“Princesses” among the “Lions”: the Activist Careers of Khalistani Female Combatants[1]

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Most Sikh militants who picked up the gun against the Indian state in the aftermath of Operation Bluestar were male, but a handful of women also took part in the armed struggle for an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, between 1984 and 1995. Throughout the insurrection, a few hundreds of women guerrillas (as compared to thousands of male recruits) might thus have enrolled in the militancy[2].

Although Sikh studies have become more gender-conscious in recent years[3], these female fighters have received scant attention[4]. This omission comes in stark contrast with the scholarship on other militant movements of the region, particularly on the Sri Lankan civil war and the Nepalese “people’s war”[5]. These gendered accounts of South Asian conflicts aim to reassess the role of women in war, “beyond victimhood

[1] I would like to thank Charlene Simon for accompanying me during my last fieldwork in Punjab (March 2009) and for helping me in the translation of the interviews we conducted jointly with former female combatants. I would also like to extend all my gratitude to Urvashi Butalia and her mother for helping me translate Pritinder Kaur’s autobiography from Punjabi into English.

[2] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000, p. 89.

[3] Doris R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History. Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, Delhi, OUP, 2005 ; Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood & Stacy Brady, *The Guru’s Gift. An Ethnography Exploring Gender Equality with North American Sikhs*, McGraw-Hill, 1999.

[4] Although Cynthia Mahmood’s seminal study on the Khalistani fighters includes a chapter on the role of women in the insurgency, it relies upon a single case and focuses on the larger issue of gender relations in Sikhism; see Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation. Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, Philadelphie, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, chapter 9, “The Princess and the Lion”.

[5] See Peter Schalk, “Resistance and Martyrdom in the Process of State Formation of Tamililam”, *in* Joyce Pettigrew, (ed.), *Martyrdom and Political Resistance. Essays from Asia and Europe*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1997 ; Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, “Fighting with Ideas: Maoist and Popular Conceptions of the Nepalese People’s War”, *in* Laurent Gayer & Christophe Jaffrelot (eds.), *Armed Militias of South Asia. Fundamentalists, Maoists, Separatists*, London, Hurst, to be published in 2009.

to agency"[6]. Indeed, far from being systematically at the receiving end of state and guerrilla violence, South Asian women have also become active participants to these armed conflicts, thus contesting the traditional sexual division of work within the region's militant organisations[7]. In the case of Sri Lanka, Peter Schalk suggests that this participation of women to the armed struggle was infused with a "martial feminism" that contested the male monopoly over the use of violence and that aimed to emancipate women through the gun[8]. Elements of such "martial feminism" can also be found among some of the female recruits of the Khalistani insurgency, who occasionally claim that women make as good or even better fighters than men, and that their participation to the armed struggle was a way to claim gender equality, for themselves and for the women of their community at large. However, such feminist recollections of their militant past were relatively rare among my interviewees and might have been informed by strategies of "ethnographic seduction"[9]. Moreover, if militancy was certainly an empowering experience for these women, their demilitarisation was often highly regressive in this regard. Many of these female ex-combatants were reassigned traditional gender roles after their return to civilian life, which added to the psychological cost of their demilitarisation. For this reason, these female ex-combatants are often extremely bitter about their post-conflict experiences and tend to idealise their militant past.

This study relies upon a series of extensive and sometimes repeated interviews with ten former Sikh female fighters, who joined the militancy after Operation Bluestar. Most of these interviews were conducted in Punjabi, at the place of residence of the interviewee, in Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts, as well as in Chandigarh. When it was possible (in three cases), I tried to interview these women individually and later on in the presence of their male relatives (elder brothers or husbands). I also conducted one collective interview with three former combatants who had met each other during the insurgency and had remained close friends after their

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[6] Rita Manchanda (ed.), *Women, War and Peace in South Asia. Beyond Victimhood to Agency*, Delhi, Sage, 2001.

[7] Until the late 1960s, South Asian male militants remained reluctant to involve women in combat operations. Thus, both in Subash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) and in the communist Telangana uprising of the 1940s, women were confined to a supporting role; see Carol Hills et Daniel Silveraman, « Nationalism and Feminism in Late Colonial India: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, 1943–1945 », *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (4), October 1993, p. 741-760 ; Vasantha Kannabiran and K. Lalitha, « That Magic Time : Women in the Telangana People's Struggle », *in* Kumkum Sangari et Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women. Essays in Colonial History*, Delhi, Zubaan, 2006 [1989], p. 180-203.

[8] Peter Schalk, "Resistance and Martyrdom", art. quoted.

[9] Antonius C.G.M. Robben, « The Politics of Truth and Emotion Among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence », *in* Antonius C.G.M. Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom (eds), *Fieldwork Under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, p. 83.

demilitarisation, two of whom were later on interviewed separately. I have also tried to enrich this biographical corpus by collecting these ex-combatants' personal accounts. So far, I have only been able to identify one female fighter's autobiography, Pritinder Kaur's*[10] *Bikhra Painda* (The Scattered Road)[11], but this thick volume largely compensates, by its sociological value, the scarcity of such testimonies.

