

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

New inflection point in Punjab

There is an anxious watch as India's Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar enters talks with the militant Sikh separatists.

The Dec. 30 meeting between Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar and Akali Party leader Simranjit Singh Mann has generated much apprehension in India. Although the prime minister has tried to allay fears by declaring that the country's unity and integrity would not be compromised, Mann's insistence on "self-determination" for the people of Punjab reflects the fact he is speaking for the Sikh militants, and it is the militants who hold a position of strength in the streets.

Mann came to New Delhi with the backing of all wings of the faction-ridden Akali Party, a development which has been given much significance here. Prior to the meeting, Mann promised it would pave the way for the Sikh militants themselves to meet the prime minister. "I am only an ambassador of those who are fighting from the jungles," he said.

Mann also told newsmen that the Sikh separatist state of Khalistan would be "a nice little buffer" between two enemy countries, India and Pakistan, which have been exchanging war threats for over a year now.

Jailed for five years as a suspected conspirator in the October 1984 murder of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Mann was summarily released in November 1989 after winning a seat in parliament. Leaks of secret meetings between Mann and the then-to-be prime minister, V.P. Singh, prior to Mann's release from jail, fed suspicions among the Khalistani gangs, and Mann's attempt to grab the limelight as Punjab's kingpin, one step ahead of the ultra-radicals, was scut-

tled before it got off the ground.

Twelve months and one government later, he has presumably been brought completely to heel.

Mann handed over a memorandum to the prime minister which read: "After being subjected for years to state repression and discrimination, the people of Punjab wish to invoke the right on which basis the Sikhs joined the Union. . . . The Sikhs who opted for the Indian Union are today demanding the right to self-determination."

The memorandum described the 1984 "Operation Bluestar," when the Indian Army entered the Golden Temple to flush out militants who had taken over the shrine and a bloodbath ensued, as a watershed in Indo-Sikh relations. It said that the trauma of that event was so great that to "safeguard their existence, Sikhs are ready to accept any political system which does not concede the right to self-determination, while the youth, whom we call the militants, are shedding their blood daily for a sovereign Sikh state."

Besides the demand for self-determination, a demand also put forward by the Muslims of the northern state of Kashmir, Mann made a reference to Article 51 of the Indian Constitution. Article 51 deals wholly with international relations, specifying in particular that India's relations with other nations be harmonious and based on peace and security.

At the moment, it is anybody's guess how the prime minister will deal with the hardened Akali position. Over the last year, inaction by

a palpably weak V.P. Singh administration has led to a great deterioration of the Punjab situation. According to reports, Punjab registered an all-time high of 3,784 killings of ordinary citizens, militants, and security men—an average of 10 per day—in 1990. In 1989, killings took 1,872 lives.

More striking, however, is the strength of the militants on the ground. According to newspaper reports, the terrorists do not run a parallel government; *they run the government*. Thousands of Hindus are fleeing from the rural areas, terrorized by Kalashnikov-wielding Sikh militants. The army has been called in, but New Delhi has chosen not to deploy them fearing it would only further harden the Sikh psyche.

Whereas the terrorist activity was for many years confined to several western districts of Punjab, the militants' writ has now been extended to the cities, and the state capital in particular. The militant Panthic Committee's orders to use Gurmukhi—and not Hindi or English—in all government affairs, is being enforced by gun-toting cadres, who move through government offices in Chandigarh, and monitoring bureaucrats.

Following the broad-daylight assassination of the state minister of All India Radio, the news media have fallen into line with the Panthic Committee's order prohibiting use of the word "terrorist" to describe the terrorists.

Meanwhile, the so-called moderate Akali leaders have capitulated to the militants, out of sheer physical fear. The unprecedented agreement among the Akali politicians on the Mann initiative is the result of this, and not some product of reasoned consensus. It is no secret that the militants are calling the shots from behind, while Akali leaders parrot their words.