



Modelling Extremism: Bandura's Social Learning Theory in Ashwin Sanghi's *Keepers of the Kalachakra*

Apurvi Kotwal

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu, India

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Abstract— This paper applies Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) to Ashwin Sanghi's *Keepers of the Kalachakra* (2018), arguing that the novel narrates its criminal and extremist characters' trajectories with unusual developmental detail, showing how ordinary people are shaped into terrorists, spies, and killers by their environments, mentors, and media rather than presenting them as born dangerous. The paper pursues three lines of analysis: first, the acquisition of extremist behaviour through observational learning and modelling, centered on the character Alim's transformation into the terrorist Abu Ahmed al-Mafraqi; second, the role of vicarious reinforcement, through propaganda media and institutional settings like prisons, in sustaining that behaviour once learned; and third, reciprocal determinism in the depiction of Chinese intelligence officer Zhang, whose career is shaped by family, state institutions, and ideology in a continuous feedback loop. The paper treats Bandura's framework both as a mechanical checklist and as an interpretive lens, and draws on later criminological and terrorism-studies extensions of SLT (including Akins and Winfree, and Pauwels and Schils) to test how far a mid-century psychological theory built on laboratory studies of childhood aggression can account for radicalization in a contemporary Indian English thriller.



Keywords— social learning theory, observational learning, vicarious reinforcement, reciprocal determinism, radicalization

I. INTRODUCTION

Ashwin Sanghi's *Keepers of the Kalachakra* (2018) follows a familiar structural logic in his fiction: an esoteric historical mystery is used as scaffolding for a present-day geopolitical thriller involving intelligence agencies, terror networks, and civilizational conspiracy. Beneath its plot machinery of Tibetan prophecy and Vedic astronomy, the novel is populated by characters whose criminal and extremist trajectories are narrated in unusually explicit developmental detail. Sanghi does not simply present villains as born dangerous; he shows, scene by scene, how ordinary people are shaped into terrorists, spies, and killers by the environments, mentors, and media that surround them. This paper argues that Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT), first systematized in his 1977 monograph of the same name, offers a precise and productive framework for reading this dimension of the novel. Where classical criminology once located the causes

of crime in biology or in unconscious drives, Bandura proposed that criminal and violent behaviour, like any other behaviour, is acquired through observation, sustained through reinforcement, and shaped by a continuous exchange between the individual, their cognition, and their environment (Bandura 22). Sanghi's novel dramatizes precisely this process across at least two of its major characters, making it an unusually rich literary text for a social-learning reading.

This paper pursues three objectives. First, it examines how the novel represents the acquisition of extremist behaviour through observational learning and modelling, using the transformation of the character Alim into the terrorist Abu Ahmed al-Mafraqi as the central case. Second, it analyses the role of vicarious reinforcement, primarily through propaganda media and institutional environments such as prisons, in sustaining and escalating this behaviour once it has been learned. Third, it

investigates reciprocal determinism, the recursive interaction between environment, cognition, and behaviour, in the novel's depiction of the Chinese intelligence officer Zhang, whose career is shaped by family, state institutions, and ideology in a continuous feedback loop. Taken together, these three lines of analysis test how far a mid-century psychological theory, developed originally to explain aggression and modelling in controlled experimental settings, can illuminate a contemporary Indian English thriller's account of how violence is made rather than born. This paper proceeds by close reading, treating Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* as an external checklist to be applied mechanically to the text and as an interpretive lens that clarifies why certain narrative choices- an origin story here, a propaganda video there, an institutional pathway elsewhere- recur across the novel's treatment of its criminal and extremist characters. Textual evidence is drawn from the Westland Publications 2018 edition of the novel; page citations reflect the pagination of the digital edition consulted for this study and should be cross-checked against a physical copy before final submission, consistent with standard practice for citation verification in this line of research.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Bandura's Social Learning Theory departs from two dominant explanatory traditions that preceded it. It rejects purely biological accounts of deviance, which located criminality in inherited traits, and it also departs from psychoanalytic models that treated aggression as the expression of an internal, largely unconscious drive. Instead, Bandura argued that most complex human behaviour, including aggression and criminal conduct, is learned socially, primarily through observation of models rather than through direct trial-and-error experience (Bandura 22). This process of observational learning, or modelling, involves four component sub-processes: attention to a model's behaviour, retention of what has been observed, motor reproduction of the behaviour, and a motivational stage in which the observer decides whether to enact what has been learned based on anticipated consequences.

