person as a most wanted terrorist, the Police personnel who would move to make the arrest would be understandably edgy, since slackness could result in a vicious shoot-out. In certain cases, misidentification by the 'cat' led to fatal mistakes. In one such case, a 'cat' wrongly identified a businessman as a notorious terrorist wanted for over 100 murders. The Police team, which attempted to arrest the person, was in plainclothes and the alleged killer thinking, in turn, that the Policemen were terrorists, attempted to flee in a vehicle. In the resulting chase the Policemen, in their eagerness not to let a notorious quarry escape, opened fire on the vehicle, killing three people inside. Genuinely believing they had scored a spectacular success, they were jubilant until they found that the terrorist and his companions were innocents who had been misidentified, and were unarmed.<sup>76</sup>

## **The Larger Picture**

It is only correct to point out that 'cats' functioned as a part of a much broader counter-terrorist framework, the contours of which can only briefly be outlined here. There were three key factors, which allowed the 'cat' system to be anywhere near as important in solving the terrorist problem as it was. Without these, 'cats' would have been little more than an exotic short-cut

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<sup>75</sup> Ramesh Vinayak, *India Today*, December 15, 1995.

<sup>76</sup> Kanwar Sandhu, "Official Excesses," *India Today*, October 15, 1992.

to some low-level operational success, but unimportant in the long run.

First and foremost, the Punjab Police in 1992 was a far more experienced, better-armed and motivated force than in the early or mid-1980s. Its officers had cut their teeth on perhaps the most vicious terrorist movement in India to date, and learnt the intricacies of counter-terrorism on the job. The appointment of K.P.S Gill as Director-General of Police in 1988 was arguably the most important turning point. Barring a year's period during 1990-1991, Gill served as DGP until 1995, and even his detractors admitted that his presence transformed the situation. K.P.S Gill, due to his immense experience in counter-terrorism, gave the Police operations in Punjab a sense of direction, which they lacked previously, having been crafted principally as *ad hoc* responses. Under Gill, a strong regime of promoting officers purely on merit did away with the otherwise prevalent system of promotions based partially on non-professional criteria. Police officers at all levels were motivated to prove themselves as capable, once it became clear that initiative in engaging the terrorists would mean promotions rather than opprobrium. Furthermore, the problems of structural deficiencies, such as firepower, transportation and communications, were attended to in fairly substantial measure. The Police were selectively equipped with better weapons, the strength of the vehicle fleet was increased, and the communications network was upgraded.<sup>77</sup>

The second factor is related to the first: the sheer amount of manpower employed to paralyse the movement of terrorists within Punjab. In February 1992, the Police were freed from static duties by the massive deployment of the Army, which saturated the countryside with section-size quick reaction teams (QRTs). These QRTs were tuned in to the Police wireless network and

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<sup>77</sup> Ved Marwah, *Uncivil Wars: A Pathology of Terrorism in India*, New Delhi: Indus, 1997, pp. 218-19.

authorized to act on their own initiative to render such support as requested with all speed. As a result, Police patrols became assured of reinforcement within 15 minutes if they confronted terrorists armed with superior firepower. Furthermore, the Army helped the Police train 20,000 Special Police Officers, and worked in collaboration with the Police a plan for the defence of urban centers. This involved recruiting and training Home Guard militiamen in positional defence tactics, thus allowing the better-trained Police to concentrate on hot pursuit of terrorists. In cordon and search operations, it was agreed that the Army would leave house-to-house searches to the Police while forming a distant outer cordon.<sup>78</sup> This ensured that proportional force was exercised at all times by search parties, and thus avoided any cause for complaint among locals.

The third factor has already been alluded to elsewhere: better border policing. Following the realization in 1988 that the availability of sanctuary in Pakistan was helping terrorists evade pursuit, the Centre agreed to finance an extensive border fencing project. Despite border patrols intercepting a large number of crossers, enough managed to get through to create mayhem in the State through sensational strikes, including bombings and massacres. The fencing plan included comprehensively improving on existing systems, in addition to raising a formidable new obstacle for terrorists attempting to enter India. The number of surveillance towers was increased, border roads were improved and a 452-kilometer fence raised, complete with alarm systems and fed with high voltage electricity. In addition, patrolling was increased along the six main routes identified as the focal points of terrorist movement into India. During the criminal phase of terrorism (1990-1993), the important *bona fide Khalistani* terrorists, with the support of their foreign sponsors, preferred to

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<sup>78</sup> Manoj Joshi, "Combating terrorism in Punjab," *Strategic Digest*, Vol. 23, No. 8, August 1993, pp. 1261-66.



enter India by alternative routes, many choosing Nepal. By 1992, border policing had become extremely effective in preventing terrorists escape Police pursuit teams into Pakistan. Intercepted documents addressed to terrorist chiefs in Pakistan complained of the difficulty of attempting border crossings. The better policing at the border made counter-terrorism a numbers game, since the alienation of Sikhs from the terrorists had frozen local recruitment.<sup>79</sup> The 'cat' system was able to play a critical role in crushing the movement, by accounting for the most important among those terrorists who continued to operate within Punjab.