The life histories uncovered through these (auto)biographies will help us to relate the successive phases of commitment to the life cycle of the combatants, following the "sequential analytical model of behaviours"[12] recently developed by French political scientists for the study of "activist careers" (*carrières militantes*)[13]. Drawing its inspiration from the interactionist sociology of Anselm Strauss, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, this analytical framework aims to set aside the motives of engagement in order to focus on its process and sequences. Each of these sequences opens up new opportunities and creates new constraints which had not been anticipated by individual activists. Therefore, initial motives of engagement may not be the same as those informing persistent activism[14]. And in any case, individual and self-conscious motivations may not be the only pushing and pulling factors driving individuals towards activist groups[15]. As emphasised by Howard Becker, "Some commitments do arise from conscious decisions but others arise crescively; the person becomes aware that he is committed only at some point of change and seems to have made the commitment without realizing it"[16]. Even the most demanding forms of engagement may be the outcome of such "commitment by default"[17]. In the same way as undergoing a sex-change operation, joining an armed group is not a sudden leap into the unknown but the consequence of a series of trivial acts and decisions, none of which seemed awkward to the

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[10] All the names of female militants mentioned in this paper have been changed for their security.
[11] Pritinder Kaur, *Bikhra Painda*, Amritsar, Azad Khalsa Prakhashan, n.d. (2004?)
[12] Eric Agrikoliansky, « Carrières militantes et vocations à la morale : les militants de la LDH dans les années 1980 », *Revue française de science politique*, 51 (1-2), 2001, p. 30.
[13] Olivier Fillieule, « Propositions pour une analyse processuelle de l'engagement individuel », *Revue française de science politique*, 51 (1-2), 2001, p. 199-215.
[14] James Downton Jr. and Paul Wehr, *The Persistent Activist. How Peace Commitment Develops and Survives*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1997.
[15] For a critique of the analysis of violence through the prism of motivations, see Nicolas Mariot, « Faut-il être motivé pour tuer ? Sur quelques explications aux violences de guerre », *Genèses*, 53, décembre 2003, p. 154-177.
[16] Howard S. Becker, "Note on the Concept of Commitment", *American Review of Sociology*, 66 (1), 1960, p. 38
[17] *Ibid*.

individual[18]. And as we shall see, these moves are not simply made in relation to macro political and social change: they take place at the intersection of "social time" and "biographical time"[19], where political commitment and domestic life come to overlap. As the case of Sikh women fighters suggests, the consistent participation to the activities of an armed group may be informed by personal and self-conscious motives but commitment to a cause or an occupation is always constrained by previous moves in the individual's career, by the pressure to conform exerted by his environment, and by unexpected personal developments related to the life cycle of each individual (puberty, marriage, pregnancy, motherhood, aging, divorce or widowhood, in the cases that will be covered here). Therefore, the activist careers of Khalistani women are not only worth being studied for their own sake, but also as a point of entry into an understudied domain of activist politics: the contact zone of public and private lives.

On the War Path: the Enlistment of Women in Khalistani Armed Groups

Unlike other irregular armed groups of the region, such as the Sri Lankan LTTE or the Nepalese Maoists, Sikh militants never encouraged the recruitment of women in their ranks. On the contrary, they tried to discourage the enlistment of young women by instituting high "entry fees" to the movement. With a few exceptions, most women who joined the insurgency did so only after having been married to militants (although the affairs of some commanders with village women have been documented[20], they will not be covered here, as these women were not involved in the militancy). Before turning to these exceptions, let us therefore look at the rule and at the most common process of women enlistment.

Unlike men, whose recruitment was a more iterative process[21], women were literally enlisted overnight. Most female recruits of the movement for Khalistan went underground on the morning that followed their wedding night. Since their husband

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[18] On transgender careers, see Howard S. Becker, *Les Ficelles du métier* [Tricks of the Trade], Paris, La Découverte, 2002 [1998], p. 59. I am indebted to Isabelle Sommier for having detected the heuristic value of Becker's remarks on sex-change operations for the study of militant careers ; see Isabelle Sommier, *La violence révolutionnaire*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008, p. 90.
[19] Olivier Fillieule, « Temps biographique, temps social et variabilités des rétributions », *in* Olivier Fillieule (dir.), *Le désengagement militant*, Paris, Belin, 2005, p. 17-47.
[20] Harish K. Puri, Paramjit Singh Judge and Jagdev S. Sekhon, *Terrorism in Punjab. Understanding Grassroots Reality*, Delhi, Har Anand, 1999, p. 85-86.
[21] Laurent Gayer, « Le parcours du combattant : une approche biographique des combattant(e)s sikh(e)s du Khalistan », *Questions de recherche*, n°28, mai 2009.

was already involved in the militancy, and thus wanted by security forces, their wedding itself was a clandestine event. Security concerns constrained the participants to skip the engagement ceremony (*kurmai*), generally performed a week before the wedding itself, as well as the visit of the groom's family and friends to the house of the bride (*braat*). These militant weddings were therefore brief and took place under the cover of the night, in a secure area which would often be located outside the village of the bride and groom. In several cases, parents could not even attend the ceremony. This was a clear breach from tradition and, as such, it isolated the bride from her original milieu. The presence of armed fighters and commanders among the guests also infused these events with a militant touch that could not be missed by the participants. Rather than marking the entry of the bride into a new family, these weddings incorporated them, by body and soul, to a political collective set apart from the rest of society. These militant weddings should therefore be seen as moments of radicalisation, both for the bride and for the participants, ritualising the entry of a new member into the Khalistani "counter society", while at the same time strengthening the bonds between previous members[22]. However, as we shall see, this process of insulation from society was never as drastic as that practiced by other militant movements of the region, such as the LTTE, and Khalistani guerrillas retained strong bonds to their society while being apart from it.

Before we turn to "the morning after" and the making of women recruits into guerrilla fighters, let us have a look at the social and political dynamics that infused such militant weddings. Who were these Khalistani brides? How did they end up marrying outlaws and embracing their violent and risky lifestyle? Schematically, three categories of women can be distinguished here, on a politicised/non politicised continuum. At one side of the spectrum, one would find brides with no political records, although they generally hailed from families with a long "tradition of resistance"[23]. This is the case of one of my interviewees, Ravinder Kaur*, who was married in 1991, at age 16, to a combatant of the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF). Known among his peers as *Hatiar ka badshah* (the king of guns), this militant had been underground since 1988 and was one of the most renowned arms smugglers of

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[22] On the process of radicalisation understood as the formation of « counter-societies », see Gilles Dorronsoro and Olivier Grojean, « Engagement militant et phénomènes de radicalisation chez les Kurdes de Turquie », *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2004.

