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**To cite this article:** C. Christine Fair & Harshiv Mahajan (13 Aug 2024): The killing fields of Punjab: representing the Sikh militancy in cinema, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, DOI: [10.1080/09592318.2024.2387885](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2387885)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2387885>



Published online: 13 Aug 2024.



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# The killing fields of Punjab: representing the Sikh militancy in cinema

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## ABSTRACT

The Sikh Militancy was a violent movement that began in the northern Indian state of Punjab in the late 1970s and lasted through the early 1990s. The movement consisted predominantly of Jatt Sikhs, who waged a bloody campaign for an independent, theocratic Sikh state, Khalistan. Despite the sanguinary nature of the conflict and the highly influential role that Punjabi culture plays in India's mass entertainment culture and even the large numbers of Punjabi directors in India's mass film industry, Indian language films about this period are relatively sparse. In this essay, we study two films about the Khalistan conflict: *Maachis* and *Punjab 1984*.

**KEYWORDS** Khalistan militancy; Hindi film; Punjabi film

## Introduction

The Sikh militancy was a violent movement that began in the northern Indian state of Punjab in the late 1970s and lasted through the early 1990s in which predominantly Jatt Sikhs<sup>1</sup> waged a bloody campaign for an independent and theocratic Sikh state, Khalistan, to be carved out of the Punjab. While estimates vary, it's believed that some 30,000 died during the militancy.<sup>2</sup> Despite the sanguinary nature of the conflict and the highly influential role that Punjabi culture plays in India's mass entertainment culture, along with the large numbers of Punjabi directors in India's mass film industry,<sup>3</sup> Indian language films about this period are relatively sparse; this is particularly so when compared to India's various wars with Pakistan in 1947–48, 1965, 1971 and 1999, the long-standing proxy war over Kashmir and even the border war it fought with China in 1962.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, we study two films about the Khalistan conflict which were made nearly 20 years apart, namely: *Maachis* and *Punjab 1984*.

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*Maachis* is a Hindi language film released in 1996 directed by Gulzar and written by H. Banerjee and Gulzar, starring Om Puri as well as Tabu and Chandrachur Singh. The film depicts a young Sikh man's involvement in the Khalistani movement in the wake of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.<sup>5</sup> *Punjab 1984* is a Punjabi language film released in 2014, directed by Anurag Sindh and written by Surmeet Maavi and Anurag Singh, starring Diljit Dosanjh, Kirron Kher and Pawan Malhotra. This film features a mother whose son has been detained and possibly disappeared by corrupt police following the events of Operation Blue Star, the Indian army operation on the Golden Temple to decimate Sikh militants ensconced there. Both films garnered widespread critical acclaim, earning accolades for their exceptional craftsmanship in the realm of filmmaking while resonating with audiences, leading to robust support and commendable box office returns during their theatrical runs in their respective markets.<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, we examine the ways in which both films depict the movement and their various actors. We organize this essay as follows. Next, we provide a brief background the Sikh militancy and its impact. Third, we provide brief backgrounds to the film. Fourth, we provide our analysis of the films. We conclude with a discussion of the implications.

## **Background to the Sikh militancy and the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984**

Both films depict the Khalistan militancy centered in the Indian state of Punjab in which Sikh militants demanded an independent Sikh state. While the demand for an independent Sikh state took on violent dimensions between the late 1970s and mid-1990s, the idea of a separate Sikh state (variously referred to as Sikhistan (Land of the Sikhs) or Khalistan (Land of the Pure)) arose formally in 1944 amid ongoing negotiations about the future of India. As independence from the British neared and partition into India and Pakistan appeared increasingly likely, Sikhs questioned how their interests would be protected in an overwhelmingly Hindu, albeit democratic, state.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, for some, there was a belief that since Muslims were obtaining a Muslim-dominant state of Pakistan, and Hindus were securing a Hindu-dominant state, why should Sikhs be deprived of an 'Azad Punjab' (Independent Punjab)?<sup>8</sup> Some Sikhs believed they deserved a separate state to be carved from the detritus of the Raj due to their disproportionate and extensive military service during World Wars I and II.<sup>9</sup> However, the Sikhs had no majority in any district and thus the quest was stillborn. Later in 1966, the Indian government created a Punjabi-speaking state known as the Punjab in effort to placate demands for a Punjabi-speaking majority state.

