

II/2018

NISHAAN

NAGAARA



Recalling Operation 'Bluestar' of 1984

Who, What, How and Why
"A scar too deep"

The Dramatis Personae
"De-classify" !



The Fifth Annual Conference on the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, jointly hosted by the Chardi Kalaa Foundation and the San Jose Gurdwara, took place on 19 August 2017 at San Jose in California, USA. One of the largest and arguably most beautiful gurdwaras in North America, the Gurdwara Sahib at San Jose was founded in San Jose, California, USA in 1985 by members of the then-rapidly growing Sikh community in the Santa Clara Valley

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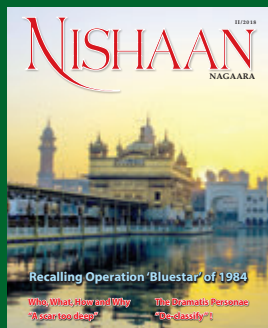


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Recalling Operation 'Bluestar' of 1984

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"De-classify!"

Harmandir Sahib, the holy
'Golden Temple', Amritsar, at dawn

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HERE WE GO AGAIN:

34 Years after Operation Bluestar

Many readers surely wonder if this painful exploration of gaping wounds could help at all or will it add more pain and suffering? You be the judge but I beg of you, wait and read carefully what is now in your hands.

We know that the events of 1984 were transformational and not for Sikhs alone. A generation has gone by. Despots depend on fading memories and people are engrossed in lives of quiet desperation. A tendency to forgive is a useful human trait, but to forget is not productive; it hinders progress. Why? Because history lasts. Progress is built on the foundations of history.

Killings or genocide of a people is not a new or modern phenomenon. Mass killings of perceived enemies have existed as long as humanity. In the not so distant times we witnessed the Holocaust that claimed upwards of six million Jews. Over a million Armenians were killed by the Turks in the last century. Who hasn't heard of the killings of Tamils in Sri Lanka and more recently of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar? Targeted killings of minorities have occurred in every continent and corner of this world, and they continue today as well.

History tells us that most of the Sikh population was almost wiped out in the two *ghalugharas* (genocides) - the greater and the lesser—barely 250 years ago in India. Now add a third perpetrated by the then government of independent India only 34 years ago. The numbers were smaller, but reparative steps or even acknowledgment of an injustice remain totally absent.

The Sikhs, though about 25 million world-wide, are a miniscule minority in India where they originated, barely two percent of the population and would likely remain a minority no matter where they live. We see how time changes us all. But does human nature change much, if at all? *Here we go again* sounds like a trite slogan, perhaps ready to be buried. But it remains fundamental to what we are. This issue of *Nishaan* now in your hands is not dirty laundry hanging in the

backyard to dry. Nothing cleans such laundry better than sunshine and that is the agenda today. We need to construct museums, libraries, exhibits, academic programmes and the like on the subject. And we need to create institutions like *Truth & Reconciliation Commissions*, as many communities and countries have done. It is like hanging laundry in the sunshine.

History tells us that humanity can recover from existential threats; after all life must go on, doesn't it? But the milestones along the journey are important. They remind us where we have been, and where we now stand. In the meantime, the world has changed and how! In short, I recommend we let go of bitterness; forgive but never forget which are the recurring lessons here. Truth and reconciliation are the way - an honest process, a lasting educational framework is the lasting lesson - which would be an institutionalised process and heaven knows we need it.

A slew of heavy-duty, serious scholars have contributed to this issue of *Nishaan*: a real collectors' item for Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. Forget not that in these 34 years since the assault on the Sikh's Harmandir (Golden Temple) by the Indian Army, there has been a sea change in the Sikh world. Today, there is no part of the new world where Sikhs are not. Clearly, there is now a whole generation of Sikhs who are only peripherally connected (if at all) to India's ethos—culture, cuisine, language, context, history, laws—and even the ways of thinking. Sometimes, and at best, they show an intricate amalgamation of the old and the new worlds. Publications like the *Nishaan* and *The Sikh Review* strive to bridge this cultural gap.

'1984' remains an unresolved issue between India and its Sikhs, who are its citizens and many others who are not. And the Sikhs who largely remain Punjab-based, look at the 1984 imbroglio with a different lens than those who largely live in the diaspora. Our constraints are different. Do people have a bias? Of course. Who does not? Do I? Certainly!

You will encounter a panel of writers in this *Nishaan*, both India-based and those who are not; sometimes with very different sensitivities about the same issues. We are all impacted by the cultural framework in which we operate. The diversity and variety of voices is good for us. Political shenanigans, too, find a place; to some they remain mental gymnastics, to others they smack of truth.

Life is full of rude awakenings. Kanwar Sandhu, a veteran journalist and now a respected politician, brings to us in useful detail the events, the decision-making process and the individuals with defining roles in the attack. To me it is disconcerting that so many of the officers leading the attack were Sikhs. Some interviews with them might be revealing. Was their loyalty mostly driven by their training to follow orders even unto death as a soldier must?

Hamid Hussain provides detailed accounts of the attack. We see data on personnel, their commanders, and their evolving, sometimes confusing, strategy. Lt.Gen. RS Sujlana (formerly Colonel of the Sikh Regiment) starts with the telling words that “Operation Bluestar was a monumental blunder.” How did Sikh and non-Sikh politicians, government officers, political leaders and common men and women react to the attack: I am looking for their feelings, not intellectual analyses. Prof. Pritam Singh from Oxford University revisits the human cost, not just in numbers, but in ways that define our humanity and our sense of self as a people, as Sikhs and as a nation. True that 1984 was an inevitable reflection of to the earlier two *ghalugharas* in history, but it was the first to occur within a gurdwara and that, too, within the Golden Temple. Remember too the underlying politico-economic issues.

Then, Col. (Dr.) Dalvinder Singh Grewal brings us a moving personal saga of Sikhs who were held in custody at the historic Muktsar gurdwara – innocent people caught in a maelstrom not of their own making. Not surprisingly, the recurring theme in many accounts refers to Guru Arjan Dev who was Sikhi’s first martyr. As is widely known, that doyen of Sikh history, Khushwant Singh reacted strongly to the 1984 attack. He was against Sikh separatism but he found the army attack so reprehensible that he returned all the honours of a life-time that the Indian government had bestowed on him. I love his statement

after the attack: “To kill a rat you don’t have to bring your house down.”

A telling nugget: Jathedar Rachpal Singh, at the bidding of then Home Minister Buta Singh, later read out a statement to the foreign press and invited them to an elaborate lunch. A Sikh woman in the audience got up and defiantly slapped the Jathedar. From a Sikh, I would expect no less. KD Vasudeva, then Chief Secretary to the Government of Punjab, recounts the convoluted process that is the hallmark of bureaucracy anywhere: the rigmarole of decision making, including local political rivalries that needed accommodation. Now the linen, not so clean, hangs in full view.

Finally, there is a brief report on the disturbing but poorly appreciated fact that some British officers colluded with the Indian government on planning the attack. Keep in mind that this was during Margaret Thatcher’s time and her government knew of this outrageous event. Some events have delayed sequelae. Daily news reports tell us of the increase in stray incidents of bullying, mistreatment, even violence against Sikhs in India and in America. These seem to be aftershocks of the 1980s and the clear debasement of Sikhs by the Indian political leadership as well as their mistaken identity as Muslims in the United States.

This issue of the *Nishaan* - as a record for posterity - explores disturbing matters, not yet settled. It is a collectors’ item for students of history, and for all Sikhs worldwide. A rich lode of data in this collector copy of *Nishaan*, for the reader to mine.

One grave matter is missing in this issue: The casually undertaken and ham-handedly conducted approximately twelve or so Inquiry Commissions into the attempted genocide of Sikhs that took place, later in 1984. True that their results remain zero, yet even that deserves critical notice. We still need to know what was their mandate and what exactly, if anything, did they accomplish. This might make for another special issue of the *Nishaan* one day. We need to preserve our history to present future recurrences. Is this the final word? Absolutely not. Remember T.S. Eliot on “*the cunning passages and contrived corridors of history that deceive us by vanities.*”

I.J. Singh

“A scar too deep”



It is not known when Mrs Gandhi came round to the view that she had no option but to order the army into the Golden Temple, and who her advisers were at the time. The names of Rajiv Gandhi, Arun Nehru, Arun Singh and Digvijay Singh were mentioned. It is also unknown who chose the date when operations should commence. There is no doubt that President Zail Singh was kept in the dark. When Mrs Gandhi persuaded him to put Punjab under military rule, she did not tell him that she had decided to order the army to clear the Temple of Bhindranwale and his armed followers. When it came to Punjab or Sikh affairs, she did not trust Gianiji. And none of her advisers had the foggiest notion of Sikh traditions. They chose 5 June 1984 as the day to launch the operation. It was

the death anniversary of Guru Arjan, the founder of the Hari Mandir, a day when hundreds of thousands of Sikhs were expected to come on pilgrimage from remote areas. Nor were alternative methods of getting at Bhindranwale considered seriously. He could have been overpowered by a band of commandos in plain clothes; the Temple complex could have been cordoned off; the people inside deprived of rations and access to potable water and forced to come out in the open to surrender or be picked up by snipers. It would have taken a couple of days longer, but would have been comparatively bloodless.

However, the army stormed the Golden Temple with tanks, armoured cars and frogmen, with helicopters

hovering overhead to give directions. The battle that ensued lasted two days and nights. In the cross-fire almost 5,000 men, women and children perished. The Akal Takht was reduced to rubble by heavy guns fired from tanks; the central shrine which both parties had declared hors de combat was hit by over 70 bullets. The entrance (*deohri*) had a large portion blasted off; archives containing hundreds of hand-written copies of the Granth Sahib and *hukumnamas* (edicts) issued under the signatures of the Gurus were reduced to ashes. Even Mrs Gandhi, who had been assured that the operation would not last more than two hours, was horrified at the extent of damage caused to sacred property and the horrendous loss of lives. Instead of admitting that she had blundered, she decided to cover up the whole thing with a barrage of lies.