[23] Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerilla Movements. Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*, University Park, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, p. 11.

the insurgency. He would often cross over to Pakistan and back several times a night, and provided weapons to various Khalistani outfits (such as the KLF but also the Babbar Khalsa International [BKI] and the Khalistan Commando Force [KCF]). Ravinder Kaur* had never met her husband before the wedding night and her marriage was arranged by an uncle of hers, who knew her husband. In this particular case, the family of the bride thus chose to marry her to a militant, as a sign of commitment to the movement for Khalistan. This was no ordinary family: Hindu by creed and Brahmins (Pandits) by caste, nothing seems to have predestined them to support this Sikh and Jat-dominated insurgent movement. Yet, Ravinder Kaur's* grandfather was a close confidant of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and four members of the family (three of them women) were killed during operation Bluestar. Another of my interviewees, Gurpreet Kaur*, was also married by her family at age 16 to a Khalistani fighter. However, in this case, the family of the bride did not deliberately marry her to a fighter as a form of commitment to the resistance movement. In this particular case, the parents (who, although Jats by caste, were poor agricultural labourers who had migrated to Uttar Pradesh in search for work) had chosen the groom before he went "deep underground" (*bahar*). And although he had become a full-fledged fighter by the time of the wedding, Gurpreet's* parents considered that it was a twist of fate (*qismet*) and that the wedding preparations could not be put to a halt. Unlike most other women married to fighters of a certain calibre (by the time of their wedding, her husband had risen to the position of Deputy Chief of the KLF), Gurpreet* did not go underground right after her wedding. As a consequence, a few months after her marriage, she was arrested and brutally tortured by the Punjab police, which was trying to extract information from her on the localisation of her husband. Following this traumatic experience, she joined her husband's group and remained underground for five years, until her husband's death in an encounter with the police in 1991.

Beyond these "involuntary" militant brides (who, as we will see, swiftly endorsed the Khalistani cause), a handful of women also contracted love marriages with militants. This was the case of one of my interviewees, Harimander Kaur*, who fell in love with an area commander of the KLF, while he was taking shelter in her family's house. Here again, the family had a long tradition of resistance: her maternal great-grand father as well as a maternal great-uncle died as martyrs in the Jaito Morcha of 1923. One of her grand mothers was also imprisoned during the freedom struggle against the British. Her maternal grand father collected information documenting the family

exploits and Harimander* was familiar with them since her childhood. She thus grew up in a highly politicised environment, which aroused her interest for politics early on. After operation Bluestar, her parents gave shelter to Khalistani fighters, who sympathised with her brother, Gian Singh. She would often listen to their conversations and gradually became radicalised, following the same path as her brother, who murdered a preeminent Akali leader in the mid-1980s.

Finally, one finds women who wanted to marry militants in order to take part in the armed struggle, out of political and religious convictions. This is, by far, the largest group in my sample. Within this broad category, one finds slight variations though. The most common case was of young women imposing on their family the first militant of a certain stature that they happened to meet, generally during his stay in their village. In this case, the personality of the militant does not seem to have played a major role, and marriage was primarily thought of by these women as an instrumental relationship providing them with access to militancy. The slight variations that I encountered are not entirely at odds with this general pattern. The first of them consisted of a vengeful young woman, Harneet Kaur*, whose father had been killed during the Delhi anti-Sikh pogrom of November 1984. She married the man that was recommended by senior militants as the most suitable for the task she was destining herself to (the assassination of Congress leaders responsible for the pogrom). The second case was that of a young woman, Harpinder Kaur*, who had followed her brother in law to Pakistan in order to take part in the armed struggle and who had to marry him -although he was already married to her sister- so as to avoid being sent to jail by Pakistani authorities[24]. Notwithstanding these slight variations, these women shared a deeply instrumental relationship towards marriage -and towards men- which did not stop with militancy and often perpetuated after these women returned to civilian life, as we shall see later on.

A word should be said, now, about the exceptions to the rule. Among the ten former ex-combatants that I interviewed, two went underground as single women. However, these exceptions should be qualified. One of these women, Parveen Kaur*, went underground with her mother after her father was killed by the police, as a reprisal for the participation of her brother to the militancy (he was a secretary

[24] In the months that followed Operation Bluestar, hundreds of Sikh candidates to militancy were jailed by Pakistani authorities; whereas men were incarcerated at the Faisalabad prison, single women were sent to the Multan jail.

of Bhindranwale and later on became a commander of the KLF). She remained underground for ten years with her mother, who seems to have played the role of a chaperon for the young woman. And although Parveen* was in touch with combatants of the KLF, for whom she carried messages and weapons, she does not seem to have shared the life of an armed band. Kamaljit Kaur*, for her part, enlisted at age 17 in a small band of armed fighters which provided support to other, more organised armed groups. She does not seem to have encountered any pressure from her group to marry one of its members ("*I just slept at some distance from the boys. And they called me 'brother'*"). However, this celibacy was to be temporary and this young woman ultimately married a combatant that she had met, according to her own words, "in the sugarcane fields". Hers was clearly a love marriage, but it strengthened her commitment to the armed struggle, and provided her with a protection against predatory sexual behaviours from other militants. Therefore, these exceptions do not really challenge the hypothesis that there existed a consensus within Khalistani armed groups regarding the position of women and the control of their sexuality. The "libidinal economy" [25] of the Khalistani insurgency was not very different from that of Punjabi society at large. It aimed to "protect" chaste women through the sacred institution of marriage, while tolerating the liberties taken with "loose" women, by mutual consent or by force (cases of rapes by Khalistani insurgents were not uncommon[26]). However, this somehow traditional libidinal economy also served a prophylactic purpose within the insurgency: it aimed to prevent the irruption of rivalries between the fighters over the possession or usage of women.

