



Radical Sikh (above): Malkiat Singh and the temple of which he is priest.

arbitrarily arrested and tortured—often, allegedly, as a result of “fake encounters,” in which police stage-manage the arrest of innocent Sikhs, branding them as terrorists. Amnesty International has expressed concern about possible abuse of Sikh human rights.

Some of the most vocal British Sikhs belong to the International Sikh Youth Federation, a body formed, in anguish and defiance, in 1984. Young Sikhs, growing up here indifferent to their traditions, were instantly politicised by the attack on the Golden Temple. “As soon as they heard the news,” says an ISYF leader, “they walked out of the pubs straight into the *gurdwaras*.” The storming of the Sikhs’ holy shrine evidently awoke in them emotions they scarcely knew they had. These days the Federation’s male members, bearded and turbanned, think of themselves as a latter-day version of Guru Gobind Singh’s “Khalsa.”

As dogmatic as they are well-educated, ISYF members talk about Hinduism as the precursor of nazism and about Rajiv Gandhi as the embodiment of evil. The Gandhi regime, alleges the federation, is bribing the British government into signing an extradition treaty which will be used against Sikhs for so much as speaking out against the Indian government. Media neglect of this issue, and of the ISYF’s reports of Sikh victimisation, encourages suspicions that they are up against a conspiracy.

There has been much conflict in British *gurdwaras*—springing, it is said, from the new-found zeal of young Sikhs, with federation supporters insisting that the money collected there be sent out to buy arms, while others want to see the money spent on civilian projects, like hospitals and schools. Yet it is hard for an outsider to know what is going on—and not always easy for insiders.

Among Sikhs—people of such certainty—nothing of this seems certain. Sikhs who, with blazing eyes, denounce the machinations of the Indian government will themselves be denounced by other Sikhs as government hirelings. There is even talk of ISYF being infiltrated by agents—who wear huge turbans and beards to prove their ultra-Sikhness. For other Sikhs still, such talk is contemptible. To friends of the late Mr Toor, the Southall businessman who was shot dead in 1986, apparently because of his “moderate” views, the existence of young Sikh men of violence is all too real—as is the damage which they are inflicting on the Sikhs’ public image. “People are beginning to think,” says a bitter Southall moderate, “that we come from the jungle.”

A Middlesex mirror of the Punjab, Southall has become a troubled town—and not just because of its feuding political factions. Violent Sikh gangs have emerged there—one, the “Tuti Nang,” named after legendary Punjabi outlaws. Bastardised versions of Punjabi tribalism, Southall’s gangs are not “politicised” like the ISYF. However, it is surely no coincidence that educated and uneducated Sikhs alike have become glamourised by ancestral images. Indeed, this upsurge of atavism may be proportionate to the inability of large numbers of young Sikhs to identify with the British way of life—whatever that may now be.

“Being a Sikh these days,” said a young Sikh, “is a hard job.” He had just discovered, to his indignation, that the shorter OED defines Sikhism as a Hindu sect. With a broad London accent, he sounded like any London teenager. The difference was that he wore a turban, and appeared preoccupied with events in the Punjab. The implosion of the British empire has produced some strange and intractable results. ■

have been vindicated.

The attack on the Golden Temple traumatised Sikhs all over the world. It was mounted, moreover, on 3 June, the day when Sikhs commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth guru, and when thousands of pilgrims converge on the Golden Temple. Four years on, Mrs Gandhi is dead, assassinated by Sikh bodyguards; thousands of Sikhs have died in Hindu revenge killings; and the turmoil into which the attack plunged the Punjab is, if anything, intensifying, with Sikh terrorism apparently getting ever bloodier. Designated a “restricted area,” the Punjab has become, in all but name, a police state—although a frighteningly anarchic one.

News bulletins from Punjab indicate that police are struggling to defeat Sikh terrorism. That, however, is not at all how expatriate Sikhs, keenly following developments, see the issue. British Sikhs have relatives and friends in the Punjab, and they constantly hear stories and rumours about Sikhs being

ALICE THOMAS ELLIS

# A family on the couch

**A delinquent child can sometimes reflect unacknowledged family problems. Only by bringing these problems out in the light and dealing with them can the whole family be “cured.”**

Three years ago I wrote a book with a psychoanalyst, Dr Tom Pitt-Aikens, about a family with problems. What I found fascinating about this family was that it could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as a “problem” family. The focus of the family’s unease was the son, Geoffrey, who numbered transvestism, indecent exposure, violence, theft and arson among his transgressions.