“A painful discovery”

Despite my indifference and even hostility to religion, I had no doubt in my mind that I should reaffirm my identity with my community. I regarded Bhindranwale as an evil man who deserved his fate. But ‘Operation Blue Star’ went well beyond the slaying of Bhindranwale: it was a well-calculated and deliberate slap in the face of an entire community. I felt strongly that I must register my protest. I did not consult anyone: my wife was away in Kasauli, my daughter in office, my son in Bombay. I rang up Tarlochan Singh, the Press Adviser of President Zail Singh, and asked for an appointment with the latter. I was asked to come straightaway. I took the framed citation awarding me the Padma Bhushan under the signature of President VV Giri. Tarlochan had anticipated that I had come to return it to the government. Giani Zail Singh was in a state of acute depression. “I know how you feel,” he said to me, “but don’t be hasty. Think over the matter for a few days and then decide what you should do.” I held my ground. “No Gianiji. I don’t want to give myself time to change my mind. I had sworn that if the army entered the temple I would renounce the honours bestowed on me by this

government.” He asked Tarlochan to put aside the citation and continued talking to me. “I don’t think my *qaum* [community] will ever forgive me for this,” he said. He was looking for some kind of assurance to the contrary. “No Gianiji, I don’t think the Sikhs will ever forgive you for Bluestar.” He was in the depths of despair. “Do you think it would serve any purpose if I resign now?” I told him it was too late: whether or not he resigned, the Sikhs would hold him responsible for the desecration of their holiest shrine.

I knew Gianiji would keep my returning the Padma Bhushan to himself. I did not give him a chance. From Rashtrapati Bhavan I drove straight to the PTI office on Parliament Street and handed over the short text of my letter of protest and about returning the award. “To kill a rat you don’t have to bring down your house,” it read. The evening papers carried the news; the morning papers had it on their front pages.

What followed was a painful discovery to me. Overnight I became a kind of folk hero of the Sikhs: the first to openly denounce the government. And a villain for Hindus. I, who had always preached secular ideals and condemned Bhindranwale, had come out in my ‘true colours’ they said. I was flooded with letters and telegrams: Sikhs applauding me for having shown how a Sikh should act; Hindus denouncing me as an arch



Giani Zail Singh and S. Tarlochan Singh with visiting Sri Lankan President at Rashtrapati Bhawan



Giani Zail Singh, the first (and so far only) Sikh President of India at Rashtrapati Bhawan

enemy of the country. Even Girilal Jain, a man I had regarded as being above communal prejudices, wrote an editorial against me. Every pressman who came to interview me asked why I had not resigned from the Rajya Sabha as well. I told them that I was not going to deprive myself of the one forum from which I could tell the government and the people what grievous wrong it had done to the Sikhs and the country.

“Such a small matter”

A few days later I visited Amritsar. Entrance to the Golden Temple was still restricted. But they could not very well keep me out. I was met at the railway station by an army officer who told me that he had been deputed by General KS Brar, who had played a leading role in *Operation Blue Star*, to be by my side for the sake of my safety. In fact he had been deputed to keep an eye on my movements.

I went round the *parikrama* and saw the devastation caused by the army. (Workmen were hastily filling in dents left by bullets and cleaning up the marble



Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale around the Golden Temple parikrama

floor of blood-stains.) Soldiers were still about in considerable strength. Near the rubble that once was the Akal Takht stood a signboard in English and Hindi reading, “Smoking and drinking in these premises is prohibited.” This is what our *jawans* had been doing after taking over the Temple. When I drew my escort’s attention to it, he ordered the board to be removed. I saw clusters of peasants gazing at the ruins of the Akal Takht with tears running down their cheeks. Doordarshan had hauled up a very frightened head-priest, Kirpal Singh, and made him read out a statement that very little damage had been caused to the buildings: *O Kirpala annha see?* “Was that Kirpal Singh blind?” people asked. In the central shrine I counted the number of fresh bullet marks. In front of each there were peasant women in tears of anger, their mouths full of curses. *Inhaan da beej naas hoey!*: “May their seed perish!” *Kuttian dee aulaad!*: “Progeny of dogs”. From down below the balcony came the strains of Gurbani. It sounded utterly out of place.

For many days parties of Sikh men and women came to call on me (in New Delhi) unbidden and without appointment to condole with me. They included well-dressed ladies who spoke in English. A day earlier, Jathedar Rachpal Singh, at the bidding of Home Minister Buta Singh, had called a press conference at Hotel Imperial to explain the government’s point of view. The press, including foreign journalists, had turned up in full force. The Jathedar read out a statement and, before allowing questions, asked guests to stay on after the conference was over and be his guests for lunch. A lady strode up to the platform and slapped him across the face, knocking off his turban. “You shameless creature! Our Temple has been destroyed and you want to celebrate it with a luncheon party?” The press conference was hastily concluded. This lady, a school teacher, was among those who had called on me.

Asad Farooqi, DCP at the Parliament Road Police Station which included Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, rang me up and asked if he could see me. When we met he told me that

he was at the gurdwara every afternoon to hear the speeches being delivered there. My name came up frequently and it was often announced that I would be coming to the gurdwara to address the congregation. We talked for quite a while and I told him of the death and destruction caused in Amritsar: *Zara see baat peh aap Sarkar say itney khafaa ho gayey* “On such a small matter you have become so cross with the government”, he exclaimed.

“*Zara see baat!* Do you know upwards of 5,000 Sikhs were slain in this single operation? You call it *zara see baat!*” I replied. “*Itney Mussulman yeh har saal maar daaltey hain* They kill as many Muslims every year,” he maintained. I could not resist retorting *Aap Mussalmanon ko to maar khaaney kee aadat par gayey hai* : “You Muslims have got used to being beaten regularly”; *Inshallah! Sikkhon ko bhee par jaygee*: “If God wills Sikhs will also get habituated to it”.

“Anti-national ?”

In my articles and speeches I pleaded with Mrs Gandhi to go to the Golden Temple as a pilgrim and ask for forgiveness. I assured her that Sikhs were an emotional people and the gesture would assuage their feeling of hurt. She allowed herself to be guided by her Home Minister, Buta Singh. They decided to have the Akal Takht rebuilt exactly as it was and in as short a time as possible, so that the Temple complex could be handed back to the SGPC. Money was no problem. A firm of Sikh contractors, Skipper & Co, owned by one Tejwant Singh, was given a blank cheque to do the job – including getting the gold to recover the domes.





Buta Singh was aware of the Sikh tradition of building temples through voluntary labour, *Kaar Sewa*. Failing to get anyone respectable to lead it, he hired the services of a Nihang who described himself as *Sultan-ul-Qaum*, ruler of the community, to do the job. This Falstaff-sized man, known to be addicted to hashish, arrived with a motley bunch of followers who went through the motions of taking bricks and mortar to the site of the building. Evening after evening Doordarshan dutifully showed them on the screen. When the matter was raised in the Rajya Sabha I had to face the ire of three Sikh members sitting with the Congress: Amarjeet Kaur, Hanspal, and the new entrant, ex-Chief Minister Darbara Singh. When I described Santa Singh Nihang as “a fat old buffoon”, they were on their feet to protest that my language was unparliamentary and should be struck off the records. Darbara Singh followed it up by saying, “Mr Khushwant Singh, Baba Santa Singh is a much better Sikh than you are!” I acknowledged that his observation was correct and added, “I have never claimed to be a good Sikh. But let me tell all three of you who claim to be such devout Sikhs that today what I say matters to the Sikhs; Sikhs like you have become irrelevant.”

The main debate on *Operation Bluestar* had to await the publication of the White Paper. I stayed back in

the House till the first copies of the book were released and spent long hours going over it again and again. I knew I would be the only one to speak against it, as by then the Akali members had resigned. The whip of the Congress party had lined up his henchmen to heckle me and put across the official point of view. When I was called on to speak the House was full. Right from the start, cronies of the Congress party tried to barrack me. Jayalalitha, who had been recently elected to the House, rose to my defence and asked the Chairman to let me have my say without interruption. I let loose whatever oratory I had at my command and roundly denounced the government for what it had perpetrated. I criticised the army for the ham-handed way it had done the job and quoted an Urdu couplet to illustrate the outcome of serious errors of judgement,

*Voh waqt bhee deykha taareekh kee gharion nay
Lamhon nay khataa kee thee Sadiyon nay sazaa paayee*

“The ages of history have recorded times when for an error made in a few seconds centuries had to pay the price.”

Only members of the Opposition applauded my speech. Mrs Gandhi, sitting in the Lok Sabha, was kept informed of what I was saying; she described my speech as “anti-national.”

All the speakers who spoke after me had something to say on what I had said. Narasimha Rao, who had replaced PC Sethi as Home Minister, jibed at me for trying to pose as a military expert who could advise the army command on how to go about its job.

Excerpted from the autobiography of Khushwant Singh,
Truth, Love and a Little Malice



Bluestar: the third ghallughara



6 June 2018 marked the 34th anniversary of Operation Bluestar. With one-third of a century on, how do we describe this action, and what meaning do we attach to it? Do we describe it, as the Congress ideologists did then, as a holy task undertaken by the Indian military to clear the temple of the militants who had taken control of it? Or do we describe it, as some Indian nationalists and Leftists do, as a sad and necessary action to defeat an imperialist conspiracy to disintegrate India? Do we celebrate it, as some Hindu nationalists do, as a successful assertion of India's Hindu supremacy against the Sikh minority's separatist aspirations? Or do we condemn it, as Sikh and Punjabi nationalists do, as a genocidal attack on Sikh dignity, assertion and identity? Perhaps, we decry it, as most human rights defenders and Leftists do, as a tragedy resulting in the deaths of thousands of human beings – pilgrims, priests, Sikh combatants and Indian army men?

The contesting descriptions of *Operation Bluestar* and the meanings attached to it are reflections of

serious fault lines in the Indian society and polity. To say that there would never be a consensus on how to describe and signify this military action may be unreasonable and ahistorical. But to say that there is little likelihood of a consensus in the foreseeable future would be alluding to an uncomfortable truth about the fractured nature of Indian nationhood. However this operation is described and whatever meaning is subsequently attached to it, one thing is clear: one day, everyone else might want to forget it—and might succeed in doing so—but this will never be true of the Sikh community.