Among the "Boys": Women Experiences of Militancy

Let us now turn to "the morning after": to women's individual experiences of underground life and militancy. These were rather contrasted, following the patterns of enlistment of individual recruits. What should be emphasised, in the first place, is that only a small minority of these female "combatants" became full fledged fighters. Most of them had to content themselves with a support rather than a combat role. However, each and every of these women was trained into handling weapons

[25] Jeff Goodwin, "The Libidinal Constitution of a High-Risk Social Movement: Affectual Ties and Solidarity in the Huk Rebellion, 1946 to 1954", *American Sociological Review*, vol. 62, n°1, 1997, p. 53-69.
[26] Harish K. Puri, Paramjit Singh Judge and Jagdev S. Sekhon, *Terrorism in Punjab, op. cit.*

and gradually developed a new self-identification as a fighter, which often came at odds with her motherly role.

Ada- *and* Paka-*Underground: the Variations of Clandestine Life*

In Europe and North America, being "underground" implies living a reclusive life, withdrawn from the rest of society[27]. As a French social scientist who grew up during the rise of Action directe, I was myself a victim of this ethno-centric trope. I was therefore completely unprepared to the testimonies that I would start gathering, from 2001 onwards, among Khalistani ex-combatants. The first thing that struck me, in these recollections, particularly in women's recollections of everyday life in the underground, was how much fun (*khushi*) they seemed to have had. Initially, I attributed such "anomalies" to the ex-post nature of these testimonies. I thought that what my interviewees were telling me was not so much that life in the underground was actually fun, but that their return to civilian life had been a true ordeal. However, with the passage of time and the accumulation of more detailed testimonies on everyday life in the Khalistani underground, I started changing my mind. I gradually understood why this clandestine life had actually seemed so fun to so many recruits, particularly women. One testimony was an eye opener in this regard. It came from a woman we have already encountered, Gurpreet Kaur*, who spent five years underground and who described her experience in these terms:

> "It was a really good life. We were strolling [*ham gumte the*], we were travelling here and there. It was not a life of suffering. It was a life of travel. We were constantly packing. It was fantastic; all we had to do was to struggle. Everything was offered to us, we didn't have to worry about anything. When we wanted clothes, people gave us clothes. When we were hungry, we were given food. And we had the opportunity to meet so many nice people, who helped us out of love" (interview with Gurpreet Kaur*, March 2009).

[27] Donatella della Porta (ed.), *Social Movements and Violence. Participation in Underground Organizations*, International Social Movement Research, vol. 4, Londres/Greenwich, Jai Press, 1992.

It is at this point that the difference between being underground in South Asia and Europe during the mid-1980s struck me. What this testimony suggests, even more vividly than those I had been collecting previously, is that in Punjab, being underground did not mean withdrawing from society. It could also mean, more simply, leaving your home and domestic responsibilities to live among and *on* the population. Particularly for women who were largely confined to their homes and to their homely tasks, this could well look like prolonged vacations. This form of life in the underground, which ex-militants themselves refer to as "*ada-underground*" (half-underground), was sociologically at the antipodes of the clandestine lives of European left-wing militants of the 1970s and 1980s. Far from excluding militants from the rest of society, it actually extended their sociability, in particular as far as women were concerned. In this case, going underground implied a brutal expansion of the sphere of sociability, beyond the home and the village. Going underground meant to see the world, not to withdraw from it.

However, this "half-underground" lifestyle was often a temporary one. The higher a profile they acquired in the militancy, the more wanted combatants and their relatives became. They became more hesitant to stay with relatives and sympathisers, whereas hosts became more reluctant to open their doors to these fugitives. In the early 1990s, with the arrival of K.P.S. Gill at the head of the Punjab police, the pressure exercised by the security forces on the guerrillas and their sympathisers increased brutally and made it harder for the former to take shelter in villages. At this point, Khalistani combatants started living "outdoor" (*bahar*), moving across the countryside in small armed bands that would walk during the night and rest during the day. The contacts with the population drastically decreased in the process, paving the way for a more exclusivist Khalistani "counter-society". This was the time of the "deep underground" (*paka-underground*), which became the lot of the majority of combatants whereas it had only involved a minority of them in the first years of the insurgency.

Embattled Mothers: Pregnancy and its Aftermath

There was no attempt at birth control within the militancy, so much so that all the recruits who joined the insurgent movement as married wives became pregnant within a year or so of their enlistment. This tends to suggest that male fighters were adamant to perpetuate their family line in spite -or precisely because- of their high

risk activism. However, the women who carried their children did not share such preoccupations. From their point of view, pregnancy and motherhood were liabilities, which came to jeopardise their participation to the armed struggle. None of the women that I interviewed withdrew from the movement during or after their pregnancy, which comes in stark contrast with the situation that prevailed among other guerrillas of the region, such as the Nepalese Maoists, where women had to renounce armed militancy once they became pregnant. But this obviously had a cost: beyond the pains and physical exhaustion that being a pregnant militant involved, these women faced greater risks. During encounters with the police, they would be slowed down and lagged behind other militants. It must be mentioned, here, that all these women remained active in the militancy well into their pregnancy (generally up to the seventh or even eighth month) and it is only at the latest stage that they left their group and took shelter among sympathisers in order to give birth. They would then spend a few months recovering and fortifying their babies, before setting on the warpath once again. In most cases, they took their newborn with them. However, this was not very practical, particularly during encounters with the police, as suggested by one of these embattled mothers:

> "I remained active in my group until the eighth month of pregnancy. Shortly before I was to deliver, my husband and I left the group and took shelter in a secure location. After a few months, my child was strong enough and we went back with the fighters. But it was tough for me. Three or four times, I had to take part in encounters with my son on the shoulder. So after a few incidents like these, I left him with families of sympathisers" (interview with Pritinder Kaur*, March 2009).