While there is considerable scholarly debate about the precipitants of the militancy and what best accounts for its demise,<sup>10</sup> Sikh separatism did not become a serious concern to the Indian state until the late 1970s when elements of the Sikh nationalist struggle began to militarize. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale emerged as the spiritual and military leader of the Sikh militancy in the early 1980s when he and his militant cadres appropriated the Golden Temple, Sikh's holiest shrine, to avoid being arrested. It should be noted that despite his significance in the nationalist movement, Bhindranwale never called for an independent Sikh state – his interests were more parochial and sectarian, and focused on attaining greater autonomy for Sikhs. He turned the shrine into a highly militarized complex, desecrating several structures in the process. Ironically, he rose to prominence with the assistance of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who sought to patronize him to split the votes for the Shiromani Akali Dal, the most prominent Sikh political party in Punjab and a formidable rival to her Congress Party. This would prove to be a deadly miscalculation.<sup>11</sup>

An important aspect of this conflict was the role of Pakistan, which exfiltrated aspiring militants, trained them, provided them with arms and funds and infiltrated them back into India. Pakistan's support for the movement was critical to its lethality. At the time, Pakistan was awash with weapons that were destined for the so-called *mujahideen* who were waging an insurgency against the Russians who had occupied Afghanistan. The United States, China and Saudi Arabia – among others – contributed to this effort, which was spearheaded by Pakistan which had conceived of the conflict in terms of a 'jihad' rather than a secular insurgency against an occupying power.<sup>12</sup> The role of Pakistan is implied by both films under study here.

Bhindranwale gained popularity within specific segments of the Sikh population, such as the traditional agricultural caste, the Jatt Sikhs. Amid ongoing violence in Punjab, on 1 June 1984, Gandhi ordered the army into the temple complex to wrest it from the militants. Operation Blue Star, which lasted 10 days, was a fiasco.<sup>13</sup> Because the operation was conducted when many Sikhs were observing the martyrdom day of Sikhism's fifth guru, Guru Arjan Dev, thousands of worshippers were inside the temple complex when the operation began. While the final casualty count is debatable, nongovernment estimates put the military losses at 700 and civilians between 5,000 and 7,000.<sup>14</sup> Other estimates are even higher. According to official government accounts, the Indian army lost 83 personnel and 492 civilians died.<sup>15</sup>

Bhindranwale was killed in Operation Blue Star, but the attack on the Golden Temple and deaths of Sikh pilgrims galvanized wider Sikh militancy. In October 1984, Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in revenge. Congress Party operatives then organized a massive anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi, in which nearly 3,000 Sikhs were murdered.<sup>16</sup> Operation Blue Star

and the ensuing massacres of Sikhs legitimized Sikh separatists' claims that India could not and would not protect Sikh interests. Khalistani militant organizations proliferated throughout the 1980s and many continue to operate to date.<sup>17</sup>

From the late 1970s through the mid-1990s, Sikh militants engaged in serious human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch noted the 'massacre of civilians, attacks upon Hindu minorities in the state, indiscriminate bomb attacks in crowded places, and the assassination of a number of political leaders', as well as the effects of the violence, which 'paralyzed the economy and led to widespread extortion and land grabs'.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, between 1984 and 1995, the Indian government prosecuted counterinsurgency operations that 'led to the arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial execution, and enforced disappearance of thousands of Sikhs'.<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Claims that 'Police abducted young Sikh men on suspicion that they were involved in the militancy, often in the presence of witnesses, yet later denied having them in custody. Most of the victims of such enforced disappearances are believed to have been killed'.<sup>20</sup>

For 10 years or so after Operation Blue Star, images of Bhindranwale and the Sikh separatist movement were displayed as a form of remembrance; however post 1994, images of Bhindranwale in the public sphere started to decline.<sup>21</sup> (This was the period in which *Maachis* (1996) was released and this context may have shaped some of the creative choices made by the movie, particularly its hesitance to speak openly about the political aspects of the conflict.) However, some time around 2008, images of Bhindranwale began to reemerge in the public sphere. This could be seen less as a resurgence of the politics represented by Bhindranwale and more as a desire to highlight the unaddressed grievances and disdain for the current political order, which appears more concerned with building power bases and alliances than in being accountable to the society it governs.<sup>22</sup> *Punjab 1984* was released in 2014 when these grievances began to resurface and close to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation Blue Star. Hence these two movies were released in very different political environments, and this is reflected in their respective political messages.