Two further concepts extend this basic model and are especially relevant to a novel concerned with terrorism and espionage. The first is vicarious reinforcement: an observer need not personally experience reward or punishment to be influenced by the consequences. Watching a model being rewarded, celebrated, or valorised for a behaviour is sufficient to increase the likelihood that the observer will reproduce it (Bandura 117). This is the

mechanism by which propaganda, recorded sermons, and circulated videos of violence function: the viewer need not participate in the depicted act to be shaped by witnessing its social consequences. The second is reciprocal determinism, formalised most fully in Bandura's later work, which holds that behaviour, personal cognitive factors, and environmental events operate as interlocking determinants of one another rather than in a single causal direction (Bandura, *Social Foundations* 195). An institution shapes a person's beliefs and conduct, but that person's conduct also reproduces and reinforces the institution, in a loop rather than a line.

Although Bandura's original formulation drew on laboratory studies of children imitating aggressive models, later criminological and terrorism-studies scholarship has extended SLT directly to the study of radicalization. Akins and Winfree argue that social learning theory supplies "the fundamental ideas necessary to understand...the antisocial...learning process" underlying terrorist radicalization, particularly the role of differential association with extremist peers and media (133-149). Pauwels and Schils, working with a large survey sample of European youth, found that social-learning variables, specifically exposure to extremist content and its reinforcement through online peer networks, were significant predictors of self-reported political violence (1). This body of work establishes that applying SLT to the study of terrorism is neither a novel nor a strained move within criminology; it situates the present literary analysis within an existing, empirically grounded scholarly conversation rather than importing the theory into fiction studies without precedent.

It is worth distinguishing Bandura's SLT from Edwin Sutherland's earlier Differential Association Theory, since the two are frequently conflated and the distinction matters for a novel that, as this paper will show, relies heavily on media rather than direct personal contact as a vector of influence. Sutherland's theory, developed decades before Bandura's, held that criminal behaviour is learned through direct interaction with intimate personal groups, family, peers, and neighbourhood associates, who transmit definitions favourable or unfavourable to law violation. Bandura's contribution was to show that learning could occur just as effectively through symbolic models encountered indirectly, through television, recorded sermons, or, in a contemporary register, social media and online video, without requiring face-to-face contact with the model at all. This extension is precisely what makes SLT, rather than Sutherland's narrower model, the more appropriate framework for a novel in which propaganda video and recorded speech, rather than sustained in-person

mentorship alone, do much of the work of transforming its characters.

Positioning the Present Study

Sanghi's fiction has received substantial popular and journalistic attention but comparatively little sustained academic analysis, and what exists tends to focus on his blending of mythology, history, and thriller conventions rather than on the psychological construction of his characters. This gap is worth noting rather than overstating: *Keepers of the Kalachakra* is, on its surface, a novel about a Buddhist prophecy of apocalypse and a global chase to prevent it. Yet several of its major subplots depend on detailed, causally sequenced accounts of how individual characters come to commit violence in the service of ideology or state power. It is this developmental, almost case-study-quality of characterisation, uncommon in commercial thriller fiction, that makes the novel unusually well-suited to a social-learning reading rather than to a more general study of villainy or evil.

This paper does not claim to survey existing criticism on this point, since no substantial body of published scholarship on Sanghi's characterization techniques could be located during research for this study; that absence is itself worth noting as a gap this paper begins to address. What can be established from the text alone is that *Keepers of the Kalachakra* narrates its extremist and espionage characters through explicit, sequential origin stories, complete with named institutions, named media, and named mechanisms of redirection, rather than through the more impressionistic revelation of pre-existing corruption common to thriller villains generally. This structural choice is precisely what allows a Bandura-based reading to proceed with textual specificity rather than broad thematic inference.

Observational Learning and Modelling in the Making of Mafraqi

The clearest instance of Bandura's modelling process in the novel is the backstory of the character introduced as Alim, later known as the terrorist Abu Ahmed al-Mafraqi. Sanghi narrates Alim's early life with a directness that reads almost like a criminological case history rather than thriller exposition. Born to an ordinary working-class Jordanian family, Alim grows up in a house that overlooks a garbage dump, and it is this environment, not any inherited trait, that the text identifies as his introduction to drugs, alcohol, and petty crime (Sanghi 9). His progression from petty theft to violent crime is described as a series of escalating behaviours learned within a "small and secret criminal world" that rewarded ruthlessness (Sanghi 9). Read through Bandura's framework; this is a textbook description of differential

exposure to criminal models: the absence of prosocial models in Alim's environment, combined with the presence and visible efficacy of criminal ones, produces a young man whose repertoire of learned behaviour is exclusively antisocial.

