When in June 1984 the Indian Army entered the Golden Temple the ‘Punjab problem’, which had been simmering since the early 1980s, became an international media event. Subsequently it claimed Mrs Indira Gandhi and catapulted Rajiv Gandhi into national politics. Seven years on, the problem is no nearer solution than in 1984. Indeed, it now looks certain to bedevil any successor to the minority Janata (Socialist) government, and seasoned observers of Punjab politics regularly note that, if anything, the issue has become even more intractable. Why has this turn of events emerged? Why have the various ‘initiatives’ failed to provide a critical breakthrough? What lessons does the post-1984 ‘Punjab problem’ provide for ethnic conflict management in South Asia?

This chapter addresses these questions by examining political developments since 1984. Its central argument is that definitions of the ‘Punjab problem’ and the possibilities of its resolution have significantly altered due to the policies pursued by successive Indian governments and the responses they have generated among the Sikh community in particular. Opportunities for a negotiated settlement still exist, but the experience of the last seven years will strongly influence the behaviour of the leading participants in the dispute.

No serious analysis of events in Punjab can be undertaken without an understanding of the main political developments after June 1984. The period since has received little academic attention and the neglect appears unjustified. Among generalists it is likely to perpetuate a linear link between 1984 and 1991 which obviates the need for detailed evaluation. Among specialists it overlooks the rich potential for policy analysis of one of the Indian centre’s most pressing problems. Increasing ethnic conflicts are likely to intensify interest in comparative examples
and the Punjab provides valuable lessons which may yet have all-India implications.

Measured by the normal turbulent standards of Punjab politics, the seven years since 1984 have been quite exceptional: they have witnessed quasi-militarization, endemic terrorism, and an ill-fated attempt to restore the democratic process. A systematic evaluation of these developments remains to be undertaken but for our purposes three clear phases can be distinguished: after Operation Blue Star the attempt at a ‘Political Solution’ associated with the Rajiv–Longowal Accord and the Barnala Ministry (September 1985 to May 1987); the ‘Anti-terrorist Solution’ (May 1987 to November 1989) identified with the policies of the state Governor S.S. Ray and the Punjab Police chief Julio Ribeiro and his successor K.P.S. Gill; and the period since the Lok Sabha elections in December 1989.

‘Political solution’: the Rajiv–Longowal Accord and the Barnala Ministry

In hindsight the Rajiv–Longowal Accord was a remarkable agreement. The territorial, economic and religious demands which had fuelled the Sikh agitation before June 1984, and were held to be non-negotiable by Mrs Gandhi, were recognized. For the moderate Akali Dal led by Sant Longowal AD(L) the Accord provided a basis for a return to democratic politics; for Rajiv Gandhi, it represented a dynamic breakthrough, a befitting start to his premiership. True the Accord was open to potentially conflicting interpretations, and suffered an immediate setback with the assassination of Sant Longowal in August 1985, but at this juncture there was sufficient commitment among both parties to pursue a political solution.¹

Longowal was succeeded by Surjit Singh Barnala, a former union Agricultural Minister. Barnala’s success in transforming the ‘Political Solution’ into an enduring settlement depended on two factors: his ability to politically marginalize militant Sikhs and their allies within the Sikh political system, the institutions and structures around which Sikh politics are organized, ² and to deliver effectively on the Rajiv–Longowal Accord. Initially Barnala had a promising start. In the September elections to the PLA (see Table 8.2) – boycotted by militants – the Akali Dal and the Longowal faction within it scored a resounding success. Akali Dal won 80 per cent of all Sikh votes and 73 seats. The mandate reflected the popular mood of the electorate and a widespread optimism that the ‘Punjab problem’ was about to be resolved.