## Introduction to the films

*Maachis* (Matchsticks) is a so-called 'Bollywood' Hindi language film that was directed by Gulzar and released in 1996.<sup>23</sup> The film is set in the mid to late 1980s, a period marked by the rise of Sikh separatism in Punjab as described above. The film follows the journey of a group of young men who are radicalized by the violence and injustice they witness from the police and their journey to join a militant group. The film has been described as

a 'realistic, hard-hitting portrayal of terrorism and youth in the Punjab after the 1984 riots'.<sup>24</sup>

The film centers upon Jaswant Singh Randhawa and his sister Veerendar (Veeran) who live with their elderly mother Biji in a Punjabi village. Veeran is engaged to Jaswant's childhood friend, Kripal Singh. One day Punjab police comes to their house looking for a suspected militant. Jaswant plays a light joke on the police when they demand to see 'Jimmy', and he leads the police to his dog, who is named Jimmy. Jaswant is taken and brutally tortured and beaten by the police. Angered by the police's actions, Kripal seeks out his cousin Jeetay, who has ties to militant groups. While he does not find Jeetay, he finds Sanathan, a leader within an militant group. Kripal joins the movement and commits many acts of violence to avenge the injustice of Jaswant. Once he enters the world of the militant, he is unable to return to his normal life and he resigns himself to life as a militant. Eventually, Veeran too joins the militant group following Jaswant's death at the hands of the police and her mother's death.

The film depicts the internecine conflict within the group and the distrust that exists within it as members begin turning against one another. Caught by the police for attempting to murder one of the inspectors involved in Jaswant's murder, Kripal receives a visit from Veeran during which she slips him a cyanide pill. Veeran takes her own pill while escaping in the back of a truck. The film concludes with their demise.

*Maachis* was generally well-received, with 10 nominations at the 44th National Film Awards, winning two.<sup>25</sup> The film 'established Chandrachur Singh as a household name as his performance received rave reviews from all corners'.<sup>26</sup> The film was also renowned for its music and 'show, don't tell' screenplay, which is fairly uncommon in Bollywood films.<sup>27</sup> Critics were disappointed that the film 'generally sidesteps political issues and uses violence strictly for dramatic effect',<sup>28</sup> and failed to take a stance on the conflict or openly deal with the political, ethnic, and religious aspects of the conflict beyond police abusing their power.

*Punjab 1984* is a Punjabi language film,<sup>29</sup> directed by Anurag Singh and released in 2014. It's best described as 'during a time of political turmoil, a mother goes on a journey in search of her missing son, who has been misjudged and labeled a terrorist'.<sup>30</sup> The film is set in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star and tackles several of the same themes of corrupt policemen, youth drawn into militancy, and how militancy impacts the families and broader community of the militants.

The film follows Satwant Kaur's journey to find her missing son. Following Operation Blue Star, she and her son, Shivjeet try to find her husband, unaware he was killed in the operation. The police inform them that he was a terrorist and has been executed. Through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that Shivjeet was beaten unconscious for suspected terrorism. When police

officers try to kill him alongside other youths, Shivjeet runs away. He eventually joins an militant organization and kills the inspector who tortured many innocent men. Meanwhile, Satwant puts pieces of information together in search of her missing son, faces physical and verbal abuse in the process, and fights to find her son. Eventually, after killing the inspector who was responsible for unjustly torturing many Sikhs, Shivjeet is shot dead, after reuniting with his mother in her arms, by his former girlfriend's fiancé, who recognized him as a so-called terrorist from the papers.

*Punjab 1984* also received a similarly positive reception, especially for its depiction of the mother-son dynamic.<sup>31</sup> In Neha Saini's review, she argues that the film is an example of 'the efforts to reinvent the quality of Punjabi cinema and ensure a promising future'.<sup>32</sup> She adds: 'Cinematically, the film successfully got the pain and turbulence during the darkest period of Punjab without coughing up controversy'.<sup>33</sup> The film's director maintains that the film is not political.<sup>34</sup> Yet, there appears to be a political message based on the characters that the film chooses to sympathize with that has resonated with many audiences.

Saini notes that the film did not stir large controversy, but critics did take issue with some of *Punjab 1984's* depictions. In a Sikh Siyasat review of the film, the writer asserts that 'The movie presents Sikh struggle in bad light. It's not just influenced by the state propaganda, rather it seems to be part of that propaganda, so far as this part of the movie is concerned. All the scenes related to the Sikh militant movement in the movie present the only image of the struggle as mindless, violent, and cruel terrorism that was being fueled by some self-interested politicians'.<sup>35</sup> However, on the other end of the spectrum, the film drew controversy for its seeming support of the militancy, or at least the victims. Member of Parliament (MP), Ravneet Singh Bittu, who hails from the Congress Party, objected to the song titled 'Rangrut' in *Punjab 1984*.<sup>36</sup> Bittu urged Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh to file First Information Reports (FIRs)<sup>37</sup> against singers Diljit Singh, Jazzy Bains, and Akal Takht Jathedar Giani Harpreet Singh for the song 'openly supporting' the demand for Khalistan.