The novel's most significant move, from an SLT perspective, is its account of Alim's conversion. A new preacher arrives in the neighbourhood and deliberately redirects Alim toward religious classes, explicitly because he is "convinced that the young man would find role models in such places" (Sanghi 9). The text is remarkably explicit about the mechanism at work: this is not described as a spontaneous spiritual awakening but as a calculated substitution of one set of models for another. Alim's zeal for crime is redirected, not eliminated; the underlying learning process, attention to and imitation of an admired model, remains constant while its object changes. He becomes, in the text's words, a permanent fixture at religious gatherings and eagerly consumes propaganda videos and recorded sermons relating to conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Palestine, Kashmir, Xinjiang, and Chechnya (Sanghi 9). This detail is significant for Bandura's theory in a specific way: modelling need not occur through direct personal contact. Bandura's later extensions of SLT emphasised that symbolic models, encountered through media rather than face-to-face interaction, are as capable of shaping behaviour as live models, and can reach a far larger audience (Bandura 25). Alim's radicalisation is achieved largely through the consumption of recorded material, prefiguring by decades the online radicalisation scholarship that would later formalise this same mechanism (Pauwels and Schils 1).

The novel's own narrative structure reinforces this reading. Sanghi withholds any account of Alim possessing extremist views before the preacher's intervention; his transformation is narrated as a direct, almost mechanical consequence of exposure to new models under socially supported conditions, namely marriage, community integration, and a ready-made ideological framework. This is consistent with Bandura's insistence that the acquisition of behaviour through observation is largely independent of any prior disposition toward that behaviour, since modelling operates on attention and retention processes that function similarly regardless of the model's content (Bandura 22-24). Sanghi's Alim is not written as a man who was always going to become Mafraqi; he is written as a man who was successfully taught to become him, a distinction the novel appears to insist on through its own narrative choices.

Vicarious Reinforcement through Propaganda and Institutional Environments

If Alim's early exposure to the preacher explains how extremist modelling begins, the novel's subsequent chapters demonstrate how it is sustained and escalated through vicarious reinforcement. Captured during operations in occupied Iraq, Alim is imprisoned in Abu Ghraib, an environment the novel describes him using "as a networking opportunity to expand the span of his web" rather than as a site of punishment or deterrence (Sanghi 10). This detail closely tracks a documented finding in radicalization scholarship, namely that carceral environments, rather than interrupting extremist development, frequently function as concentrated sites of differential association where extremist peers reinforce and refine one another's beliefs. Sanghi later makes this mechanism explicit through a separate subplot, in which an Australian minister's colleagues note that "even Australian prisons were being used by imams to radicalize inmates" (Sanghi 127), a near-verbatim restatement, within the fiction, of a documented real-world radicalization pathway.

The reinforcement that sustains Mafraqi's later career, however, operates primarily through mass media rather than direct peer contact. Once he emerges from Abu Ghraib as a "soft-spoken teacher" with devastating ideological influence, his organization's violence against civilians is systematically recorded and circulated: "Horrific videos were posted on the internet so that his macabre deeds could be viewed by everyone" (Sanghi 11). This is vicarious reinforcement operating at scale and by design. Bandura's original formulation held that an observer's likelihood of reproducing a modelled behaviour increases when that behaviour is seen to be rewarded, and reward, within Bandura's framework, need not be material; social status, notoriety, and the visible expansion of a model's following all function as reinforcing consequences (Bandura 117-118). The novel's own account of the aftermath supports this reading directly: Mafraqi's reputation, rather than being diminished by his designation as America's most wanted terrorist, "surged," and the same chapter notes that thousands of recruits were drawn to him as a direct consequence of his growing notoriety (Sanghi 11). The novel thus depicts a reinforcement loop in which each act of publicized violence increases the model's status, which in turn increases the probability that distant, unseen observers will imitate or join him, a dynamic that closely parallels what Pauwels and Schils describe, in their empirical study of online extremist exposure, as the capacity of new social media to multiply the reach and reinforcing power of a single extremist model far beyond what direct personal contact could achieve (1).