The third ghallughara

Operation Bluestar has become an integral part of the Sikh collective historical memory. It has become the third ghallughara (holocaust) in Sikh history: the first referring to the massacre of some 10,000 Sikhs in 1746; the second to the even larger massacre of Sikh men, women and children in 1762, when 30,000 (nearly 50 per cent of the population) were slaughtered in Punjab. Today, the available evidence suggests that

many (though not all) gurdwaras in India and abroad include references to the third ghallughara in their daily ardas, or prayers.

The most reliable estimates of the total number of deaths during *Operation Bluestar* are anywhere from 5,000 to 7,000. Yet, a crucial difference between the third ghallughara and the previous two is that this massacre occurred inside the Golden Temple, while the first two took place on open battlefields. This gives an added religious dimension to the significance of the military action: a much larger number of Sikhs died during Partition, but the 1947 deaths are not seen in terms of attacks on and in defence of religion. In religious terms, the largest Sikh loss in 1947 was the fact that the Nankana Sahib gurdwara — marking the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith — was suddenly located in Pakistan. This, too, was a loss that today figures in the daily ardas.

Human rights approach

What should be the human rights approach in dealing with the complex situation of destruction, loss and pain associated with Bluestar? It could be to put forward a position of truth, accountability and justice as a methodology to study and a tool with which to deal with this painful situation. One can hope that truth and justice can heal the wounds, and there can be sound grounds based on an understanding of human history that such a hope is not wholly unfounded. However, one is also simultaneously troubled that the truth may never be allowed to come out and that justice may never be done because of the complicated conflicts of

competing nationalisms implicated in this tragedy. Another dimension of human history which creates pessimism is that history is also full of intractable conflicts and continuing injustices.

As for how to think about Bluestar, first and foremost, it was a massive human tragedy. It was a tragedy that could have been avoided if—and that is a big if—Indira Gandhi had had a larger vision to reach a political settlement with the moderate Akali leadership. Most Akali Dal demands—regarding federal decentralisation,



Every June, Operation Bluestar is remembered with anger and angst



The 'Third Ghallughara' occurred inside the Golden Temple

river water rights, territorial readjustment and the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab as its capital—could have been negotiated. In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi agreed in the Rajiv-Longowal Accord to each of these demands, plus many more. It is a different matter that he implemented none.

Indira Gandhi's political calculations—those of using the 'Hindu card' for electoral victories—led her to deliberately choose a dangerous path of confrontation, first with the Akalis and eventually with the entire Sikh community. She paid for this miscalculation with her life, but still left Punjab and India communally scarred and polarised. Sikh nationalism was defeated militarily, but Hindu nationalism was unleashed so powerfully that the Hindu nationalists have succeeded within a few decades to capture the Indian state.

Regarding the demands that led to the Akali agitation of the early 1980s, the situation today remains where we were back then. As far as accountability for atrocities committed during *Bluestar* and subsequently during the conflict between the Indian state and the armed opposition Sikh groups is concerned, one suggestion for an Indian government in the future oriented towards reconciliation could be to take a bold step in following South Africa's example of establishing a truth and reconciliation commission.

No one wants history to be repeated. The least anyone can do today is to remember those thousands—pilgrims, priests, politicians, traders, militants, policemen and soldiers—who became victims in the tragedy of the third Sikh ghallughara.

Pritam Singh
Professor of Economics
Oxford Brookes Business School, UK

Punjab was scorched 34 summers ago and...

The burn still hurts

A whole new generation has come up since 'Operation Bluestar' in 1984, which set Punjab on the path of bitterness that continues to this day. Many in India as well as abroad have only heard tales of what transpired immediately before and during the assault on the Golden Temple complex. Not all accounts are unbiased or informed and in this article, Kanwar Sandhu attempts to put together the chain of inglorious events in an objective perspective, based on narrations and claims of people directly involved in the Operation.



Artist's depiction of severe fighting in the Golden Temple complex in June 1984

Operation Bluestar in June 1984 marked a watershed in contemporary history. The Sikh psyche was bruised. Within months, India's Prime Minister was killed, spiralling widespread violence against Sikhs in the National Capital of Delhi and elsewhere. Hindus and Sikhs, whose historic bonding appeared intrinsic, stood polarised.

Instead of stemming violence, this military action in Punjab sent the region into the throes of a crisis of unimaginable proportions, lasting more than a decade. Reprisals continued to claim lives for years and among the innumerable people who fell to assassins' bullets were a retired Army Chief, General AS Vaidya, and Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh.

More than three decades later, trauma of that ignominious Operation remains stark, the outrage and bruise may have diminished but has not gone away. The anguish appears to have not only spilled over to the next generations of Sikhs, it has got particularly amplified amongst the Sikh diaspora abroad. Lt Gen Kuldip Singh Brar, who as a Major General had spearheaded the Operation, remains in virtual hiding. Although he lives in the highly secured Colaba area of Mumbai, he was attacked and knifed in London when on a visit there in September 2012. In fact, some recent revelations of the possible involvement of the British Special Forces, the SAS, in the run-up to the 1984 military operation have fuelled British Sikh anger.

Some years back, despite opposition from various quarters, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) succumbed to pressure from radical Sikh groups to build a memorial in memory of those who died during the Army operation, which triggered a demand for another memorial for those who were killed by militants. Certain Sikh groups have demanded that the 1984 events referred to as the third ‘Sikh Ghalughara’ (holocaust), the previous ones being in 1746 and 1762.

Political shenanigans

Operation Bluestar was the culmination of a series of events in the 1970s and 1980s. There was restiveness in the Punjab, emanating from a clash between the mainstream Sikhs and the Nirankari sect in April 1978, which worsened over a litany of religious and political demands raised by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD).



The perennial Prakash Singh Badal, with Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal, Gurcharan Singh Tohra



Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale at an Amritsar function

Gradually, the SAD leadership of Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, Gurcharan Singh Tohra and Parkash Singh Badal, which had taken stringent stand over its demands with the Centre, found itself going along with the hardliners. The Congress then was plagued by rivalry between the factions owing allegiance to the then President of India, Giani Zail Singh, who had earlier been Union Home Minister, and former Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh.

Referring to the uncertainty in Punjab, former Punjab Chief Secretary KD Vasudeva says that Giani Zail Singh had once compared the situation to the strewing of pages of a book come unstuck (*“Punjab vich kitab da varqa-varqa khilrya hoya hai”*).

At the same time, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who till the Sikh-Nirankari clash had confined himself to *dharam parchar* (religious preaching), had by the end of 1983 begun to wrest control of events. By January 1984, the legend of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, popularly referred to as Sant Bhindranwale, had attained a peak. Operating from his headquarters in Guru Nanak Niwas on the outer periphery of the Golden Temple complex, he had come to epitomise the Sikh struggle started in the form of a *Dharam Yudh Morcha* by the Akali Dal in August 1982. Regarded the Sikh face of the struggle, he would address almost every evening a congregation of hundreds of supporters and devotees at Manji Sahib Diwan Hall in the complex.

Initially uncertain on sending the Army into the complex, Indira Gandhi reportedly explored various options, including sending commandos and reports suggest that advice of the British Government and Britain's elite SAS was sought in early 1984. Opinion prevailed against a limited operation owing to the dangers involved and strong chances of failure. Meanwhile, as the power struggle within the Sikh groups intensified, Bhindranwale moved to Akal Takht with his armed supporters in early 1984.

Indira Gandhi finally succumbed to hardliners within her group of advisers to send the Army in. Veteran journalist Kuldeep Nayar recalls, "Three or four days before the Operation was launched, she sent the then I&B Minister, HKL Bhagat, to me to ask if they should send the Army in. I told him that they should never send the Army into the complex, which is the Vatican of the Sikhs. They will never forgive you."

The military action was preceded by hectic behind-the-scenes negotiations between the Centre on one hand and the SAD leadership on the other. On and off, the Centre even made some overtures to Bhindranwale through emissaries. A number of times, senior Akali leaders were taken out of jails where they had been interned and flown to Delhi for secret confabulations. According to MPS Aulakh, a retired IPS officer, who was then an Assistant Director with the Intelligence Bureau in Amritsar, the last such meeting with Akali leaders was held on 26 May 1984 six days before the Army was called out in Punjab. Interestingly, among those who negotiated for the Centre was Pranab Mukherjee, later President of India (who was then a Congress leader), while the Akali leaders included Parkash Singh Badal. The talks were inconclusive and the then Western Army Commander, Lt Gen K Sundarji, was asked to storm the complex.

Former MP Tarlochan Singh, who was a close aide of the late President Zail Singh, claims that when the final decision to storm the complex was taken, even the President was kept in the dark about it.



Major General Shabeg Singh

The build-up

During the six months preceding *Operation Bluestar*, Bhindranwale's ranks had swelled with volunteers from the countryside, many of who were ex-soldiers as well as police and army deserters. The most important was former Major General Shabeg Singh, one

of the heroes of the 1971 Indo-Pak war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. He was feeling wronged due to, what he alleged, a "false case" of financial bungling made out against him. He had joined Bhindranwale and moved into the complex in March 1984. He was responsible for the entire fortification and build-up of militants within the complex. Besides, Bhindranwale had a close-knit group of confidants and armed guards who had sworn to "do and die" for the Panth.

On eve of the Operation, the Golden Temple complex had been turned into an armed citadel by different militant groups. These included Damdami Taksal, All-India Sikh Students Federation, Babbar Khalsa, Dal Khalsa, Akhand Kirtani Jatha, and the Akal Federation. Although claiming that they were unable to prevent inflow of arms and ammunition into the complex, the Punjab Police and other security agencies were able to get a fairly accurate account of the weaponry being piled up inside the complex. As per a CID report of May 1984, there were 10 light machine guns (LMGs), 25-30 SLRs (self-loading rifles), 100-125 carbines, 150-200 sten guns, 250 odd rifles, 1500 HE-36 grenades, and "thousands of" country-made grenades.

Alas, the Army did not take this information into consideration while preparing for the battle. It presumed that the militants had only antiquated guns.

After General Sundarji was given the go-ahead for the Operation on 27 May by the Generals, the Army units chosen for the Operation started heading for Amritsar. On the evening of 31 May, Major General (later Lt Gen) Kuldeep Singh Brar, GOC of 9 Infantry Division in Meerut, was

called to Chandimandir Cantonment near Chandigarh for a conference the following morning where he was told to submit his detailed plans to General Sundarji by 3 June. It was also decided to seal the border with Pakistan.