### **Re-assessing the 'Cat' System**

As has been stated above, the 'cats' only contributed to the counter-terrorist victory; they did not ensure it. During 1986-1987, when other deficiencies were left unattended, 'cats' did not play a decisive role beyond helping dilute the ideological coherence of the terrorist movement. The focus on targeting top terrorists ensured that the terrorist gangs were deprived of consensus-building leaders. They were thus rife with intrigue and rivalry and so were unable to present a united front. In strategic terms, this damaged the credibility of the movement over a period of time but practically, it had little impact on the ground situation. During the criminal phase of terrorism, 'cats' became little more than a mechanism for lowering high civilian casualty rates. The most violent killers would be the first to be tracked down and arrested or killed. The bulk of 'cat' operations seem to have been focused on two of the most vicious groups, responsible for the majority of killings – the Babbar Khalsa and the Khalistan Commando Force. In certain cases, killer gangs yielded to the effect of relentless attrition upon their ranks and pledged to avoid

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<sup>79</sup> Prakash Singh, *Kohima to Kashmir: On the Terrorist Trail*, New Delhi: Rupa, 2001, pp. 126-128.

carrying out murders of noncombatants during their criminal activity.<sup>80</sup> Distasteful as it might sound to purists, turning terrorists to neutralize other terrorists served a definite humanitarian purpose: to save lives. It was when it became clear to terrorists that the more violent their activities the more certain was the probability of their attracting Police attention that the problem began to wane. From five years in the 1980s, the Police succeeded in bringing down the average active life of a hardcore terrorist to three years in 1990, and thereafter to six months in 1992.

During the final offensive against the terrorists, so heavily were the dice loaded against the possibility of their survival that 'cats', to some degree, became superfluous. However, the massive demoralization in terrorist groups during 1992 cannot have occurred without impact of the loss of many of the hardcore cadres being felt. Ashish Sonal, a veteran counter-terrorist officer, noted that the loss of a leader to security forces action imposed considerable strain on the internal dynamics within a terrorist group.<sup>81</sup> The Punjab terrorists became increasingly disillusioned with their foreign-based top leadership as their losses mounted within the State, and there were increasing accusations of cowardice against the leaders abroad. As the movement neared its end, several signals were intercepted by the Police from subordinate terrorists challenging their leaders to leave their safe havens in Pakistan and lead the fight on the ground.

This raises the key point this paper seeks to address: it was the comprehensive loss of local medium-rung cadres amongst the terrorists that crushed the *Khalistani* movement. The capture or killing of a terrorist group leader was a bonus, but essentially not one to be relied on at the tactical planning level. In the last two years of their lives, leading terrorists Sukhdev Singh Dasuwal and

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<sup>80</sup> Dang, *Terrorism in Punjab*, p. 231.

<sup>81</sup> Ashish Sonal, *Terrorism and Insurgency In India: A Study of the Human Element*, New Delhi: Lancer, 1994, pp. 36-37.

Gurbachan Singh Manochahal were rendered unimportant, except in a psychological sense, by Police attrition of their subordinate commanders.<sup>82</sup> Particularly when local leaders shared the risks and travails of the terrorist rank and file, their loss had a stronger demoralising effect than that of a leader who was too high up and distant for the rank and file to feel personally affected. What broke the back of the movement was the loss of these middle level hardcore terrorists. Their arrests or deaths had a limited but immediate impact on the terrorist gangs' morale. This was why, in 1989, when many of the top leaders were still at large, the loss of their immediate subordinates resulted in their making clandestine approaches to the Police for negotiating surrender.

Money power was the key to turning terrorists, especially as their motives grew more mercenary over the years. The 'cat' system was only as effective as its capability to purchase loyalty and to punish lethargy. The strengths and weaknesses of the system lay in the freedom of initiative it accorded to Police operational officers on the ground, who would actually be handling the 'cats'. Generally, those 'cats', who were heavily compromised by involvement in murders and threatened into co-operating rather than being simply bought off, seem to have been the most reliable. This might have been because the handling officer could always brandish the stick of punishment for past activity if the 'cat' faltered, and offered carrots in the form of bonuses only sparingly. The more desperate the 'cat' to buy his peace with the Police, the more he could be pressured to run risks while gathering information.

It is the contention of this paper that the success of the 'cat' system was due to the strength of the pseudo-terrorist concept. The comprehensive use of 'cats' played an important, if not decisive, role in controlling and ultimately defeating the terrorist movement in Punjab. Punjab goes to show that more, not less

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<sup>82</sup> Narayanan, *Tryst With Terror*, p. 57.

pseudo-terrorist operations are necessary to rapidly build on transient tactical advantages, so that success may flow from success.