It is worth noting what the novel does not dramatise as clearly: individual-level self-reinforcement, the internal standards by which Bandura's theory holds that people evaluate and regulate their own conduct once a behaviour has been acquired. Mafraqi is narrated almost entirely from the outside, through the consequences and reception of his actions, rather than through interior reflection on his own conduct. This is a limitation worth flagging rather than concealing: a thriller novel's narrative conventions, which favour external action over interiority for antagonist figures, mean that SLT's external mechanisms, modelling and vicarious reinforcement, are far more visible in the text than its internal mechanism of self-reinforcement.

Reciprocal Determinism in the Making of an Intelligence Officer

The novel's Zhang subplot offers a different and complementary test of Bandura's framework, one centred not on criminal radicalisation but on the reciprocal, recursive shaping of an individual by state institutions. Zhang's background is narrated with a similar developmental explicitness to Alim's: born in Tianjin during the Cultural Revolution, his father, a People's Liberation Army officer who had helped suppress Red Guard factions, Zhang is shown to inherit both a family position within the state security apparatus and a family disposition toward loyalty to it (Sanghi 29). Crucially, the text specifies the exact institutional pathway through which this disposition is converted into professional identity: his father's influence secures Zhang a place in the Institute of International Relations in Beijing, explicitly described as "the starting point for a career in espionage," from which students proceed to the Institute of Cadre Management in Suzhou for further tactical training before absorption into the Ministry of State Security (Sanghi 29).

This sequence is a near-ideal literary illustration of reciprocal determinism as Bandura formulated it. The environment, an inherited political position within a one-party state's security establishment, shapes Zhang's available opportunities and beliefs. Those beliefs and the professional conduct they generate- wiretapping, propaganda work, the recruitment of informants, and counter-insurgency operations against Uighur, Tibetan, and Falun Gong populations- in turn actively reproduce and strengthen the institution Zhang serves (Sanghi 29-30). The text makes the cognitive dimension of this loop explicit as well: Zhang's professional conduct is narrated as flowing directly from an internalised strategic philosophy, summarised in the novel as the conviction that "there could only be one hegemon in the world at any given time," attributed to a reading of Sun Tzu that Zhang treats as self-

evidently correct (Sanghi 30). Bandura's account of reciprocal determinism specifically rejects any model in which the environment alone determines behaviour or in which cognition operates independently of environmental feedback; instead, it treats personal factors, behaviour, and environmental influences as "interlocking determinants of each other" in a continuously updating system (Bandura, *Social Foundations* 195-96). Zhang is neither simply a product of Chinese state ideology nor an autonomous believer who happens to work for the state; the novel depicts him as a case in which institutional environment, professional behaviour, and internalised belief continuously reconstruct one another over a multi-decade career.

This reading also clarifies a structural difference between Zhang and Mafraqi that is worth stating precisely, since it sharpens rather than weakens the case for applying SLT to the novel as a whole. Mafraqi's arc emphasises the acquisition and reinforcement of behaviour through modelling, a linear-seeming process. Zhang's arc emphasises the recursive, loop-like relationship between an individual and the institution that produced him, a distinct emphasis within the same overall theory. Reading both characters together demonstrates that the novel is not simply gesturing at radicalization as a single undifferentiated process but is, whether consciously or not, dramatizing two analytically distinct mechanisms within Bandura's broader theoretical architecture.

Zhang's characterization also offers indirect evidence of what Bandura termed self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their own capacity to execute a given course of action successfully, which SLT treats as a precondition for whether observed and reinforced behaviour is actually enacted rather than merely learned. The novel repeatedly emphasises Zhang's experience and competence across successive postings, the Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau desks, counter-insurgency work against separatist movements, and the cultivation of front organisations for espionage, building a portrait of a man whose confidence in his own tradecraft is the cumulative product of two decades of institutionally reinforced success (Sanghi 29-30). This matters for social-learning reading because Bandura's theory holds that modelling and reinforcement alone are insufficient to produce sustained behaviour; an observer must also come to believe they are capable of performing the modelled behaviour effectively. Zhang's narrated career functions, in effect, as a slow accumulation of exactly this belief, each successful operation reinforcing both the institution's trust in him and his own sense of professional capability, which in turn licenses further, more consequential action.