On 1 June, matters had begun to hot up in Amritsar and the CRPF and the BSF, which had occupied buildings around the Golden Temple complex, began to engage the armed militants which had occupied certain towering structures around the complex in order to size up their weaponry and deployment pattern. By the evening, 11 people had been killed, creating considerable tension.



CRPF picquet on rooftop

On 2 June, then Akali Dal president Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, SGPC President Gurcharan Singh Tohra and Akal Takht Jathedar Giani Kirpal Singh met to discuss the situation. The Akal Takht Jathedar and the Darbar Sahib Head Granthi, Giani Sahib Singh, issued a strongly worded appeal to the Sikh Panth to safeguard the sanctity of Darbar Sahib.

That evening, Indira Gandhi in her address to the nation made no reference of the Army being called out but stated that “the government could no longer remain a silent spectator to the sad happenings in Punjab.” Soon after, at 10 pm, an AIR news bulletin announced that the Army had been called out in view of civil disobedience in Punjab.

With the announcement the previous night, on 3 June the stage was set for the military operation at the Golden Temple complex critically at the time of

Martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev, when thousands of devotees had come especially to the complex. In view of the ongoing Dharam Yudh Morcha, a group of volunteers had also come from Sangrur to court arrest.

Motives have been ascribed to the operation coinciding with the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev. The government has explained that its decision was forced by a number of factors, which included increasing incidents of violence; Akali Dal’s plan to take the civil disobedience movement to the next level by stopping food grains from Punjab; reports of Bhindranwale planning to declare Khalistan on or about 10 June and its possible recognition by Pakistan; and intelligence reports of instructions having been issued by militants for killing Hindus in Punjab countryside.

Many Sikhs have refuted the government claims and believe that such an auspicious day was chosen for the attack to “teach Sikhs a lesson”, something that successive governments have denied.

The Army set up tactical headquarters atop a building overlooking the complex. The main offensive was tasked to 350 Infantry Brigade under Brig DV Rao. The four battalions tasked for the main operation being 10 Guards, 26 Madras, 12 Bihar and 9 Kumaon.

The battle

Before dawn on 4 June, while most of the Punjab was still asleep and a handful of devotees were engaged in the morning rituals, an Army rocket from a shoulder-held launcher slammed into the Akal Takht building at 4.40 am, shattering the serenity of the complex.



Overlooking the Darbar Sahib were fortified towers, 18th Century ‘Bungas’



Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and armed followers at the Golden Temple complex

Two more such blasts soon after woke up the city residents. An hour or two later, the people in Punjab and Chandigarh woke up on to a state-wide curfew and a complete news blackout. Phones (there were only landlines then) were disconnected.

Intermittent firing continued the whole day and by the evening, power supply to the complex was cut off. Militants who had taken up positions atop the water tank adjoining the complex were engaged by the Army and when the tank collapsed, there was panic in the area. Towards the evening, a publicity van of the district administration was making announcements in Punjabi, asking all those stranded inside the complex to come out with their hands raised. There were hardly any takers for these appeals. Later, many of those who surrendered claimed that they had not heard the announcements. Army officials claimed that a few who tried to come out were shot by militants from inside and

their bodies could be seen lying in front of the Ghanta Ghar main entrance of the complex.

Meanwhile, the Army was battle-ready for what it believed would be a quick surgical strike lasting a few hours. At a conference in Amritsar Cantonment, while most officers listened to General Brar intently as he laid out his plans, BSF DIG GS Pandher argued against the way the operation was planned and warned that since the militants were highly motivated and well entrenched, there could be a bloody stalemate. He was, however, overruled and replaced overnight.

The stage was set for storming of the complex. A detachment of the Special Frontier Force (SFF) carrying special weaponry had also arrived in Amritsar. Even Naval divers had been airlifted and brought to Amritsar. Gas masks and CS gas canisters were also brought in to meet any eventuality.

On 5 June morning, Major General Brar visited various units taking part in the Operation. Meanwhile, the heavily fortified militants' positions atop the two eighteenth century 'bungas' on either side of the Langar building of the complex were bombarded by the Army using RCL guns and a 3.7-inch howitzer. This had the salutary effect and on the afternoon of 5 June, about 120 men, women and children came out of Darbar Sahib with their hands raised.

Within the complex, while Bhindranwale and his close associates, including the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) president, Bhai Amrik Singh, stayed put inside Akal Takht, General Shabeg Singh was seen by Army sentries supervising the fortifications. All five storeys of the Akal Takht building had been fortified and slits made in the marble slabs for firing automatic weapons.

It was at 7 pm on 5 June that General Brar issued "operational instructions" for Operation Blue Star. These said the operation would be in three phases: clearing the militant *morchas* around the complex, capturing the terrorists through simultaneous military action and then repairing the damaged buildings before resuming the religious services. Nearly 50 gurdwaras in Punjab were also to be "searched." Part of the operation in Amritsar was to secure the sanctum sanctorum, Harmandir Sahib, by getting divers and commandos to swim across the holy sarovar.

The plan was based on an assessment that there were about 2,000 militants inside the complex, of which about 500 were 'hardcore'. Six to eight heavy tanks, eight BMP infantry carrying vehicles (ICVs) and three armoured personnel carriers (APCs) were deployed around the complex. It was decided that in addition to the battalions earmarked for the Operation, elite troops of 1 Para Commando and the SFF (the secret Establishment 22) would also take part in the main assault. Troops of 9 Garhwal and 15 Kumaon battalions were kept in reserve.

The Golden Temple complex was stormed at 10.30 pm on 5 June. The attacking troops surmounted tremendous opposition from militant battlements atop the Ghanta Ghar entrance of the complex and

also automatic fire coming from the slits on the two sides of the staircase at the entrance. Troops trying to gain entry from the Langar side were stalled by the militants entrenched there. In the nearby hostel complex, where Akali Dal offices were housed, an unfortunate incident was reported. Sometime in the night, when a large number of men and women had gathered in an open compound, a grenade was thrown, resulting in the killing of a large number of innocent people. These included many of those who had come to the complex either to take part in the Morcha or to pay obeisance on the occasion of the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev.

Meanwhile, Army casualties began to mount. After bitter fighting at every level, the troops managed to gain a foothold in the buildings around Akal Takht. However, not only was Akal Takht holding out, it was bringing heavy fire on the troops lodged around it. Then the reserve troops were inducted. Repeated attempts to storm Akal Takht were repulsed. The CS gas canisters lobbed at the heavily fortified Akal Takht proved ineffective. Then, APCs were wheeled in, followed by tanks to cause 'shock and awe' on the militants. The 'zenon' lights on the tanks were switched on to blind the militants, but to no avail.

It was then that General Sundarji, who was watching from his command post outside the complex and listening to the communications on his radio set, got desperate. With troops suffering heavy casualties, a stalemate stared him in the face. With daylight just an hour away, he feared the possibility of thousands of villagers marching in to the Golden Temple. Meanwhile, one of the APCs in the 'parikarma' heading for Akal Takht had been immobilised by a rocket. General Sundarji then called up Delhi for permission to use the main gun of the tanks to silence the militants in Akal Takht. A little after 5.00 am, New Delhi gave the green signal to use the main tank gun and at dawn, two of the tanks targeted Akal Takht with 105-mm high-explosive squash heads, General Brar told me later that they had fired about 20 rounds at the Takht. While this silenced all opposition from Akal Takht, the use of tanks continues to be a rankle to this day.

Around 8.30 am some people came out of the complex. While some made a dash for the sarovar, a few went for the buildings around. They were all killed by the

troops. Bhindranwale and his associate, Bhai Amrik Singh, were among those killed in the group. The Army learnt later that earlier in the night when the troops were finding it difficult to make a breakthrough, they had gained an unexpected success: an injured General Shabeg Singh had been on the 'parikarma', was carried into the basement of Akal Takht, where Bhindranwale was. He died soon after and his body lay covered with a sheet in a corner of the room as battle raged outside. The body was discovered only on 8 June, the day President Giani Zail Singh visited the complex.

It was around 5.00 pm on 6 June that General Brar announced that the Army was in complete control of the complex. The body of Bhindranwale, which had his customary pistol strapped to it, was identified and placed at entrance of the complex. According to the figures given out by the government, the Army lost 83 personnel, including four officers. A total of 248 army men were wounded, including 13 officers. The civilians, including militants killed, were 492, 30 women and five children among them. Civilians wounded were 86. A total of 1,592 persons were apprehended from the complex. However, these official figures have been challenged. The Army also announced that a total of 927 weapons were recovered from the complex, including rocket-propelled grenade launchers, LMGs, and SLRs.

Complications

By about the noon of 6 June, the Complex had been secured. But the Army had other worries. Akali Dal leaders Sant Longowal, GS Tohra and Balwant Singh Ramoowalia, although safe, were still inside the complex. They had been secured in one of the rooms, and their evacuation was the Army's top most priority. It was only by the afternoon that they could be evacuated in an APC.

Removal of the dead and injured from the complex was extremely difficult. Some of the bodies had putrefied in the heat and sun over the 48 hours. There was terrible stink in the air and the holy sarovar ('the house of nectar') had bodies floating in it. Brig Onkar Singh Goraya (a colonel then), recalls: "The bodies, many of which were bloated, were stinking. DDT powder was sprinkled on them, which made it



Anguished people inspect damaged buildings of the Complex

worse. The cocktail of decaying flesh and DDT was unbearable."

Since the Army had referred to remove the bodies, officials summoned the local municipality sweepers. When they hesitated, they were given the incentive of keeping the wristwatches and other valuables taken from the bodies. "Bodies were dumped into garbage trucks and carried away like firewood being carried," recalls Brigadier Goraya. While Bhindranwale and two of his associates, Bhai Amrik Singh and Thara Singh, were cremated with proper rituals, others were crudely cremated in heaps of 10 to 15.

Excesses not probed

What has continued to anger the Sikh community over the years is that excesses allegedly committed during the Operation have not been inquired into. These have been documented in various eyewitness accounts, including in the latest book by Brigadier Goraya,



Troops with 'Prisoners of War' in the streets of Amritsar

who had as a colonel then led the Army team which evacuated the Akali Dal leaders from the complex. He said that on the morning of 6 June when he had gone into the complex, he was told by the Akali leaders, including Balwant Singh Ramoowalia that they had seen people being made to sit along a wall and then shot the previous night. Brig Goraya also narrated another incident of a young officer shooting an arrested person in cold blood. He said he was witness to an injured person being killed by an irate jawan on the evening of 6 June.