## Themes represented in the two films

*Maachis* and *Punjab 1984* present overlapping themes: loss of innocence, the blurred lines of righteousness in the militancy, and role of women in the militancy. In doing so, however, they develop differing political messages on the militancy. While *Maachis* relies on more implicit, non-political messaging, *Punjab 1984* more directly addresses the political aspects of the conflict. *Maachis* takes a personal approach by analyzing a small family becoming radicalized, ideological convictions, and the transformations they undergo due to their participation in the political conflict. On the other hand, *Punjab*

*1984* uses the plotline of a mother searching for her son, as a way to humanize the impact of political decisions by focusing on the personal struggles and sacrifices of ordinary people. Here we address these themes in turn.

### ***Loss of innocence***

In both films, the main characters experience a loss of innocence. They did not begin as militants; rather they were radicalized through injustice. This is an important message that the films deliver about the militancy; namely, that persons would not be militants if the state had not began targeting Sikhs unfairly. Needless to say, this is a provocative starting point that does not always align with the empirics of the case particularly before Operation Blue Star.

*Maachis* relies heavily on its soundtrack to advance the film's narrative instead of dialogue. Particularly, through music nostalgic of the days without militancy, *Maachis* is able to set up a narrative that evinces the demise of innocence. The opening scene itself shows a white lamb being tended to tenderly, a metaphor for the collective innocence of the main characters before the Indian police interfere with their lives.<sup>38</sup> Songs like 'Pani Pani Re' and 'Chappa Chappa' all have lyrics that follow this theme, as well. 'Paani Paani Re', sung by Lata Mangeshkar, reflects the pain and longing for a lost homeland. The lyrics capture the essence of displacement and the search for identity.<sup>39</sup> In 'Chappa Chappa Charkha Chale', singers Hariharan and Suresh Wadkar use imagery of the spinning wheel (charkha) to display the struggle for freedom. The charkha is a powerful symbol associated with Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian independence movement. It represents self-reliance, simplicity, and the economic empowerment of the masses. In the context of *Maachis*, the charkha serves as a symbol of resistance against oppression and a call for self-determination, which is a subtle way for the film to convey the political elements of the militancy, without directly addressing the issue.

In addition, *Maachis* displays the loss of innocence through shifts in narrative tone throughout the film. At the beginning of the film, there is some lightheartedness to the film. The family seems close and happy. Jaswant even plays a joke on the police by leading them to his dog.<sup>40</sup> The film quickly turns to a dark tragedy following Jaswant's arrest. Symbolized through Kripal attempting to hide a gun, the characters turn from an innocent family to one dealing with violence.<sup>41</sup> Once Kripal joins the militant group it becomes nearly impossible for him to be able to go back. When he does attempt to return, he realizes he cannot go back or reacclimate into his old life, resigning himself to the life of a militant.

*Punjab 1984* also depicts the loss of innocence as a central theme to the film. One of the ways this is done so is through the symbolism of the turban. Typically, the turban holds cultural, religious and political symbolism to the



Sikh community. The turban and images of the Shivjeet's long hair tie directly to the struggle.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, the scenes where Shivjeet is shown to be tortured, his head is without the turban, convey a sense of vulnerability to the audience. This vulnerability displays a concrete moment for the audience where Shivjeet loses his innocence, and radicalizes. The turban is mentioned several times in the movie, with specific linkage of 'kesari' (saffron) turbans to martyrdom.<sup>43</sup> There are also references to Sikhism and the conflict is framed as Hindu-Sikh. This is highlighted when Shivjeet's friend is dragged out of the bus and killed for being a Hindu by the militants. He knows he will be singled out for being a Hindu and even attempts to hide his 'dhaga' (threads worn on his wrist).<sup>44</sup> Through the loss of innocence symbolized through the turban, *Punjab 1984* more directly identifies the political divide between Hindus and Sikhs than *Maachis* is able to do.

Similar to *Maachis*, a leading young man in the film becomes a militant. Shivjeet is portrayed as an innocent young man at the beginning of the film. He has plans to marry his classmate Jeeti, and attends college. However, like Kripal in *Maachis*, through brutal treatment by the police, Shivjeet will turn from an innocent student to a militant. Notably, at the beginning of the film, Shivjeet has an argument with his father about following the laws in India. While his father is a law-abiding citizen, Shivjeet argues that nothing will guarantee his rights other than God. This scene indicates the innocence of his father. His father does everything 'right'. He cares for others and follows the law, yet he is killed in Operation Blue Star. Shivjeet is shown even in his moments of 'innocence', as still being slightly aware of the harsh realities of the world.

*Punjab 1984* uses open dialogue, as well, to demonstrate the loss of innocence. Shivjeet and his accomplices discuss the idea of going back, displaying their deep yearning for home.<sup>45</sup> The film has a montage of the characters becoming proficient with firearms and even has their recruiter stating his eagerness to deploy them on missions, clearly showing the lead character losing his innocence.<sup>46</sup> This choice of open dialogue allows the viewer to more clearly understand the political messages of the film. The characters specifically speak of Khalistan and their urge to return to a country of their own.