In this particular case, the embattled mother simply refused to raise her child, if this was to come at the cost of her military commitment. This critical relationship to motherhood, and to the traditional role that was expected from them, was common among these female fighters. Even Ravinder Kaur*, who was married into the militancy and, at least initially, did not have much political credentials, came at odds with traditional representations of motherhood, as exemplified by the following conversation:

> L.G.: Did you experience fear during all these years of militancy?
> Ravinder Kaur*: No, we never experienced fear. We knew we would die.
> L.G.: The baby, too?
> Ravinder Kaur*: Yes, the baby too [laughs].

This outward rejection of motherhood is all the more significant that it comes from a rather "traditional" young woman, who could not claim the same degree of political consciousness as that of other, more articulate female fighters such as Pritinder Kaur*. Therefore, it tends to suggest that this critical relationship towards motherhood was extremely common among the female recruits of the militancy, setting them apart from their society but also from their male comrades, who did not seem to have such a problematic relationship with traditional gender roles.

If even the most traditionally brought up girls came at odds with motherly values and lifestyle, it is primarily because they quickly came to endorse a new identity, that of a fighter, no matter how involved they actually were in the armed struggle. In the case of Nicaragua's Sandinistas, Karen Kampwirth emphasises that "there was a long continuum between unarmed and armed work. The armed guerrillas were very dependent on the unarmed revolutionaries for support, for recruitment, and for the unrelenting pressure that would help to bring down the dictatorship. As with any continuum, the distinction between one position and another was not always clear"[28]. As far as Sikh fighters were concerned, this distinction was blurred by the size factor. Due to the limited size of guerrilla cells (which generally comprised between ten and twenty five combatants only), there could be no formal division of work between fighters and non-fighters and every member of a guerrilla cell was trained into handling weapons and came to experience combat situations. This provided every recruit, no matter how involved he or she was in military operations, with a self-identification as a combatant. This was reinforced by the challenging experience of encounters, but also by everyday forms of armed struggle, such as training or weapons cleaning sessions, as well as night guards. Interestingly, it is these non-violent forms of armed struggle, rather than the more brutal but unexpected

[28] Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerilla Movements, op. cit.*, p. 36.

encounters with the police, that left the deepest imprint on those recruits who were not involved in military operations along the men:

> "I really enjoyed these night guards, with a gun in my hands [she mimics the handling of a rifle and laughs]. After all, there is not much physical difference between men and women, and I felt really strong during these night guards" (interview with Ravinder Kaur*, March 2009).

Even if the distinction between fighters and non-fighters was not always clear and if every recruit of the armed groups came to develop a self-representation as a fighter in the process, this does not mean that an informal sexual division of work did not prevail within the guerrillas[29]. Generally, women did not take part in military operations against the security forces or against the civilian population. Their role was primarily to carry weapons and ammunition, go on reconnaissance missions, or transmit messages[30]. These were by no means menial jobs: without such support, the guerrillas would have faltered in a short span of time. These tasks were not devoid of a risk either and after the security forces understood that women militants were often in charge of weapons and ammunition transportation, they came under the threat of being brutally tortured in the event of their interpellation, so as to reveal the location of weapons caches. More specifically, women detainees also faced the risk of being sexually abused by their jailers, a traumatic experience which I suspect was generalised among my interviewees. Although they never mentioned it explicitly in front of me, they sometimes used circumlocutions that alluded to such sexual violence ("*During my stay in prison, I was tortured repeatedly*", suggested Navneet Kaur*, "*and my torturers were all male*...").

Only a handful of women came to challenge the informal sexual division of work that prevailed within the armed groups, where female recruits were *primarily* acting as couriers although they were trained to be much more than that. It is to these full-fledged female fighters that I would like to turn now.

"Roti, Pani Nahin"*: the Full-Fledged Fighters*

[29] On the sexual division of insurgent work, see Jules Falquet, « Division sexuelle du travail révolutionnaire : réflexions à partir de l'expérience salvadorienne (1970-1994) », *Cahier des Amériques Latines*, n°40, 2001, p. 109-128.

[30] This is also emphasised by Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, chap. 9, *op. cit*.

Notwithstanding the reluctance of male fighters to involve women in combat missions, a handful of them did side along with them in these military operations. In the process, these women warriors developed a distinct identity, setting them apart from the less martial female recruits of the movement. This is exemplified by the following words of one of these full-fledged fighters:

> "I am not the cooking type [*Main roti, pani nahin*]. It was not my role to cook for the group, and anyway, when we took shelter in the sugarcane fields, people would offer us food. Once in a while, I did feel like cooking *pakore* and since everyone likes *paneer*, I prepared some about twice a month and everyone was really happy. But I was different from these women who claimed to be terrorists and who merely did the washing and cooking of the militants" (interview with Pritinder Kaur*, March 2009).

In the same vein, another of these women warriors insists that if she did cook occasionally for her group, it was out of her own will, unlike other women attached to her group:

> "Sometimes, I saw the wives of some militants who were busy cooking for the group. So I lent them a hand" (interview with Harneet Kaur*, March 2009).

