

WIDOW OF INDIRA GANDHI ASSASSIN SET TO ENTER INDIA PARLIAMENT.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

697 words

23 November 1989

Reuters News

English

(c) 1989 Reuters Limited

CHAMKAUR SAHIB, India, Nov 23, Reuter - Long before Bimal Kaur Khalsa's motorcade churns into dusty view across the Punjab countryside, the waiting crowds are chanting militant Sikh slogans.

Khalsa, widow of one of prime minister Indira Gandhi's assassins, has come to symbolise the anger and alienation that have plunged the north Indian state into a spiral of violence over the past nine years.

A state official said intelligence reports showed Khalsa was far ahead of her rivals as a candidate for the Punjab parliamentary seat of Ropar and a "certain winner".

The former nurse's husband, Beant Singh, was one of two Sikh bodyguards who assassinated Indira Gandhi at her New Delhi home five years ago. He was shot dead by other members of the prime minister's security force.

Punjab's 12.9 million voters go to the polls on Sunday in the last leg of India's general elections, which opinion polls predict Mrs Gandhi's son and successor Rajiv will lose.

Rajiv Gandhi is scheduled to visit Punjab, which is patrolled by 100,000 police and paramilitary forces, on a campaign visit on Friday.

At village after village, rough Sikh farmers and their wives wait to greet Khalsa in their best clothes.

Standing atop a jeep bedecked with marigolds, she makes a brief appeal for votes at each stop and then accepts tributes of garlands, cash and scarves of saffron cloth -- the colour that stands for martyrdom among Sikhs.

The young men surrounding her raise slogans like "The Khalsa will rule" and "Long live Bhindranwale".

Khalsa (pure) was the name given to the Sikhs by their 10th and last guru, Gobind Singh, in 1699 when he swore them to militancy against India's Moghul rulers.

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale is the preacher who raised the call for a separate Sikh nation, Khalistan (land of the pure). He was killed along with nearly 1,000 followers when troops stormed the Sikhs' holiest shrine, Amritsar's Golden Temple, in June 1984 -- the event that led to Indira Gandhi's murder.

"The people have not forgotten my husband's sacrifice," Khalsa says.

She says she has no election manifesto except to "serve all Punjabis" -- Sikhs as well as the farming state's Hindu minority who are the main targets of Sikh extremist attacks.

There is an air of reverence among the rustic Sikhs crowding around Khalsa. Asked how she feels about being treated like a minor goddess, she responds in good English: "I feel proud."

Khalsa is confident of winning Ropar and says an opposition government in New Delhi will be good for Punjab.

But she has no answer for Punjab's continuing violence which has claimed more than 5,600 lives in the past three years, most of them innocent people killed in extremist attacks.

Earlier this month 17 Hindu college students were shot dead in their sleep at a hostel in the Punjab town of Patiala. Nine people, including a policeman and six civil guards, died on Wednesday alone.

The national elections, which began on Wednesday, have deepened rifts within the Sikhs' own Akali Dal party. Three Akali Dal factions are fighting each other.

The strongest appears to be Khalsa's group, which is led by Simranjit Singh Mann, a former police officer accused of being involved in Mrs Gandhi's assassination.



Mann is standing for the Tarn Taran constituency in northwest Punjab from his prison cell in Bihar state, more than 1,500 km (935 miles) away.

Police see him winning handsomely, along with Sucha Singh, Bimal Khalsa's father-in-law who is standing in south Punjab's Bhatinda constituency.

The mood among Hindu voters is sullen. Hindu traders in Ropar were apprehensive of what would happen if Khalsa became their member of parliament.

"This is real democracy," a senior policeman said. "You may have Gandhi sitting in the same parliament as the widow of his mother's killer."

Bimal Khalsa smiles enigmatically when asked how she will feel when she takes her oath to defend India's constitution as a member of parliament. "You will see," she says.

Document lba0000020011130dlbn015ey