A question that has persisted even after 30 years is whether many people were killed with their hands tied behind, which referred to an Associated Press (AP) report on 14 June 1984, which said, “Sikh rebels tied and shot”. The post-mortem reports of some of the people killed with gunshots did mention that their hands were tied behind their back. General Brar categorically denied that any one was shot after being lined up with hands tied. He, however, admitted in his book that some people who had been detained were fired upon when they tried to escape.

An Army Court of Inquiry also confirmed instances of looting of household goods by some jawans from houses around the complex. The Sikh Reference Library, which was repository of about 1,500 rare manuscripts and artefacts, was destroyed after the Operation, which has further infuriated the community (see *The Sikh Forum's* communication to the Government).

The aftermath

As news of Operation Bluestar spread, there was a megaton fall-out. While Darbar Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum, was intact, Akal Takht, seat of Sikh temporal authority, had suffered irreparable damage as its edifice had all but crumbled. Since the Punjab Governor, BD Pande, had expressed himself against the Operation, he resigned soon after. Author-journalist Khushwant Singh and the founder of Pingalwara in Amritsar district, Bhagat Puran Singh, returned their Padma awards.

The Army operation resulted in instant polarisation. The Golden Temple was hitherto the binding force

Heart-rending image of the Akal Takht, badly damaged by tank and artillery fire



amongst the Sikhs and Hindus. After the operation, while the majority of the Hindus saw justification in the military action, the Sikhs saw it as a terrible affront.

But what was perhaps the most disturbing fallout was the effect of the Operation on some of the Army units with Sikh troops. Starting with the 9th battalion of The Sikh Regiment, there were instances of collective insubordination (mutiny) in about one dozen units involving more than 3,000 deserters. The Commandant of the Sikh Regimental Centre in Ramgarh, Brig SC Puri, and his two deputies, Col Jagdev Singh and Col HS Cheema, were attacked. While Brigadier Puri died, his two deputies were injured.

Major General Charanjit Singh Panag, a Sikh Regiment officer, attributes the desertions to command failure: the troops should not have been kept in the dark of the impending actions.

The incidents shattered the very ethos of the Army, at least for some time. The legendary Colonel of the Sikh Regiment, Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh, was shocked and defended the actions of the deserting Sikh troops. He felt that the actions of the Sikh soldiers should be understood in the context of the fact that “he (Sikh soldier), like his comrades of other religious denominations in the Indian Army, is essentially nurtured, on his religious tenants and traditions, which have been approved and supported by the Government of India.” Though many deserters were tried by court martial and dismissed from service, the Ministry of Defence was forced to change its stance towards the majority of the deserters swayed by emotions. The Akali Dal and the SGPC honoured the ‘dharami faujis’, but this issue continues to rankle to this day.

Such was the anger of the Sikh community that the damaged Akal Takht building, which was sought to be repaired through a government sponsored *kar seva* by Nihang chief Santa Singh, was dismantled. The community then raised a new structure through a massive voluntary *kar seva* and this is the Akal Takht of today.

Alternatives

General Brar insists that he did what a soldier was required to do — carry out a legitimate order. In a detailed interview he had said, “I made sure that minimal force was used. I made sure that places of religious importance were safeguarded to the extent possible. I wish he (Bhindranwale) had seen reason and come out of the Golden Temple. There is nothing better that I could have done. I have always regretted that I had to do this. I wish a task of this nature had been avoided.”

However, there are many who feel otherwise. Major General Jagdish Singh Jamwal, who was then commanding the 15th Infantry Division in Amritsar, had stated, “The Operation was not needed. We should not have ordered it. We could have plugged all inlets for water and food going into the complex.”

Lt Gen PC Katoch, who as a major was injured while leading his commandos in the Operation, narrated, “This was an Operation which was rushed through. The Operation was conducted just contrary to what you are taught in the Army about fighting in built-up areas.” He said that the National Security Guards, which carried out *Operation Black Thunder* in 1988, had learnt the right lessons from the 1984 Operation. But General Brar refutes such suggestions, “Plugging all inlets was not feasible. Also, the two operations can’t be compared”.

Some officers feel that storming of Akal Takht should have been attempted from the narrow alleys behind it. Some also advocate a “top down approach”, which was used by the US SEALs while picking out Osama Bin Laden from his hideout in Abbottabad in Pakistan in 2011.

Breaking the homogeneity of command has also come under criticism. Units from various formations were brought together under the command of a Brigadier to carry out the Operation. Most troops that took part were unfamiliar with the layout of the complex.

However, most of these suggestions are made with the benefit of hindsight. The one which was made much before the Operation and is credible is that of Lt Gen SK Sinha, former Western Army Commander and later Governor of Assam and J&K. He had in 1981 prevented the Army from getting involved in the arrest of Bhindranwale from his headquarters in Chowk Mehta.

Following this experience, General Sinha had laid down a procedure for conducting operations in religious places. "Had this procedure been followed even remotely, things would have been very different," he explained to me in an interview. He said that as per his plan, the Army would have involved the local Sikhs to see what the Army was doing. There would have been TV coverage. A temporary gurdwara would have been established outside and Bhindranwale and his people would have been asked to come out and offer prayers. "If still we were forced to go in, all troops taking part in the Operation would have offered prayers at the temporary gurdwara before going in. And when you enter, use minimum force. And if it takes one day or two days, so be it. You should be patient."

Lt Gen SK Sinha was soon superseded and in 1983, General Vaidya became the Army Chief. The rest is history.

Looking for a Closure

Operation Bluestar throws up some uncomfortable questions for the Sikh community too, especially its leaders. While the government can be blamed for using excessive force, including the use of tanks, and carrying out the Operation on an auspicious day, can the community justify

a religious place having weapons of war like rocket launchers, machine guns and grenades? Even after three decades a closure awaits the event. Says Gurpreet Singh of the Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh, "We demand an inquiry under the aegis of the United Nations into the entire gamut of issues relating to the Operation. In its absence, the newer generation of Sikhs, especially abroad, is at a loss to understand the event. The anger instead of diminishing is rising."

Will an apology or regret help? Says Ashok Singh Bagrian, a Sikh scholar, "It sure will. If the British Prime Minister could express regret for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and Canadian PM apologise for the 'Komagata Maru' incident, why can't our own government?" Chaman Lal, a historian, feels that an apology by the government endorsed by all political parties could mitigate the anger. But, he asks, "Will vested political interests allow that to happen?" He also feels that since religion has an overriding influence in our society, it would be difficult to bring about a closure in any real sense. "Perhaps with the passage of time, the event will get relegated to the pages of history," he adds.

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The Akal Takht today

Book Review

1984: Who, What, How and Why

In his book, 1984-Unimagined Catastrophe, activist-writer Ajmer Singh reviews many questions agitating the Sikhs and raises several more for Sikhs and others to answer in his third book of what is transforming into an anthology of contemporary history of the Punjab. His book, in Punjabi, explores the genesis of the Indo-Sikh conflict and offers a deep insight into the Hindu mind and the Sikh response during the turbulent times of the eighties and nineties of the 20th century.



Why did 1984 happen? What is the genesis of the Indo-Sikh conflict? How is the Indian state a protector and promoter of Hindu nationalism? What is the ethnic character of the Indian state? Is the Indian establishment neutral? What is the status of Darbar Sahib, popularly known as Golden Temple in the minds of the average Sikh? What is the theo-political status of Darbar Sahib? Why Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale chose Darbar Sahib Complex as the fighting ground? Or did he chose it? Why are Sikhs today unwilling to accept the martyrdom of martyrs of 1984 with the same spirit as they accept the martyrdom of Baba Deep Singh and his compatriots?

In his new book, *1984-Unchitvaya Kehar*, the political theorist and activist in the persona of Ajmer Singh analyses the entire gamut of Sikh-Hindu relations, pre and post 1984 and offers an insight into the labyrinthine lanes of contemporary political history of the Punjab.

Ajmer Singh has recently donned the mantle of an author, though he did contribute extensively through monographs and newspaper articles in the domain of social equality and human rights. Without mincing words, without being apologetic and without letting the argument go off-tangent, Ajmer Singh offers in this 12 chapter book, in-depth analysis, evidence and exposition of the eternal conflict that confronts the Sikh nation, which despite losing thousands of its children to the pyre of freedom-struggles is still coming to terms with nuances of the struggle and seems undecided about the resolution of the political conflict and the destiny of its peoples.

The 432-page book, well-produced by the Amritsar-based publishers *Singh Brothers*, with an attractive and relevant title is essentially on 1984: past, present and future. Likely to upset many and enrage others, the book does some plain speaking about the role of the Government of India, the Akali leaders and those Sikhs who were entrenched in high positions in the government, but who not only failed to understand the pain of the Sikh people, but in fact colluded and conspired with the perpetrators who were fully prepared, armed and clear about “teaching Sikhs a lesson”. This not in the commonly perceived sense of temporary political retribution for an adverse political act or set of acts, but to browbeat and subjugate them so that they do not raise the “ugly head” of “unique identity, opposition, revolt and rebellion.”



Author of '1984-Unimagined Catastrophe', Ajmer Singh

According to the author, rationale for the book emulates the words of scholar Howard Zinn, who says that, “When you take interest in the past, it ceases to remain the past and becomes the present; therefore to understand the present, go back centuries or into the future, as it is required to uncover the dimensions of the whole problem in perspective.” This is precisely what Ajmer Singh has done. He has traveled deep into history, tracing the unique status of Darbar Sahib and the tradition of martyrdom amongst the Sikhs.

In the early chapters, Ajmer Singh comprehensively dwells on why Darbar Sahib fascinates every Sikh-believer, agnostic, the undecided. He uncovers layer after layer of Sikh history from the medieval times which although a period of repression for the Sikhs, is

fondly recalled as the ‘Golden period’ of Sikh history. He offers example after example as to how Sikhs at the time of Diwali and Baisakhi, unmindful of death that stalked them at every step, reached the sacred holy tank surrounding the sanctum sanctorum of Darbar Sahib, rejuvenating their commitment to Sikhism and if required to attain martyrdom to defend their faith.