Interestingly, both these women came to develop a self-conscious masculinised identity, which in their eyes predated their enlistment in the guerrilla. Both of them insist that, since their childhood, they always preferred male to female occupations. In her autobiography, Pritinder Kaur* writes that:

> "From childhood, I took an interest in boys' work, giving fodder to animals, starting up the engine of the tractor and climbing on top of things"[31].

[31] Pritinder Kaur*, *Bikhra Painda, op. cit.*, p. 2.

Harneet Kaur*, for her part, claims to have been a true tomboy, wearing boys' pants, playing *kabbadi* and occasionally engaging herself in bloody fistfights:

> "In my school days, I did everything the boys' way. I dressed like them, fought like them... I was very fond of *kabbadi* and became the captain of my team. One day, one of our team members, a Nirankari boy, tried to take off my turban [her family belonged to the Akand Kirtani Jatha and women were thus wearing a *keski*], so I defended myself. I really trashed him the boy's way" (interview with Harneet Kaur*, March 2009).

Both these women grew up in a highly religious atmosphere, under the tutelage of devout mothers and benevolent fathers, who supported their daughter's education and ambitions. Although they were still very young when they first had a *darshan* of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (Pritinder Kaur* was ten years old when she first saw him at the Golden Temple in 1983, whereas Harneet Kaur was thirteen when she first met him in Delhi in 1982), they were deeply impressed by the man: "*he, at least, never lied*" says Pritinder Kaur*; "*he always spoke the truth*", confirms Harneet Kaur*. All these dispositions towards commitment in the movement for Khalistan are not enough to explain the mobilisation process of these women, though. Beyond these obvious commonalities, these two women's trajectories are strikingly different. Pritinder Kaur* was a deeply religious girl with a fascination for Sikh historical figures of the past, particularly women warriors of the eighteenth century such as Mai Bhago (to whom she refers as "Mata Bhagoji"). At a more mundane level, Pritinder* was in search for fame, as she herself candidly admits in her autobiography: "*In my childhood, whenever I heard of someone in a poor family who had become famous, I would feel a sort of longing that I also wanted to do something and prove myself"*[32]. The wave of violence (*jujharu lehar*) that swept over Punjab from the early 1980s onwards caused her great grief but the heroes and martyrs of the time also excited her imagination, as she suggests in the following lines:

> "In this struggle, in this *morcha*, there was a *rail kand*, on 11 sept 1982, and many Sikhs were martyred. In the newspapers,

[32] *Ibid*., p. 4.

> their pictures touched me greatly, these heroes [*virs*] and martyrs [*shuhada*]. I took that paper to school and showed it to my friends and told them the entire story. I cut the pictures out and distributed them among my friends [...] I kept them in my notebook. I wondered what their mothers and sisters must be feeling [...]"[33].

Growing up as a teenager in the aftermath of Operation Bluestar, she became adamant about marrying a combatant and joining the armed struggle. Her family was initially opposed to such a marital union but she finally had her way and, in 1989, married a commander of the BKI, Daram Singh Khastiwal, who had been taking shelter in her village and whom she had met twice. The morning after the wedding, she joined the armed band led by her husband, with whom she remained underground until her arrest in 1992.

Harneet Kaur* did not have such a romantic imagination and although she presented some predispositions towards militancy, it is only the brutal death of her father that prompted her to join the armed struggle. Both her parents were members of the Akand Kirtani Jatha and her father was close to the leadership of the Damdami Taksal, being familiar with Sant Kartar Singh and later on with Bhindranwale. Moreover, the family residence in New Delhi was regularly attended by some leading personalities of the AKJ/BKI, such as Sukhdev Singh Babbar. Therefore, Harneet* grew up in a radicalised environment, where she learnt early on to detest the Sant Nirankaris. Notwithstanding these predispositions towards militancy, she would probably have followed the medical career she was destining herself to had it not been for the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. On November 2nd, 1984, her father was brutally murdered in front of her eyes, after he was lured by the nephew of the Congress MP Sajjan Kumar. Harneet claims that she was herself the target of a murder attempt after she testified in front of some VIPs who had been visiting the army camp where she had been taking shelter with her mother and brothers following her father's execution. In the weeks that followed, she left for Punjab in order to complete her studies in a more serene atmosphere than the one prevailing in Delhi. But this was not to be. In Jullunder, where she joined the Lyallpur Khalsa College, she stayed with an uncle of hers, who was tightly connected to some

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33 *Ibid*., p. 6-7.

preeminent figures of the emerging Khalistan movement, such as Manbir Singh Chaheru, the founder and first commander of the KCF, who was a regular visitor at her uncle's residence. Her college was also a hotbed of Sikh militancy and she became an activist and soon a local leader of the Sikh Students Federation. It is in this context of personal and collective radicalisation that she planned to take revenge for her father's death, by eliminating those responsible for the Delhi pogrom. But she was single and she feared that if she took part in a military operation with a group of married men, her detractors would accuse her partners of having an affair with her. Therefore, she decided to marry the man who would accompany her through her lethal mission. Following the advice of Manbir Singh Chaheru and Bimal Kaur Khalsa (the widow of Beant Singh, Indira Gandhi's assassin), she chose a militant of the KCF who had already proved his worth by taking part in the assassination of Lala Jagat Narain in 1981. The wedding was celebrated in October 1985 and a few days later, she and her husband travelled to Delhi to murder the four Congressmen who had been playing in a leading role in the pogrom. But the plan did not unfold as expected. The night before the attack, the third member of the commando had a fight with Harneet's husband. During a short absence of his, the young man had been entertaining prostitutes in their common flat, spending a great deal of the money that was meant for the mission. Following this altercation, the young man went to reveal the whole plan to the police, who arrested Harneet's husband and herself later on. She only saved her life due to the support of a Sikh policeman who handed her a turban while she was going to the washroom, which she used as a rope to escape from the police station. In the following days, she returned to Punjab and after a few months of "*ada*-underground" life, during which she gave birth to a child, she joined a group of fighters of the SSF, with whom she fought Indian security forces until 1988 (she was among the militants arrested during operation Black Thunder II) and again between 1990 and 1993.