I never met Geoffrey. When he came of age he declined to attend any more of the family meetings which form the basic structure of the therapy designed by Dr Pitt-Aikens. And although he was the ostensible cause of the family’s quest for help, he never reappeared at any of these meetings. The reasoning behind such meetings is that it is absurd to attempt to treat a juvenile delinquent directly, since the problems he portrays are likely to act as a distorted reflection of unacknowledged family problems. Many families understandably refuse to see themselves as problematic, unconsciously preferring to permit one child to carry the whole can of worms.

When both parties—family and child—are reluctant to take treatment (delinquents are notoriously unwilling to admit that there is anything “wrong” with them), a method must be found which will incorporate all the important family members. This

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way, themes which may have been laid down two generations before can be examined and exorcised.

At first, I found the family therapy meetings were structured to a ridiculously pedantic degree. No one was allowed to wander from the point and they finished dead on time, even if someone was in the middle of confessing to an ancient murder. Eventually, I began to see that every family will twist and distort the facts, even to the extent of trying to smash an imposed structure, and only with something so clearly formulated as meetings could the family see what it was doing to all its members and everyone around it.

Geoffrey’s brothers and sisters made sporadic appearances, but it was the parents, Mr and Mrs Hutton, who doggedly and devotedly drove 80 miles every few weeks to continue the occasionally illuminating, but more often frustrating, search for the reason for their son’s alarming behaviour.

They and the psychoanalyst hunted through the near and distant past, through their own selves and through all the forgotten, hidden things which lie in

our heads like so much inaccessible lumber in a loft. Their patience was extraordinary. It still is, for while the book was finished some time ago, the actors are still turning up at the meetings from which I, the intrusive spectator, had eventually been banned. It was as though an intolerable discomfort had driven them out into the light and now it was time for them to retreat again, untroubled by the threat of exposure.

Yet it was not the book which hurled them on to the stage. Geoffrey did that when he brought himself to the notice of the authorities and the penal system. And they did not retire from the scene because the book was finished, but because Geoffrey’s misdemeanours virtually ceased. Their identity as a “client” family started to slip away and they were able to return to that ideal state, a “normal” family.

Geoffrey had not, of course, become a saint: he still caused them anxiety. But his behaviour was markedly less bizarre and, as the worry grew less intense, each member of the family was able to emerge as an individual, rather than as a helpless part of something desperate and doomed. At one point, Geoffrey became a council foreman, his father was coping well with his job, fears about his mother’s health had receded and the other children were doing well.

Why, then, do they still persevere with the meetings, the therapy? What is left to “cure”? And what, in fact, is “normal”? As Dr Pitt-Aikens points out: “If you peer too closely at the norm, it is thoroughly disheartening. Are we thinking of doing away with thinking? Confidentiality is supposed to be important, but gossip is certainly popular and lucrative. Economics has more to do with the pursuit of an irresponsible corporate identity than spending wisely. People are nastier to their nearest and dearest than they are to strangers. Maybe child abuse and euthanasia are universal. After all, one doesn’t hear about what one doesn’t hear about.”

Yet there is an ideal of honesty and happy family life, and such things are not impossible. The Huttons knew this because they so nearly had it, or seemed to. It took Geoffrey to make them aware that behind the “normality” lay old unacknowledged sorrows and guilts: chances missed, relationships broken and deaths which could have been avoided. These had to be hauled out into the light and dealt with before they could destroy life and lives. It is their patient willingness to do this which makes the Huttons remarkable, and it is gratifying to learn from Mr Hutton that the dreaded arsonist Geoffrey’s efforts to light the bonfire on 5 November for his two little children met with dismal failure. There’s nothing more normal than that.

There is a certain poignancy here. It is almost as though, now that the rest of the family is going back into the shadows, Geoffrey, so vividly illuminated against a background of burning crime, is trying to follow them. ■

“Secrets of Strangers,” by Alice Thomas Ellis and Tom Pitt-Aikens is published by Pelican Books, price £3.95.