In his characteristic pithy, visionary, logical and direct approach, Ajmer Singh has raised the bar of political debate on what is commonly construed as *the Punjab problem*, enabling readers and activists to be critically aware rather than to take things for granted. Whether dealing with the character of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale or the role of BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the author does not resort to compartmentalising his thoughts in any particular mould and idiom. His stance throughout the book remain uncompromising.

Apart from some English historians, not many have had the courage to mention that it was only the Sikhs who did not relent anytime in history when their holiest of holies—Darbar Sahib—was attacked. Ajmer Singh categorically mentions in the book that it is the unique theo-political status of Darbar Sahib, which non-Sikh minds have failed to comprehensively comprehend, lies at the root of the problem. He further goes on to say that perhaps others cannot decipher the problem, and that “you have to be born Sikh to understand the Sikh psyche in so far as it relates to Darbar Sahib.” It is failure to understand this and its entire ramifications which led Mrs. Indira Gandhi to storm the Golden Temple with the might of the Indian Army, says the author.

Another question which has baffled the ‘Hindu’ mind and the Western scholar alike is the Sikh tradition of martyrdom. To simplify, Ajmer Singh says that “a Sikh is not necessarily always ready to die under all circumstances and at the call of anyone and everyone.” However, when any issue, problem or incident or event relates with the Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib, Gurbani, history of the Gurus, then there is no compromise for the Sikh. In view of his unique relationship with the Guru, a Sikh is ready to sacrifice self and family at the altar of faith. This explains the swelling of numbers

when Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale exhorted the Sikh youth to uphold the banner of religion without fear. This is why hundreds chose to die with him in the Darbar Sahib complex and thousands continued to be martyred post-*Operation Bluestar*, unmindful of the strength and reach of the Indian state. Anyone trying to seek only a worldly explanation in terms of



unemployment, political strife and pecuniary gains is more than likely to miss the point. The author quotes the civil liberties activist, Harji Malik who said that “the Hindu has not been able to understand what the genesis of this conflict is.”

“Was the code-named *Operation Bluestar* a war of revenge by Indira Gandhi on the basis of anger against Sikhs for their role in the ill-conceived national emergency? In a micro sense it may have been personal but in perspective of the situation, it was sum-total of systemic crisis of the Indian state, the crisis of the

Indian state and the crises of Indira’s legitimacy and political leadership.....it was the perception of the rulers of the time that the attack on Darbar Sahib is part of the mission to create a monolithic Indian state.”

After the savage (for Punjab) partition of 1947, the target was the building of a single Indian nation, where on the face of it, there was diversity but in actuality, a continuing trend of assimilation. The activities of the political party Shiromani Akali Dal and the religious propagation of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale resulting in revivalism of the Khalsa spirit was construed as a threat to the above stated mission and the events of 1984 were launched precisely to remove this challenge.

Enumerating event after event of the period which has been described as “loaded with history”, Ajmer Singh says that all spheres of Indian society—the media, all political parties without exception, the man on the street, the people in the hinterlands of India and all components of the state...judiciary, armed forces, bureaucracy rallied behind the Indian state with full force and in unison. To continue to get support of all sections, the bogey of “a foreign hand” was ruthlessly used. This aspect has been extensively dealt in the book with examples, facts and citations.

How did the judiciary collude? There are many examples, but let us take just one of them. Salwa Judum, vigilantes of the Chattisgarh government has been declared illegal by the respective High Court, but in case of the Punjab, even though then police chief KPS Gill had openly declared that they had vigilante groups to act extrajudicially, the judiciary was a mute spectator.....silently allowing things to happen and even delivering a suspended sentence to the police chief who had been convicted of moral turpitude.

The author also questions competency of the Akali leadership and the sincerity of the Sikh intelligentsia to parry onslaught of the state. While the nincompoop attitude of Akali leadership has been stressed in great detail, the author is particularly disturbed by the silence, lack of interest and abject failure of the so-called Sikh intelligentsia and intellectuals to comprehend the dimensions of the problem and



offer solace and solutions. He attributes the lack of clarity, confusion and negativity of the Sikh response to this lacuna and rues the fact that such apathy still continues.

Unforgiving, the author who throughout his years of political activism was able to understand the nature of this section of Punjab society from close quarter, provides a thorough analysis of why the Sikh intelligentsia failed, what were their priorities and how they continued to be swayed with the wind of Indian nationalism, overriding peoples' basic and fundamental rights and distinct religious identity. So, according to the author, it was understandable that under such circumstances, the Sikh response was spontaneous, emotional, purely confrontationalist and at times, directionless.

The catastrophic times continued for the Sikhs till the 1990s and beyond. Ajmer Singh says that the genocide of November 1984 was just the culmination of events started in June 1984; it was part of a continuum. He writes in the book, "This has been studied in relationship to the holocaust of the Jews ...this incident was not an aberration....it is the tendency of the Hindu to dwarf, undermine and dilute the distinct identity of the Sikhs, so when you assert that, he reacts." Vis-à-vis the Sikhs, if the goal is assimilation, he reacts violently....it started from the rejection of *janeu* by Guru Nanak at the age of 9....the Hindu's objective is assimilation, so we need to understand the Hindu

mind set....his strategies.... we have to neutralise his methods of persuasion, pressure and persecution.

The pogrom of November 1984 should be viewed in this perspective...it was not an aberration, but a premeditated plan, executed with cool calculation, with full support and coordination of many sections of Hindu society.

The book also deals with how the country's December 1984 elections were unprecedented how the entire electoral campaign was focused on the Sikhs, even in areas where Sikhs were in insignificant numbers and how the verdict was an endorsement of the pogrom against the Sikhs in Delhi and eighty other places which had taken place barely four weeks before.

The book concludes with the Hola Mohalla in March 1985 at Anandpur Sahib where a sea of humanity from all parts of Punjab descended in an unprecedented manner to raise the banner of defiance against the Indian state. *Kesri* turbans and *dupattas* were overwhelming in the White City of Anandpur Sahib, showing the true spirit of the Khalsa in fighting back such onslaught.

The author has acclaimed the role played by Ragis and Dhadis of the Sikhs, who in this period of acute and extreme crisis and fear, virtually took to the streets and bolstered the morale of the community through references to Gurbani and Sikh history. Their contribution, according to the author has not been adequately acknowledged.

Summing up all aspects of the catastrophe that struck the Sikhs, Ajmer Singh writes that "whatever happened was unbelievable, unimaginable, unforgettable and unforgivable."

Jagmohan Singh
(From *World Sikh News*)

**First Person account by Chief Secretary of the Punjab in 1984,
KD Vasudeva recalls**

Operation Bluestar



On return from a visit to the capital, where perhaps he had been summoned by the Prime Minister, Punjab Governor Mr BD Pande called me and the Home Secretary (Mr AS Pooni) to the Punjab Raj Bhavan at Chandigarh on 2 June 1984 at 6 pm. He told us that it had been decided to call in the Army to flush out the terrorists ensconced in the Golden Temple at Amritsar and that the GOC-in-C Western Command, Lt Gen K Sundarji, would be arriving at 6.30 pm to meet him in this connection. He asked us to keep ready the usual letter for 'Army aid to civil power', to be handed over to the General. Mr Pooni

had most reluctantly to put his seal on that fateful decision in compliance with the direction.

This was the culmination of a process I had been witness to since 9 June 1982 when I had taken over as the Chief Secretary to Government of Punjab during the Chief Ministership of Sardar Darbara Singh. He tendered his resignation and demitted office on 6 October 1983 in wake of the first incident of selective killings of bus passengers (Hindus) in the State. Besides, there had been sundry other incidents calculated to terrorise the civil populace including



Chief Minister S. Darbara Singh with aides in Chandigarh

bomb explosions, attacks on policemen, random shooting of bystanders in market places and so on. Earlier on there had been mischievous attempts to incite communal passions by throwing meat/cigarettes in or around temples and gurdwaras, respectively. After the 1978 clash between Nirankaris and a group of orthodox Sikhs, led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, in which three Nirankaris and twelve Sikhs had been killed, the Nirankari Baba (Gurbachan Singh) had been killed on 24 April 1980 at Delhi. Thereafter, Lala Jagat Narain of the *Hind Samachar* group of newspapers was murdered on 9 September 1981 for his bold and fearless editorials which were severely condemnatory of terrorists.

Analyses galore have appeared over the years, those on the political background and events leading upto the Operation Bluestar. Suffice to say that compulsions of out-of-power Akalis to launch a ‘marcha’ against the Government had received a boost, virtually a New Year gift, when peremptorily on 31 December 1981, the Prime Minister had announced a decision on the distribution of Ravi and Beas river waters between the three states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. This was perceived as discriminatory against and detrimental to the interests of the Punjab. Inevitably followed the ‘Nehar Roko Morcha’ from the border village of Kapuri in Sangrur district in April 1982. This, for tactical reasons, the Akalis later shifted to

Amritsar on 4 August 1982 and expanded it to become ‘dharam yudh’ (crusade) morcha for their demands including that about river waters. It was also supported by Bhindranwale.

Meantime, factional fights of the Congress Party were in their heyday. It was widely known that there was no love lost between Sardar Darbara Singh and Giani Zail Singh, who had since been elevated to the Home Ministership of India (later, President of India at the time of the Operation) in the game of one upmanship between the two. Giani ji clearly had the upper hand and lost no chance to run down S Darbara Singh. On one of my visits to the North Block to meet a colleague in the Home Ministry, a chance encounter with a member of his personal staff, who had earlier served under me, led to the gratuitous setting up of an unsolicited interview with the Home Minister. He graciously asked me to get in touch with him directly in future on the phone or otherwise, since the Punjab situation, in his view, resembled the helter-skelter strewing of unstuck pages of a book (*‘Kitab da varka varka khillarya hoye hai’*). Naturally I had post haste to get back to Chandigarh to prevent any suspicion of my politicking with the Chief Minister’s arch-enemy !

