Keeping up vigil in Punjab

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At least two protagonists of Khalistan won the parliamentary elections in Punjab with large margins making it easier for them to further push the separatist agenda in the sensitive border state.

Khalistan ideologue Amritpal Singh lodged in Dibrugarh jail under the National Security Act, secured victory with a margin of 1.93 lakh votes -- the highest in this election in Punjab.

Significantly, the Akali Dal registered a decline -- winning only the Bathinda seat -- which could be interpreted as a weakening of the moderate Sikh voice.

The AAP got three seats that did not set any trend but the relative performance of the Congress and the BJP showed interesting pointers. The BJP increased its vote share from 6.6 to 19 per cent without scoring any victory while Congress lost its vote by a corresponding 13 per cent and won 7 of the 13 seats in the state.

The Jat Sikh and Dalit vote apparently shifted to the Congress while the Hindus seemed to have rallied behind the BJP.

Incidentally in the parliamentary election in nearby Haryana, the Congress and the BJP equally shared the ten seats of the state -- all at the cost of regional groupings -- which was welcome to the extent it showed the voter's preference for mainstream politics.

Anything that accentuates community differentiation in Punjab has to be avoided as that would only benefit radicals and separatists -- Hindu-Sikh unity founded on the teachings of Guru Nanak was an intrinsic political antidote for the Khalistan movement.

It may be recalled that the Khalistan terror witnessed by Punjab last time had seen targeted killings of Hindus. There is no gainsaying the fact that Punjab has been exposed in recent months to the after-effects of a lot of pro-Khalistan activities that were taking place outside India -- particularly in the US and Canada -- instigated by our adversaries. There were incidents like attacks on temples abroad to create a Hindu-Sikh divide -- the intention obviously was to create a communal backlash in Punjab as well.

Three trends are currently in play that should cause concern. One is the unmitigated process of build-up of the Khalistan advocacy seen in Canada, the US, Australia and even the UK attributable to anti-India forces -- with a clear indication of Pak ISI's hand in it. Pak establishment was known to be in league with Amritpal Singh -- it had arranged his stay in Dubai before he shifted to India.

Amritpal Singh was trying to emulate Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale -- he visited village Rode in Moga district and took to Bhindranwale’s attire. He was obviously testing waters in Punjab when he rallied hundreds of followers to raid Ajnala Police Station near Amritsar in February 2023 and successfully rescued his aid who had been earlier arrested for violence.

The crowd carried Guru Granth Sahib as a strategy of defence -- this might encourage the trend of stray Gurudwaras being used wherever possible for the promotion of Amritdhari cult.

The modus operandi used by Pak ISI for fuelling terrorism in Punjab in the late 80s was likely to be repeated and this should help the government to frame its counter-measures against the covert plans of the adversary. This time around, Pak ISI is banking in a big way on spreading addiction to drugs in Punjab so that the vulnerable youth could be indoctrinated more easily for taking the path of separatism and violence.

It has made use of Sino-Pak strategic friendship to secure Chinese drones for dropping arms and narcotics in Punjab -- undeterred by the close vigilance of BSF and state police against this planned mischief.

It is reported that Amritpal Singh was using ‘de-addiction centres’ in the state for hiding weapons sourced from Pakistan.

The state government needs to have the political will to clean up these establishments, strengthen its Intelligence machinery and secure public cooperation to put down any externally instigated violence- particularly in the border districts of Punjab.

It should be presumed that Pak ISI would keep up its covert offensive in both J&amp;K and Punjab -- an indication of this is the ambush of a bus carrying pilgrims returning from Vaishno Devi at Reasi, executed by a group of terrorists said to be from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) on June 9 -- around the time when in Delhi the new cabinet of Prime Minister Narendra Modi was being sworn in. In the intense firing on the bus, the driver was hit and the vehicle subsequently fell into a deep gorge -- resulting in nine deaths and grievous injuries to 33 passengers.