### ***Moral ambiguity***

While both films display the messiness of militancy by demonstrating mistakes made on both sides of the militancy, *Maachis* more directly pushes for a message of ambiguity within the militancy than *Punjab 1984*. *Maachis* chooses to focus more on individual perspectives and seeks the audience to empathize with individual stories and their ethical dilemmas. In contrast, *Punjab 1984* more explicitly takes a political and historical approach to show,

while there are unclear ethical dilemmas, the state repression and human rights violations during that period, and portrays the impact on the Sikh community.

Both films display moments of moral ambiguity. In *Maachis*, this is done through the militants turning on each other. Sanathan is shown to be a leader of the militant group that Kripal and Veeran join. Initially, while Sanathan can be intimidating, he is shown as someone who guides the militants, as they struggle ideologically. However, he turns on the militants. When one of the group members, Kuldip, asks to go home because he no longer wants to be a militant, Sanathan agrees, but secretly plants a bomb to kill him on the way home.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, when Kripal spots Inspector Vora and decides to try to kill him, he is arrested. Each militant had been given a cyanide pill to be able to commit suicide in the event that they were caught by the police. Because Kripal did not kill himself, Sanathan concludes that Kripal must have been a police informer, and Veeran an accomplice.<sup>48</sup> Despite doing nothing but following the orders of Sanathan, Veeran is placed on house arrest and is supposed to be killed. Eventually Veeran takes control and kills Sanathan herself.

This moment signals a shift in the movie. From the beginning, the film drew upon the empathy of the audience to side with the militants against the police. However, this scene demonstrates that morality is not always clear. The leaders of the militancy do not necessarily care for the well-being of the militants, leading the film to be more of a commentary on individual experiences than taking a side between the militant group and the police force.

*Maachis* used Sanathan as the only direct device within the film to comment on any of the political aspects of the militancy. He displays the ideological commitments of the group of militants. Sanathan's parents died during the partition. According to Sanathan he fights for no faith or country. He says, 350 'I am fighting against my helplessness and being dominated ... The system wants to take away our manhood. But I am not a eunuch'.<sup>49</sup> The vast majority of the militant group in *Maachis* are depicted as people of the state of Punjab who felt that they had been failed by the system, without dealing with specific ethnic and religious aspects of the conflict.<sup>50</sup> The militancy depicted 355 in the movie also does not clearly state their long-term objectives. They plant bombs on buses and plan to kill a senior ranking police officer, but they do not portray an overarching goal to achieve. This, therefore, further adds to the idea that the film does not directly comment on the political aspects of the conflict, but more the individual characters' experiences because it does not 360 get into the details for why the conflict is being fought in the first place, and who is even on which side based on identity or oppression.

*Punjab 1984* also has moments of moral ambiguity. On the bus, for example, Shivjeet's friend is killed by the militants for being a Hindu by the

militants, a character the audience has grown sympathetic to for his relationship with Satwant.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, when Shivjeet does not plant a bomb on the bus where his mother and best friend are riding, the rebel leader Sarhali reprimands him. Similarly, when Shivjeet suggests a potential target has no relation to killing Hindus or Sikhs, Sarhali orders Shivjeet to kill him anyways. Furthermore, Shivjeet and his friend Taari realize that their militant leaders themselves were responsible for the killings of several innocent Hindus and Sikhs. Thus, the militant rebel group is not depicted as entirely morally righteous. However, unlike *Maachis*, *Punjab 1984* does not depict the conflict as the police versus the militants, but the Indian police's brutality against the Punjabi community, specifically through identity conflicts. The impact is not necessarily felt through the militant group, but through the families and community. Thus, while the actions of the militant group are morally ambiguous at times, the film overrides this issue by demonstrating support for the victims of the militancy.

*Punjab 1984* does not rely on a singular character to display the political messaging of the film like *Maachis*. The characters openly talk about their political stances. They acknowledge that separatism is their end goal and there are multiple mentions of 'Khalistan'.<sup>52</sup> The movement is shown to have a structure and different factions within it. This shows a level of organization and forethought that was absent from the representation of the same movement in *Maachis*. The two characters who are shown to represent the movement initially are Sukhdev Singh Sarhali, the recruiter and militant leader, and Darshan Singh Poonpuri, the peaceful political leader who supports them from the sidelines. In a scene showing a conference of the leadership we see more factions, including Talwandi, a leader who is shown to be pro-Khalistan unlike Poonpuri, who suggests that they work with the government. The film finally positions Poonpuri and Sarhali as the true antagonists while Talwandi is shown to have been a victim of their schemes. The audience is left with the impression that those working with the government on a solution are 'politicians' and that true leaders of the movement just fell victim to the former's schemes. The film uses moral ambiguity to not sidestep the opportunity to take a side in the conflict, but to show the nuances of the movements, and ultimately allow the portrayal of an additional significant side of the conflict – the Punjabi and Sikh victims and families. This allows the film to condemn the Indian state for Operation Blue Star and show support for the Khalistan movement.

