

SLEEPER CELLS KEEP PUNJAB AWAKE

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Supporters of Waris Punjab De shout slogans in favour of their chief and separatist leader Amritpal Singh inside the Golden Temple complex, in Amritsar. | Photo Credit: AP

While [pro-Khalistan preacher Amritpal Singh](#) continues to be at large after what appears to have been [a botched-up police operation to capture him](#) on March 18, anxiety over the presence of 'sleeper cells' or pro-militant elements across Punjab and other States in India has only grown.

The one-year-old Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Punjab, which has been facing flak over the poor law-and-order situation, is yet again on the back foot after the police failed to arrest Mr. Singh. The 30-year-old chief of [Waris Punjab De](#) gave the police the slip after his cavalcade was intercepted in Jalandhar district. Mr. Singh, who is booked in at least half a dozen criminal cases, has been on the run since then. This has led to questions about police proficiency. Days after a crackdown was launched on Mr. Singh and others who are disturbing law and order, the Punjab and Haryana High Court, during the hearing of a habeas corpus petition, reprimanded the AAP government for "intelligence failure" as Mr. Singh was not apprehended despite the presence of an 80,000-strong police force in Punjab.

As Mr. Singh's whereabouts are still not confirmed, the police say there is a possibility that 'sleeper cells' of Khalistan sympathisers are harbouring the fugitives and attempting to provide them a safe passage. Security experts have been pointing out for a long time that while the Khalistan movement may have lost popular support in Punjab, which is evidenced by the negligible public support for Mr. Singh following government action against him, there are people abroad and elsewhere in India who have an interest in keeping the embers of the long-dead Khalistan movement alive. These sleeper cells could be waiting for the right moment to create trouble and could be assessing the strength and capability of the AAP, which is new to power in Punjab.

Over the last year, there have been a series of incidents with Khalistan links in Punjab and neighbouring Himachal Pradesh. In 2022, a rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the headquarters of the Punjab Police Intelligence Wing in Mohali. The police indicated the role of Babbar Khalsa International, a terror organisation striving for a separate Sikh state, and a nexus of gangsters and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, in the attack. There was also a clash in Patiala between pro-Khalistan and anti-Khalistan groups. In Dharamshala, a few Khalistan flags were found on the main gate and walls of the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly. All these incidents have rekindled fears of armed militancy.

The police have said that some of these incidents have terrorist backing from abroad. This is a dangerous trend and cannot be ignored. The incumbent government cannot afford to let down its guard in Punjab, which shares a border with a hostile Pakistan. Treading with caution and sensitivity is the need of the hour.

There have been persisting concerns about drugs, cash, weapons, and explosives being pushed into India from Pakistan through drones and other means. Who is receiving these, and where are these people located? They are apparently the 'sleeper cells,' located in the State and possibly elsewhere in the country.

Shashi Kant, a former Punjab Director General of Police, who has served in numerous intelligence agencies, says the police should investigate further and find out the recipients of these drugs, cash, explosives and arms who pose a serious threat to internal security.

In June last year, the victory of Simranjit Singh Mann, a known hardliner Sikh leader and chief of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) from Punjab's Sangrur parliamentary constituency, who has time and again been raising the bogey of Khalistan, was perceived by many to indicate that radical people are gaining strength and the narrative surrounding Khalistan could get emboldened. A few months later, the rapid rise of Mr. Singh and the increase in Khalistan-linked incidents has created ripples across the State and beyond.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann has asserted that some people are trying to divide the State on sectarian lines for the sake of their own vested interests and maintained that the acts and intentions of these leaders, which are inimical to Punjab and its people, will not be allowed at any cost. He has promised that they will be given a befitting answer. The arrest of Amritpal Singh could go a long way in instilling confidence among the people in the new government and its promises.

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