In Punjab, there was another attempt recently to drop narcotics from a drone. Pakistan backed by China has stepped up its anti-India operations particularly after the Indian Parliament voted for the abrogation of Article 370 relating to Kashmir in August 2019. This period has seen a rise in pro-Khalistan violence outside India -- notably in Canada and the US -- at the hands of Pak ISI-backed forces such as Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) and Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF).

In April this year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the leader of the opposition in Canada were welcomed at the Vaisakhi rally in Toronto organised by Khalistan supporters, with slogans of 'Khalistan Zindabad'. This led to India charging the Canadian PM with giving space to separatists and extremists for political reasons. India-Canada relations have suffered a setback on this issue.

Earlier, 'Sikhs for Justice' active in the US called for a ‘Khalistan Referendum’ on January 28, 2023, which evoked a response from Sikh separatists in the US, Canada, the UK and Australia. A violent-looking mob created a ruckus at the Indian Consulate in San Francisco and flashed Khalistan flags on the occasion.

In March 2023, Khalistan supporters gathered in front of the Indian Embassy in Washington, raised abusive slogans and threatened the Indian Ambassador. Around the same time, protestors carrying Khalistan flags broke into the Consulate premises in San Francisco and painted graffiti calling for the release of Amritpal Singh who had been arrested in India and lodged in Dibrugarh jail in Assam. In July again, Khalistan supporters set fire to the San Francisco Consulate building at midnight.

Indian Embassy in Melbourne, Australia, witnessed a protest demonstration by Khalistan elements in June 2023 and Sikh -- Hindu tension cropped up in Sydney as well.

In London, Khalistan supporters including Dal Khalsa and Khalistan Tiger Force members tried to attack Indian High Commission in March 2023 in retaliation against the arrest of Amritpal Singh, the Khalistan protagonist who had come from Dubai - leading the organisation called 'Waris Punjab De' - and as mentioned earlier organised a violent raid at Ajnala Police Station on the outskirts of Amritsar in February last year. The protestors pulled down the national flag, caused damage to the building and injured some people.

India's national security scenario is characteristically marked by the fact that covert external threats are the prime danger to the country’s internal security at present. This is attributable to the Sino-Pak strategic alliance that works basically against India. The Khalistan movement is being instigated by Pak ISI and China is collaborating with the latter by supplying drones to Pakistan for cross-border operations of dropping arms and narcotics in Punjab.

Intelligence collection on the doings of the Sino-Pak axis against India has to be stepped up using also the Intelligence-sharing channels with friendly countries who were opposed to China and who felt threatened by the advent of ‘radicalisation’ in the Muslim world.

India is handling the threat of revival of the Khalistan movement in Punjab with a multi-prong strategy using diplomatic, police and socio-political measures to contain and counter the danger -- drawing lessons from its handling of the Khalistan ‘terror’ that had overtaken the state in the latter 80s.

In February 2024 at the India-US Homeland Security Dialogue held in Delhi, India raised the demand that pro-Khalistan outfits in the US be investigated for instigating violence against India.

A clear message has been delivered to Canada and the US that the freedom of expression did not extend to giving anti-India calls for violence in the name of Khalistan.

Pro-Khalistan elements do not have the benefit of a cult figure like Bhindranwale within Punjab but the anti-India forces abroad are in a determined way trying to instigate the separatist movement and inject the Hindu-Sikh communal divide into the border state, from outside.

The Centre should take an early step to appoint a senior person with a national security background and knowledge of how the terror that prevailed in Punjab in the past was handled as the Governor so that counter-measures could be coordinated and the state government guided suitably in the socio-political sphere and also instructed properly on security issues.

The new challenges for Intelligence are the scanning of social media, uncovering of clandestine funding of separatist movements and keeping track of the activities of anti-India elements within the state and outside. In matters of national security, the state and central governments have to be on the same page.

(The writer is a former Director of the Intelligence Bureau. Views are personal)