Both films converge through their ambiguous endings, as well. Both movies end with the lead character dying. They die at very different places in their journeys: Shivjeet having defeated his enemies and returning home, and Kripal in jail, having failed his mission and facing a life sentence. Kripal's death in *Maachis* can be read as a sign of accepting defeat. It shows that the 'fire' that made him join the rebellion has died and only left him with grief and

loss. Veeran dying with Kripal also ends the film romantically by both of them taking the cyanide pill together, completing their individual narratives. Shivjeet's death in Punjab 1984 is at the hands of his former girlfriend's fiancé, a man who has never met him but identifies him as a militant based on reports about him from the newspapers. This can be read as the societal toll of reputational loss from participating in militant activities. Ultimately their deaths can both show that despite their best efforts, the violence is inescapable, and there is a tragedy to the conflict that leads death to be the only option. Because Shivjeet dies in his mother's hands, *Punjab 1984* is also able to further a narrative that sympathizes with the Punjabi mothers who lost their sons due to Operation Blue Star.

Another element that unites the two endings is a moral code that dictates depictions of militants in Indian cinema, across states, in the broader picture. Militancy can be viewed as amoral, and even righteous militants are not awarded fair endings. While not codified or enforced in Indian cinema, a close parallel would be the 'Hays code', enforced in American movies during the 1930s, which is described in Gregory D. Black's book:

Rejecting the notion of censorship by the government, Hays embraced a system of industry self-regulation. In 1924 he introduced 'The Formula', a series of rules designed to prevent 'objectionable' plays and novels from being produced as films. Hays' formula did manage to keep some material off the screen, but he was dependent on voluntary compliance by the studios. The Catholics demanded that Hays create a Production Code Administration (PCA) to enforce the censorship code adopted by the industry in 1930. The code, written by a Catholic priest, had not, in the opinion of the church, been enforced. The church demanded, and Hays agreed, that a staunch lay Catholic, namely Joseph I. Breen, would head the PCA and interpret the code.<sup>53</sup>

While Indian cinema does not have an equivalent of 'Hays Code', there is a reluctance to depict any sort of sympathy with militants.<sup>54</sup> With the 1990s phase of aggressive Hindu nationalism in film, the representation of separatist movement in film was slim, and the impacts are felt today.<sup>55</sup> While *Punjab 1984* is very clear in its political messaging through direct dialogue, its departure from this at the end, through an ambiguous ending, could suggest a restraint within Indian cinema to evoke total sympathy towards militants. While still controversial, it could be easier to side with the victims of the militancy, than with the militants.

*Maachis* has been lauded for its nuanced portrayal of the militancy.<sup>56</sup> The film is not intended for choosing a side in conflict. If anything it shows how righteousness is lost in armed conflict as well as the injustices perpetrated on innocent families and on Kripal and Veeran. Nevertheless, the movie manages to instill empathy for individuals who either willingly opted for or found

themselves compelled to take the route of militancy, a decision fueled by impulsiveness and fueled by rage. Kripal's anger is highlighted in multiple instances to show us the role that injustice plays in the radicalization of Punjab's youth.<sup>57</sup> The film does not offer alternative paths, but shows that the cycle of violence will continue until all involved are left either bereaved or dead.

In *Punjab 1984*, Shivjeet grapples with anger, but it is depicted as righteous fury. His father was tragically killed while innocently attempting to provide water to a child. Unlike the more impulsive decisions of Kripal, Shivjeet's choice to join the militancy is not characterized by hastiness. While there are many morally ambiguous moments in the film, Satwant's role allows a new perspective into the film, the families of victims, which allows the film to more easily take a political stance. The depiction of the militancy itself is very different. Since the struggle for the formation of Khalistan is shown explicitly, the movie's depiction can be seen condoning the real-life movement.

### Women in the militancy

Notably, both films portray strong female characters as essential to the narrative, and use them to convey their respective political messages. It should be noted that this is cinematographic license. Unlike the Tamil Tigers, the Sikh militancy was highly patriarchal with little scope for female participation with few exceptions.<sup>58</sup>

*Maachis* uses the female character Veeran to connect the audience to the personal narrative technique of the film, and uses the connotation of female innocence to further its depiction of the loss of innocence due to the militancy. *Punjab 1984*, on the other hand, uses Satwant, as a leading character to push through the moral ambiguity of the conflict to argue for the side of the mothers and families who were unjustly deprived of rights and suffered loss during the conflict.