After the resignation of S Darbara Singh, President’s Rule was imposed by the Centre and Governor BD Pande took over on 10 October 1983



"Deceptive calm": The Punjab Raj Bhawan at Chandigarh

on transfer from West Bengal. I remember having mentioned to him then that a major problem of ours was the lack of rapport with the Centre at both the political and the administrative levels. A number of Advisers were appointed by the Government of India to assist Mr Pande in the discharge of his duties, all able and experienced officers. Mr Pande himself having been Cabinet Secretary in the Government of India, perhaps did not need much administrative support. He was renowned for his efficiency, integrity and political neutrality. The Advisers generally came with the mindset that the Punjab Administration was in shambles and that they had to set it right. This may have been the result of their induction briefing at the Centre. Leaving aside the terrorist problem and the law & order front, the proud Punjab Administration found it rather hard to digest this approach. It was the conviction that the problem was political, in

fact a creation of the Congress Party itself then ruling both at the Centre and in the State. What appeared to be the foremost requirement was political will to put the "terrorist genie back in the bottle." Tinkering by the Central bureaucrats at the administrative levels could hardly be an effective remedy for their masters' political dissimulation!



Entrance to Hall Bazaar in Amritsar



- CRPF jawans outside the Golden Temple

The 'Advisers' were mostly retired or serving IAS/IPS officers. All of them obviously enjoyed a high degree of credibility and clout at the Centre. Pooni and I had at times found answers to our posers at official level meetings at Delhi rather difficult to decipher. The case was now expected to be different with the Adviser(s) dealing with law & order. May be he/they had political insights and inputs which were valuable in the current scenario? One has a vague feeling, to this day, that tendering of informal advice to the Central authorities, behind the back of the Governor, was not even beyond them. That *Operation Bluestar* may have also had its incubation in such informal soundings may be an unfair surmise—but it persists.

While discussing the issue of posting an IAS officer as Deputy Commissioner at Amritsar, the Adviser (Home) had suggested to me that compliance with orders without asking questions should become the hallmark of the prospective incumbent even in a situation where, for example, the Golden Temple had to be entered into. I had then expressed the view that, leaving aside the abstract desideratum, the specific contingency would be not just a physical entry, but a step into the dark ages of history. This view was based on the consideration that such an act would be construed as a horrible desecration of the holiest of

holies amongst shrines of the Sikh faith by not only the devout but also the non-practising Sikhs. The trauma of such a man-inflicted wound upon the Sikh psyche could unleash a reaction of violent retribution.

Another Adviser deputed by the Governor to sort out a tricky terrorist-related situation in a Malwa town had reported a happy outcome in the evening, whereupon His Excellency the Governor held an impromptu dinner at Raj Bhavan to celebrate the achievement. Later on, the Adviser's report was found to have been "economical with the truth." Incidentally, during the currency of the Operation, perhaps

on its very first evening, it fell to this writer's lot to convey to the same Adviser the Governor's order "to leave Chandigarh at once" on demitting office; upon his demurring, to re-convey His Excellency's insistence upon its immediate compliance.

By-passing the seniormost Police officers within the state, heads of the Punjab Police to tackle the situation were chosen, one after the other, by the Centre and deputed to the Punjab, with high expectations and mixed consequences. The Police force, or officers, could not be blamed in the absence of clear and visible



Troops inside the Golden Temple

political directive and any unity of command. In a situation of 'war by other means' replete with a highly motivated band of misguided desperadoes and commanding allegiance within some sections of the force itself, as with the general populace, grave personal risks can be undertaken by members of the force only when discipline, dedication and professionalism permeate the ethos of the police force from the top downwards, Politicking can neither inspire nor deliver.

When DIG Jalandhar Range AS Atwal, was gunned down by terrorists from inside the Golden Temple on 23 April 1983, it was debated whether or not the Police should enter the Temple 'in hot pursuit' of the culprits and nab them. Examples were available from pre-partition Punjab of the Police having entered places of worship on occasions of grave violation of the law or in hot pursuit of criminals. Perhaps in post-partition Punjab too, the police under Mr Ashwini Kumar had once entered the Temple in hot pursuit. In normal circumstances, such a decision is taken on the spot at the local level itself, because of the time factor involved and the general policy being well known and understood, and is upheld by the higher ups. Here, before the Punjab Government could make up its mind, telephonic instructions were received from New Delhi, first through the Cabinet Secretary, to wait for further instructions; and later, to abandon any idea of entry. In any case, the consensus that had emerged at Chandigarh was against such a course of action. The police did not even consider itself adequately equipped for the momentous task. In other crises or events too, Central guidance or direction was freely and spontaneously forthcoming. The ultimate act in the drama of course, was ordering of the Operation itself.

In regard to the role of the Army in *Operation Bluestar*, competent professionals and others have written about this at length. However I would like to make two points. One is that, so far as I know no briefing was sought from the Intelligence Wing of the State Police on eve of the Operation. The IG (CID) HS Randhawa did have a fair amount of information about the extent of arms, armament and fortifications inside the Golden Temple which the terrorists had smuggled into, hoarded or built up inside the Temple. In fact this information used to be updated and

submitted to higher authorities from time to time. Earlier on, officers from the Western Command and P&HP area [Generals Dayal and Gaur] used to have periodic interaction with us about the situation in general. In the normal course, specific briefing about the Temple precincts would have taken place on the eve of such an Operation. Perhaps it was the suddenness of the decision about the Operation that prevented this. Uncharitable critics may fault the Army's too ready compliance with the Central directive as the cause of flawed preparation and perhaps find a repeat in later history (IPKF in Sri Lanka which contrasted with thorough homework leading to success in liberating Bangladesh in 1971). An efficient and professional Army perhaps tends to under-rate the dare-devil motivation of committed daredevilry in this instance led by a military genius, earlier a professional soldier who had been cashiered (General Shabeg Singh).

The second aspect recalled is that means of communication were totally cut off with the civil authorities, thus disabling the District Administration and even the State headquarters from bringing anything to notice of the field force for rectification or redress. For instance, D-day of the Operation was one of the sacred days in the lunar calendar on which a large number of Sikh devotees from the countryside had thronged the Temple. This fact was either not known nor fully appreciated by the Army in the conduct of the Operation. This led to a large number of innocents being unnecessarily, rounded up and quite a few incarcerated for long periods in the Jodhpur jail for interrogation.

Operation Bluestar lasted from 2nd to 6th June 1984. On the 8th or 9th of June, I was deputed by the Governor to visit Amritsar for a first-hand report. While about to return from there in the evening, a message was received that the President of India, Giani Zail Singh, was scheduled to reach in a little while to visit the Golden Temple to see the situation for himself. Soon enough the Governor Mr BD Pande landed at the airport, to receive the President, who followed quickly after. While getting down from his aircraft, the Giani accosted Mr Pande thus "*Pande Sahib kya ho raha hai? Kya aap soay huay they?*" ["Mr Pande, what is this that is happening? Were you asleep?"]



President of India Zail Singh visiting the Golden Temple just days after Operation Bluestar

One of the most ironical moments in history, Mr Pande, the perfect gentleman, however kept quiet. Giani ji was widely believed to have been the patron saint of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who had later acquired a halo and an independent persona inspiring a multitude of young militants whose activities had led to the Operation. And now Gianiji was arraigning the Governor, Mr BD Pande, the innocent victim, who had reluctantly to carry out the Union Government's orders!

As the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, the President was presumed to have authorised the Army's Operation Bluestar. But it was he himself who was now indirectly questioning the need for it. If he was kept in the dark by the Prime Minister (since disillusioned about his role in the entire series of events) that was matter between him and her. So far as the Governor was concerned, he had made honest attempts at the political and other levels to avert the catastrophe. It was believed that the Government of India's draft White Paper on the Operation had originally passed on the blame to the Punjab Government for the entire saga but when Mr Pande protested against being made the scapegoat, this was amended.

Many would surely like to question as to whether the Punjab Government/ Administration was entirely blameless in the chain of events in the build-up to the Operation. My answer is: no, it was not. As the Chief Minister of Punjab during the early seventies (1971-77) Giani Zail Singh had been adept at doing one better than the Akalis by initiating, one after the other, symbolic moves to capture the imagination of the Sikh masses, for instance *Guru Gobind Singh Marg*, *Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar*, and others. Such political acumen was not in evidence in the staunch secularist successor of his from the very same Congress Party who was Chief Minister S Darbara Singh.

On the administrative front, the failure to check smuggling of arms etc. into the Golden Temple in 'Kar Sewa' trucks was inexcusable. This was made possible through casualness, complacency and, worse, complicity all combined. Undeniably, there was a mixture of fear, sympathy and admiration evoked by Sant Bhindranwale in sections of the Administration at different levels (officers included), besides the Sikh populace in general. To discover leaks of official level meetings, attended by district heads and above, to the other side in the Temple was not uncommon. Whatever was said at a meeting became known in the Temple by the evening or the next day. The residence telephone



Indira Gandhi at the Golden Temple, post-Bluestar

of the Chief Secretary going dead immediately after important calls from New Delhi, when instructions had to be passed on downwards, was not an infrequent occurrence. Lack of harmonious relationship between the Punjab Police and the Para-military forces (CRPF) in enforcement matters was also a feature of the ground situation at Amritsar. All these were portents of the gathering storm which some may say made the Operation inescapable.

To express their deep hurt at the armed forces' entry into the holiest shrine of the community, four senior Sikh IAS officers of the State then resigned. This mark of protest against Government action naturally annoyed the Governor as an act of indiscipline and he asked me to issue orders for their suspension. However, on my assuring the four colleagues that their anguish was shared by the Governor himself and that he too would like to join the 'kar sewa' as and when instituted, they agreed to withdraw their applications and Mr Pande was gracious enough to revoke his earlier direction.

Soon after the Operation, Mr Pande resigned from the Governorship, I had already applied for long leave.

That, Mr Pande said, would be decided by his successor. The flamboyant Mr KT Satorewala succeeded him. His style of functioning was rather mysterious and he liked to keep people in suspense. He was obviously prejudiced against and distrustful of the Punjab Administration. This lack of confidence became reciprocal in a few days. Ultimately, from the middle of August, 1984 my request for leave was granted by that time the Centre had convinced itself that the State needed a Sikh officer as the Chief Secretary. The Punjab bureaucracy had never thought in such communal terms. So now a Sikh IAS Officer from Bihar State was imported to fill the bill. Mr PH Vaishnav from the Punjab Cadre was offered a to-be-created post of Additional Chief Secretary but he declined the sop as "unnecessary." After a few months of the experiment to keep him out, he was made full-fledged Chief Secretary.