Although Pritinder Kaur* and Harneet Kaur* are both reluctant to provide details on the military operations they took part in or even planned, there is no doubt that both of them took an active role in the attacks perpetrated by their group against state and civilian targets. Breaking her silence vow, Harneet Kaur* admitted that she was behind the kidnapping and subsequent decapitation of a communist activist. Up to now, she considers that this brutal killing was justified, since this communist "had got a lot of Singhs killed". This operation implied another female militant, who had been posing as a journalist to lure "comrade Abu*". Therefore, it

seems that at least some combat operations involved a decisive participation from women. This has been the case until recently: in 2004, for instance, it is a woman militant who planned the successful jail break of four Khalistani commanders from the Chandigarh district jail[34].

Significantly, none of these full-fledged fighters -and, more generally, none of the female recruits of the Khalistan movement- ever complained in front of me about being discriminated by their male counterparts. On the contrary, these women insist that they were treated as "sisters", or even as "brothers". Therefore, Pritinder Kaur* insists upon the "fraternity" (*bhai ki tarah*) that prevailed within the armed groups, which was supplemented by the "love" and "respect" that her male comrades showed towards her. According to her, "*We all did the same job* [kam] *and we were all brothers* [bhai], *all equal* [barabar]. *I never felt weaker than men*" (interview, March 2009). Interestingly, these women have not come to reconsider these gender relations in the light of their post-combatant experience, which sets them apart from other female fighters such as those of Central America[35]. True, none of these women has ever been part of feminist networks, but one could have expected them to have become more critical with the passage of time. Actually, it is the opposite that happened: since their return to civilian life, these women have idealised their underground past as an unmitigated moment of liberation and gender equality. Therefore, these testimonies are probably more revealing of the present challenges faced by these ex-combatants than of actual gender relations within the Khalistan insurgency.

Back to the Kitchen? The Return of Sikh Female Fighters to Civilian Life

The return to civilian life has been a challenging experience for all the former fighters of the Khalistan movement, both practically and morally[36]. These ex-combatants had to find new sources of income and although the Indian media often depicted Khalistani militants as opportunists who made fortunes through extortion[37], none of the former militants that I encountered throughout my research seemed to have benefited economically from his militant experience. On the contrary, all these ex-

[34] Interview with this female militant, Chandigarh, March 2009.
[35] Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerilla Movements, op. cit.*
[36] On the demilitarisation process of Khalistani combatants, see Laurent Gayer, « Le parcours du combattant », art. quoted, pp. 24-27.
[37] Kanwar Sandhu, "The wages of terrorism", *India Today*, 31/10/1992, p. 93.

combatants lived in modest houses or apartments and a substantial part of them showed obvious signs of economic hardship. Moreover, the demilitarisation process of these individuals had a psychological cost, as they had to deprive themselves from their "overcommitment"[38].

This demilitarisation process was particularly challenging for the female recruits of the insurgency. For these women, the return to civilian life carried the risk of a re-assignation to their traditional gender role – that of wives, mothers or widows, largely confined to the domestic sphere. In other words, these women feared that they would lose as civilians the power that they had gained as combatants. For all these women, endorsing the role of a *house*wife, particularly as a widow (seven out of ten of my interviewees were widowed in the course of the insurgency), was seen as a social and political regression. Therefore, these women were particularly harsh when they came to depict their lives as demilitarised mothers:

> "I am disgusted by this housewife's life. When I was in the militancy, I could walk for days without sleep. But these days I can hardly find the energy to go down to the bazaar" (interview with Harneet Kaur*, March 2001).
>
> "I am suffering so much from this normal life" (interview with Gurpreet Kaur*, March 2009).

Some of these women faced pressure from their family to settle down with their in laws, although they were now widows and faced the acrimony of their mothers in law, who were constantly reminded of the premature death of their sons by the presence of their widows. This was too much to bear for many of these women and only two of my ten interviewees went to live with their in laws (one of whom married her first husband's brother), under family pressure. Another one -the only woman of my sample who remained single throughout her underground life- was put to so much pressure by her family that she finally agreed to settle down, although she claims that

38 On the addictive effects of « overcommitments », see Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements. Private Interest and Public Action*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 101.

> "I did not want to get married. I wanted to keep on living this [underground] life. After my wedding, I suffered a lot. This was not my destiny" (interview with Parveen Kaur*, March 2009).

Some of the widows of the insurgency were also pressurised to remarry into non-militant families, often getting out of reach for researchers in the process, as their in laws were eager to erase the militant past of these women and to isolate them from their former comrades or from anyone who could publicise their militant past.

Some of these women did resist family pressure, though. Within my sample, the most extreme case was that of a commander's wife who got separated from her husband, largely for professional reasons:

> « Family life was working just fine but we had serious disagreements on professional matters. He didn't listen to me. I didn't agree with him on the localisation of the school [Harpinder Kaur* and her husband opened an orphanage-cum-boarding school in Chandigarh after their demilitarisation]. He did not have any experience in the field of education since he had been working in a bank [before joining the militancy]. So it could not work. For four years, we quarrelled a lot. He was saying that he would do this, and that, but he never did. And for me, when you commit to do something, you do it. After we were divorced, both of us met with success. When we bumped into each other at the Golden Temple after some time, he asked me how many children I was in charge of, and he was quite surprised! [laughs]" (interview with Harpinder Kaur*, March 2009).