The Novel's Own Theory of Ideology, and the Limits of the Framework

Keepers of the Kalachakra contains a passage that functions almost as the novel's own gloss on the mechanism this paper has been describing. The character Brahmananda, a recurring mystical figure across the Bharat series, tells the protagonist that "any religion can act like a medicine in small doses but can also act like a poison at higher doses," adding that he counts many Muslims among his own followers and worries specifically about the influence of radical Islamism on the preservation of knowledge, comparing its effects to the Inquisition's suppression of Copernicus and Galileo (Sanghi 168-69). This passage does not describe Alim, Mafraqi, or Zhang directly, but it articulates, in the novel's own idiom, essentially the same claim that underlies a social-learning reading of those characters: that extremism is not an inherent property of a belief system but a matter of dosage, context, and what a given environment amplifies or suppresses. The novel, in other words, appears to share the premise on which this paper's argument depends, that ideological violence is produced by conditions rather than by the content of belief alone.

That said, SLT has real limits as a framework for this novel, and a rigorous reading should state them rather than skip past them. Bandura's theory was developed to explain individual-level behavioural acquisition, tested experimentally on children imitating a single adult model in a controlled setting. Sanghi's novel operates at a vastly larger scale, involving intelligence agencies, transnational terror financing, and civilizational-level conspiracy, where geopolitical and economic causation operates alongside, and sometimes independently of, the individual psychological mechanisms SLT describes. The novel itself gestures toward this limitation: Mafraqi's rise is attributed not only to modelling and reinforcement but to a specific geopolitical error, the American disbanding of the Iraqi army, which the text describes as creating "a quarter of a million unemployed Sunni fighters" available for recruitment (Sanghi 11). This is a structural, policy-level cause that SLT, an individual-level learning theory, is not designed to explain. A complete account of the novel's treatment of radicalization would therefore need to supplement SLT with theories operating at the institutional or geopolitical level; this paper's claim is narrower and more defensible: that SLT accurately describes the individual-level mechanism by which the novel's characters acquire and sustain extremist behaviour, not that it accounts for the novel's entire causal architecture.

A related limitation concerns the verifiability of authorial intent. Nothing in the available record establishes

that Sanghi consulted Bandura, or social-learning criminology more broadly, while writing the novel, and this paper makes no claim about the author's research process or conscious design. The argument advanced here is a claim about textual pattern: that the novel's characterization choices correspond in structure to Bandura's theoretical mechanisms, not a claim about what Sanghi read, intended, or was aware of. This distinction matters for the paper's evidentiary standard: the case rests on what the text demonstrably contains, established through close reading and page citation, rather than on inference about the author's sources or purpose.

A second limitation concerns the theory's applicability across this author's wider body of work. This paper is offered as a self-contained study of *Keepers of the Kalachakra* and should be distinguished from work applying Bandura's later theory of moral disengagement, which explains how individuals who have already learned to commit harmful acts rationalize and justify them to themselves, to other Sanghi novels. Social Learning Theory and moral disengagement theory are related but analytically distinct: the former addresses how harmful behaviour is acquired, the latter addresses how already-acquired harmful behaviour is morally rationalized after the fact. Keeping this distinction explicit is necessary for anyone extending this line of analysis across Sanghi's other novels, so that the acquisition of criminal behaviour and its subsequent moral justification are not treated as the same phenomenon simply because both trace back to Bandura.

III. CONCLUSION

Reading Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory alongside *Keepers of the Kalachakra* reveals a novel, unusually attentive, for a commercial thriller, to the mechanics of how violence is learned rather than born. Alim's transformation into Mafraqi exemplifies observational learning and modelling in near-textbook form, down to the deliberate substitution of criminal models with ideological ones. The circulation of his propaganda videos and the radicalizing function attributed to prison environments demonstrate vicarious reinforcement operating through both mass media and concentrated institutional contact. Zhang's career illustrates reciprocal determinism, the continuous, recursive shaping of an individual by the state institution he serves and, in turn, reproduces. None of this suggests that Sanghi wrote the novel with Bandura's terminology in mind; rather, it suggests that a popular Indian English thriller, working within the conventions of the geopolitical conspiracy genre, arrived independently at a set of characterization choices that a well-established psychological theory of behaviour

acquisition can describe with considerable precision. The value of this reading lies less in confirming that SLT applies to the text, since almost any account of learned villainy could be loosely mapped onto it, and more in showing that the novel's specific narrative choices, its insistence on origin stories, its attention to media circulation, and its interest in institutional pathways, correspond in detail rather than in outline to the theory's own component mechanisms.

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