The portrayal of Veeran, in *Maachis*, begins with typical gender expectations. Veeran is demure and shown serving their elders food, Bollywood shorthand for a dutiful daughter. *Maachis* is littered with instances of benevolent sexism in the beginning of the film. Benevolent sexism provides a comfortable rationalization for confining women to domestic roles.<sup>59</sup> Veeran is ordered around by her brother and fiancé, talked down to when she tries to take up responsibility of the farm, and, in general, consigned the duty of cooking without any thought given to the arrangement. She is also depicted as 'innocent'. When the police come to question her brother and Kripal about a suspected militant living with them, Veeran is ordered to go inside, because it is not her business to deal with matters regarding the police.<sup>60</sup> In addition, women are regularly used to depict the gravity of the conflict. For instance, the fact that Veeran's mother fell 'unconscious 10 times'

is used to demonstrate how truly horrific the situation is for the family.<sup>61</sup> Women are used in the film to reflect the extent of the horrors of the situation – it must be terrible if even the women are feeling the impact.

Yet, Veeran's story doesn't just end there. She later joins the militancy movement, by her own free will, following the death of her own mother and brother. As she joins the movement, she serves to humanize the militants. Kripal and her get married, and the men soften with her arrival. This helps the film's intent to connect viewers with the individual journeys of the characters. Furthermore, Veeran saves her own life and kills Sanathan, avenging his betrayal of Kripal. She also uses her femininity to allow the guards to permit her to see Kripal and slips him the cyanide pill, allowing the two to commit suicide. Veeran's loss of innocence is particularly painful, perhaps because the film draws on implicit biases sympathetic to female innocence, and keeps the audience invested in the fates of characters.

*Punjab 1984* uses Satwant to overcome any moral ambiguity, and develop its message supporting the mother and her search for her son. Satwant Kaur's character is often associated with the theme of motherhood. She faces the challenge of being separated from her son, who becomes a victim of the political unrest. This aspect adds emotional depth to her character and highlights the human cost of the conflict. Her representation of motherhood stretches beyond her own son, and she is shown as an indiscriminate mother to everyone like Shivjeet's friend Bittu.<sup>62</sup> Satwant's resilience to find her son is tested throughout the film, as she receives physical and verbal abuse from police officers and challenges at each corner.

It's hard to find a reason not to root for Satwant. She is shown as unequivocally good-natured and kind. One such example is when a policeman comes to her house to tell her the truth about her son's fate. She treats him well and offers him food despite his actions towards her and her son, which causes the man to rethink his own actions.<sup>63</sup> She is shown to be the paragon of motherly patience, determination, and sense of service. Amidst the chaos surrounding the identification of true Khalistan supporters among militants and distinguishing between those motivated by financial gain, as well as the challenge of discerning genuinely malevolent police officers from those who may be misguided, Satwant stands as a beacon of unwavering moral strength. For a film that attempts to display support for the mothers and Punjabi community during the conflict, Satwant is the perfect avenue to ensure audience empathy to push their political message forward.

## Conclusion

Both *Maachis* and *Punjab 1984* depict the aftermath of the Khalistan militancy. The two work through many similar topics, such as loss of innocence, moral

ambiguity, and women in the militancy. However, in doing so, they develop different political messages.

*Maachis* portrays its messaging less directly through music and symbolism. In its depiction of the loss of innocence *Maachis* is able to connect readers to the individual characters of the film. *Maachis* keeps itself morally ambiguous by suggesting the militant group and the police forces both make grave mistakes that ultimately lead to tragic consequences for all. The female character of Veeran is particularly useful for developing this sense of loss of innocence, and portraying the conclusion that political unrest can deeply affect individuals and transform innocent people into militants. The film seeks to depict the human cost of the conflict and the cycles of violence.

*Punjab 1984* illustrates its political messaging through more overt means. When dealing with topics of losing innocence, the film openly discusses ideas of Khalistan and specific conflicts and ideologies that led to the militancy. While the film artfully deals with the nuances of conflict, by demonstrating how blurred 'good' and 'bad' can get in conflict, the film keeps its momentum in supporting the militancy's victims by focusing on the conflict's long-term impact on communities. The female character of Satwant particularly mobilizes the idea of motherhood to help draw empathy towards the issue.