A more common way for these female ex-combatants to assert their agency was to remarry on their own terms, generally with a sympathizer of the movement for Khalistan, who had been *ada*-underground for some time and who had been detained for short periods of time. This was the case of three of my interviewees. Interestingly, these three women justify their remarriage by a rationalist, if not cynical discourse, suggesting a self-conscious instrumental relation to men: "*I had to find*

money" (Gurpreet Kaur*); "*I was harassed by the police*" (Pritinder Kaur*); "*I wanted to get out of jail*" (Harneet Kaur*)[39]. The fact that these men had only been *ada*-underground empowered their wives, who took this opportunity to assert themselves in their new homes. This was made particularly clear during the interviews that I conducted with these women. Although their husbands were sometimes present during the interview, they did not utter a word until I solicited their opinion on their wife's trajectory or more generally on the participation of women to the insurgency.

If these women were "liberated", to some extent, by their participation to the armed struggle, few of them expressed a desire to work after their return to civilian life. True, some of them became dedicated social workers, managing orphanages for the children of martyred combatants (three such orphanages opened up in Punjab in the second half of the eighties, in Mohali, Sultanwind and Patiala). Yet, most of these demobilized ex-fighters were reluctant to enter the job market, as this would emphasise their precarious economic situation and thus make them vulnerable to stigmatisation and sexual harassment from their neighbours and relatives. Moreover, for the women who came from relatively well-off families, taking a job was seen as a form of declassification. One should be careful, here, not to project Western conceptions of women's liberation over these Punjabi women experiences. Far from being lived as a form of emancipation, work was often perceived by these former-fighters as a downgrading and alienating experience[40]. And in their perspective, marriage -particularly to rather dull characters who could not claim the same political legitimacy as their wives- was a far more pleasant, dignified and to some extent liberating option.

Conclusion

Gender is not merely an additional variable for the study of activist careers, supplementing other personal attributes such as age, ancestry or geographical origins. It is a category of analysis in itself, shedding a new light on individual

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[39] Jasmit Kaur* chose to remarry under the advice of her lawyer, who pleaded that she was firmly committed to reinserting herself into society and "settle down", *i.e.* re-endorse a traditional gender role. This happened to be a successful line of defence, which suggests that the Indian state was also a powerful agent in the "re-traditionalisation" of female ex-combatants.

[40] Pramod Kumar, Rainuka Dagar and Neerja, *Victims of Militancy*, Chandigarh, Institute of Development and Communication, 1999.

trajectories but also on the formation and reproduction of social movements[41]. Therefore, by introducing gender into the study of the movement for Khalistan, my aim was not so much to produce a "herstory" of this insurgency[42] but to unravel the interactions between the public and private lives of its militants, as well as its libidinal economy. Focussing on the activist careers of the female recruits of the insurgency should not lead to the eviction of its male recruits from the scope of the analysis. I hope to have shown that, at every stage of their militant career, these female fighters interacted, both socially and physically, with their male counterparts. It is through the intermediary of men that they were recruited into the movement, and later on that they reinserted themselves into society. The power equations that presided over these relations, at the entry and at the exit stage of these militant careers, were often quite contrasted. This suggests that at least some of these women have found in their militant experience a source of empowerment. However, emancipation through the Kalachnikov has its limits. Only a minority of these women were able to translate their new sense of agency into a more autonomous lifestyle after their decommissioning. Most of them were then reassigned traditional gender roles, under the pressure of their family or in laws. These personal developments have important macrosocial implications: they suggest that neither the Khalistani movement at large nor the outstanding trajectories of its female recruits have been seriously challenging the dominant paradigm of gender relations among the Sikhs of the Punjab, in the same way that Sikh heroines of the past never came to question the globally subservient position of women within the Sikh *Panth* [43]. But then again, let us not get confused by Western trajectories of women's liberation: the female fighters for Khalistan were not fighting for their own liberation or for that of their "sisters", for whom they often showed utter disdain. They fought for their nation and religion[44], alongside their men. And if they got empowered through their participation to the movement, this was a largely unanticipated and idiosyncratic development. In this regard, Sikh female fighters are not as exceptional as they may initially appear to be: their trajectories are somehow similar to that of other female recruits of nationalist and/or fundamentalist movements, who may find in these "a

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[41] Olivier Fillieule, « Travail militant, action collective et rapports de genre », *in* Olivier Fillieule, Patricia Roux (eds.), *Le sexe du militantisme,* Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2009, p. 28.

[42] In France, Daniel Kergoat was one of the most vocal opponent of this sociologically regressive approach, which contents itself with " 'adding' women as a colouring agent for social movements, while their analysis remains blind to sexualised social relations [*rapports sociaux sexués*]"; Danièle Kergoat, Françoise Imbert, Hélène Le Doaré and Danièle Senotier, *Les infirmières et leur coordination. 1988-1989*, Paris, Lamarre, 1992, p. 122.

[43] Doris R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, *op. cit.*

[44] Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, *op. cit*.

tool of emancipation, a career and a way to transform their life and their self-representation"[45], but who ultimately have to content themselves with an ambivalent, precarious and self-centred "liberation"[46].

[45] Martina Avanza, « Les femmes padanes militantes dans la Ligue du Nord, un parti 'qui l'a dure' », *in* Olivier Fillieule, Patricia Roux (eds.), *Le sexe du militantisme, op. cit.*, p. 144.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 165.