The two films were written in different contexts. *Maachis*, produced in 1996, was filmed in a time less open to overt discussions of the specific political aspects of the militancy. The film chose a more subtle and poetic approach to depict the radicalization of youth and the consequences of the armed struggle. The use of metaphors and symbolism in the film allowed for a certain level of abstraction, enabling audiences to engage with the narrative without triggering direct political controversies. *Punjab 1984*, on the other hand, is more explicit and direct in its portrayal of the aftermath of Operation Blue Star and its impact on the Sikh community. However, to some, *Punjab 1984* does not go hard enough in its support of the victims of the Khalistan movement.<sup>64</sup> There have been several other films depicting the aftermath of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms and riots, including inter alia *The Mastermind Jinda Sukha* (2015), *Gaddar* (2015), *Quom De Heere* (2014), *Sadda Haq* (2013), and *Patta Patta Singha Da Vaarhi* (2015). All of these films were banned in India, and could be useful for further research on depictions of the Khalistan conflict in film, particularly to include examples of very controversial films.<sup>65</sup> While of course more films depicting the conflict ought to be studied to portray a more complete picture of Indian cinema's evolution in depicting the conflict, these two case studies can be indicative of a broader trend to shift toward a more direct confrontation of historical events, particularly regional and ethnic conflict within India. Studying these films as case studies provides

insights into the evolving nature of Indian cinema and its willingness to engage with complex and contentious subjects. As discussions around separatist movements in India become more prevalent, these cinematic representations act as cultural artifacts that contribute to shaping the collective memory and understanding of historical events.

In the broader context, the shift towards more open conversations in cinema reflects a societal willingness to confront historical issues and their lasting consequences. It opens the door to fostering empathy and understanding among diverse communities, encouraging a more nuanced dialogue about the complexities of political conflicts and their impact on individuals and societies. Alternatively, these films may serve to inflame sentiments across different Sikh communities as well as between religious communities. As more films continue to explore such themes, they play a crucial role in shaping the ever-evolving narrative of India's historical and political landscape.

## Notes

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4. Athique, "A line in the sand: the India – Pakistan border in the films of JP Dutta", 472–499; and Bharat and Kumar, eds. *Filming the line of control: and Chopra, Bollywood Does Battle: The War Movie and the Indian Popular Imagination*.
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7. Mohanka, "Religion and conflict in India". 589–598. See also Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: Volume 2*.
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10. See for example Leaf "The Punjab Crisis," 475–498; Hardgrave, "India in 1984: Confrontation, assassination, and succession," 131–144; Kataria, "Realpolitik in the Khalistan Movement," 57; Helweg, "India's Sikhs: Problems and prospects," 140–159; Pettigrew, "Martyrdom and guerilla organisation in Punjab," 387–406; Shiva, *The violence of the green revolution*, 1991; Chima, *The Sikh separatist insurgency in India*, 2008; Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India, and the Post-Militancy Era." 975–997; and Dhillon, "The Sikh Diaspora and the Quest for Khalistan," 2007.
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22. Singh and Purewal, "The resurgence of Bhindranwale's image".
23. Bollywood is one of the most dominant forms of Indian cinema. As described by Rachel Dwyer, Though India has many cinemas, currently the most famous worldwide form is Bollywood cinema. This is a term that has come to mean a specific kind of Hindi cinema, a popular or commercial cinema, based in Mumbai/Bombay. It is national and transnational, a globalized cinema that is one of the few serious rivals to Hollywood. Dwyer, "Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema," 381–398.
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25. "44th National Film Awards", [https://web.archive.org/web/20200725232620/http://dff.nic.in/images/Documents/73\\_44thNfacatalogue.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20200725232620/http://dff.nic.in/images/Documents/73_44thNfacatalogue.pdf)..
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37. FIR: A First Information Report is a written document prepared by the police when they receive information about the commission of a cognizable offense in India.
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41. *Maachis*, Gulzar, ~30:00.
42. Segall, "'1984 and Film: Trauma and the Evolution of the Punjabi Sikh Identity'", <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1707&context=honors..>
43. *Punjab 1984*, ~1:48:06.
44. *Punjab 1984*, ~2:00:07.
45. *Punjab 1984*, ~1:21:50.
46. *Punjab 1984*, ~1:30:03.
47. *Maachis*, ~01:30:00
48. *Maachis*, ~02:23:00
49. *Maachis*, ~01:01:00.
50. *Maachis*, ~57:50.
51. *Punjab 1984* ~2:00:07.
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53. Black, "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration," 167–189.
54. Singh, "Representations of the 1984 Tragedy in Punjabi Cinema", 418–421.
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## Acknowledgement

The authors thank Anya Karumanchi for editorial assistance. The authors are grateful to the knowledgeable reviewers. All remaining errors are the fault of the authors alone.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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