That *Operation Bluestar* had not cured the problem was realised soon enough. The Prime Minister had to pay for it with her life on 31 October 1984 followed the brutal and barbaric massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere. The militants' insurgency got a fillip and their terrorist activities in the State increased. Learning from the inadequacies/mistakes of Operation

Bluestar, Operation 'Blackthunder' was conducted, this time, in the full gaze of TV cameras, with the desecration of the Temple by the holed-up miscreants exposed and the scrupulous behavior of the Police highlighted. Mr KPS Gill had been in position as DGP for some time by now. In the regime of the late Sardar Beant Singh, who followed Sardar Surjit Singh Barnala as Chief Minister, Mr Gill was to receive full political backing and was given a free hand to curb militancy.

The misdeeds of militants in the countryside imposing themselves on country folk in midnight knocks and misbehaviour with womenfolk, besides extortion of money, had by now alienated much of the general populace and evaporated whatever little sympathy of indulgence they had earlier enjoyed. Ruthless and unorthodox initiatives under Mr Gill's leadership led the Punjab Police to complete domination of the trouble makers and/or their elimination in the process, human rights activists at times had reason to complain or protest. But fighting the enemy from within is always more difficult than face to face them in battle formation. However, the line has to be drawn at the springs of motivation i.e. whether one was prompted by public interest or to settle personal/private scores. While bonafide mistakes



The Golden Temple Complex under bombardment, June 1984

have to be condoned, the malafide wrong doers should receive condign punishment. Only then can the human rights of the ordinary citizens be protected from depredations of marauding militants as also the arbitrary actions of "armed goons in uniform."

Operation Bluestar was a case of Mark Tully calls "too much too late." Political one upmanship had created the crisis, that is sponsorship protection and encouragement of Bhindranwale by the Giani, while frustrating Darbara Singh's efforts to control the situation. Central bureaucratic penchant for covering up political dissimulation with administrative tinkering and parachuting rootless favorites into mined territory, compounded the mess. Hasty conception of and over-confident approach to the Operation made its own contribution to the tragic dimensions. The fatal flaws in the character of different wings of the polity led to the inexorable outcome of this national tragedy.



'Millitants' surrender during Operation 'Blackthunder'

Now that peace has descended upon the strife-torn Land of the Five Rivers after a decade of turmoil, it will hopefully never have to witness again those dark deeds of the eighties.

Hamid Hussain, a well-known historian, writes on Operation Bluestar and

The Dramatis Personae



Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale with visitors at the Golden Temple complex



Giani Zail Singh and Indira Gandhi at New Delhi

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, President Giani Zail Singh and Union Home Minister Buta Singh, Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh, Akali Dal leaders Harchand Singh Longowal and Parkash Singh Badal, Gurcharan Singh Tohra head of *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC) and head of the Damdami Taksal Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale were the key Dramatis Personae in this tragic situation, whose climax was conducted in the holy precincts of the Golden Temple at Amritsar in June 1984.



Sant Harcharan Singh Lonogwal (centre) with Farukh Abdullah of Kashmir and others

Former Chief Minister of Punjab Zail Singh and Congress leader Sanjay Gandhi had supported Bhindrawale in their attempts to weaken the Akali Dal and when Bhindrawale was arrested on charges of inciting assault against the Nirankaris, Zail Singh, then Union Home Minister arranged for his release without due judicial process. Bhindrawale thus emerged as a hero who had won this showdown



Sanjay and Maneka Gandhi

with the Government and his views hardened even as his popularity increased. Zail Singh had allegedly thwarted Chief Minister Darbara Singh's efforts to curtail militant activities. Sant Longowal became fearful for his life especially after Bhindrawale moved to the Golden Temple complex hostel which also housed offices of Akali Dal and SGPC, who then used another splinter militant group *Babbar Khalsa* to push Bhindrawale's followers from the hostel to the into Akal Takht. When the law and order situation deteriorated in Punjab, the state's Chief Minister was sacked and President's Rule imposed in the Punjab.

Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale

According to various sources, some three to four hundred supporters of Jarnail Singh were the core group of militants, most of them radical. A small number of Sikhs belonging to *Babbar Khalsa*, the All India Sikh Student Federation (AISSF) led by Amrik Singh and the Dashmesh Regiment were also present, while about a dozen close confidants of Jarnail Singh were assigned different tasks. Rachpal Singh was Bhindrawale's secretary and Dalbir Singh, who was political advisor. An inner security ring of about half dozen hard line militants guarded Bhindrawale and Gurmukh Singh was in charge of weaponry. Four deserters from the Punjab police Kabul Singh, Gurnam Singh, Sewa Singh and Amarjit Singh later joined Bhindrawale at the Golden Temple complex.

During late 1982, more than 5000 ex-servicemen had gathered in Amritsar for a convention, with more than one hundred and seventy above the rank of Colonel including retired Major Generals Shabeg Singh and Jaswant Singh Bhullar. The majority of ex-servicemen were advocates of non-violent means to achieve the long-stated demands of the State, but some including Generals Shabeg Singh and Bhullar had were allegedly influenced by Bhindrawale. General Bhullar actually left India just before the operation



Major General Shabeg Singh being presented his portrait by a Bangladeshi artist

but General Shabeg Singh remained in the Golden Temple complex at the time of *Operation Bluestar* and was responsible for the fortifications and placement of automatic weapons and snipers at strategic positions in the Complex.

The State's Civilian Administration

In early 1980s, the central government responded to deteriorating situation in the Punjab by changing bureaucrats in the provincial administrative machinery. In fact, from 1981 to 1984 there were six governors: Jaisukh Lal Hathi (September 1977–August 1981), Aminuddin Ahmad Khan (August 1981–April 1982), Marri Chenna Reddy (April 1981–February 1983), Anant Prasad Sharma (February 1983–October 1983), Bhairab Dutt Pande (October 1983 – June 1984) and K T Satarawala (June 1984–March 1985).

During the same time period the top police position of Director General of Punjab Police was shuffled four times, in turn being Birbal Nath, CK Sahni, Pritam Singh Bhinder and KS Dhillon. In the four year period, the post of Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) of Amritsar post was shuffled six times: AS Atwal (September 1981–April 1982), Surjit Singh Baines (April 1982–July 1983), Sarabjit Singh (July 1983–October 1983), Ajay Pal Singh Mann (October 1983–March 1984), Sube Singh (March 1984–June 1984) and Bua Singh (June 1984–August 1985).

Former Cabinet Secretary and West Bengal Governor Bhairab Dutt Pande was transferred to the Punjab and became head of the government as the province went under President's rule. New Delhi appointed four advisors to the governor including Shivandar Singh Sidhu, Harbans Singh, P G Gavi and Gajjala Jagathpathi. However, all four advisors either quit or were recalled as they advocated a political settlement rather than the use of force. Later, Chief of Staff (COS) of Western Command, Lieutenant General Ranjit Singh Dayal was appointed as Security Advisor and Surendranath of Indian Police Service (IPS) as advisor of law and order to the governor.

Provincial bureaucracy of Punjab was headed by the Chief Secretary KD Vasudeva, Amrik Singh Pooni was Home Secretary, Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Amritsar was Gurdev Singh and city magistrate was S S Dhillon. The Army was suspicious that Gurdev Singh had sympathies with the militants and therefore was replaced on 3 June 1984 with Ramesh Indar Singh. Ramesh was a Bengal cadre officer then serving as director of rural development in Punjab and this was his first district appointment (later he was transferred to Punjab cadre and served as Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister and Chief Secretary). Director General Police (DGP) of Punjab was Pritam Singh Bhinder and Inspector General (IG) of Criminal Investigation Department (CID) was Harjit Singh Randhawa. Police officers of Amritsar district included Superintendent Police (SP) Sital Das, Deputy Superintendent Police (DSP) city Opar Singh Bajwa, SP CID Harjeet Singh, DSP CID Sudarshan Singh and MPS Aulakh was Assistant Director Intelligence Bureau (IB). Director General (DG) Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) was Ram Swarup Sharma, Inspector General (IG) Border Security Force (BSF) was B K Tirpathi, Director General (DG) BSF was Birbal Nath and DIG BSF in Amritsar was G S Pandher (he was sent on leave on 5 June because of his strong objections to the operation and was replaced by Chaturvedi). By early 1984, civilian administration was completely ineffective owing to political inertia, interference and virtual collapse of police morale.

In New Delhi, a group of serving and retired senior intelligence officers of the Research & Analysis

Wing (RAW) was advising Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This group included chief security advisor Rameshwar Nath Kao (first Chief of RAW), NF Santook (former head of RAW) and Girish Chandar Saxena (then head of RAW). Political leadership provided legal cover to the security forces bypassing several acts. These included the National Security Act 1980, Punjab Chandigarh Disturbed Area Act 1983, Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Power Ordinance in October 1983, Terrorist Activities and Disturbed Areas (TADA) Act 1984 and Terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act 1984. No Sikh political leadership could acquiesce with the Centre's plan therefore Punjab was put under direct central rule in October 1983.

The Army Action

Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) was General A S Vaidya and he assigned the operation to GOC-in-Chief Western Command Lieutenant General K Sundarji. Western Command, whose Chief of Staff was Lieutenant General Ranjit Singh Dayal moved from its headquarters at Simla to an advanced headquarters at Chandimandar, for planning and conducting the operation. Western Command had three Corps: II with headquarters at Ambala, IX at Yol and XI with headquarters at Jallandhar. XI Corps commanded by Lieutenant General Gauri Shankar consisted of 7th Infantry Division based in Ferozepore, 9th Infantry Division based in Meerut and 15th Infantry Division based in Amritsar were assigned the task of border defence and internal security of Punjab. Meanwhile, three more Infantry Divisions, including the 4th, 14th and 23rd were inducted into the Punjab for the operation, in fact, a larger force concentrated than that during the 1971 war with Pakistan.

There were three components of the military operation: the main operation was to clear the Golden Temple complex and it was supported by two other operations. One was focused on clearing other gurdwaras in the state where militants had taken refuge. Operation *Wood Rose* was aimed at sealing of Indian border with Pakistan to prevent escape of militants across the border and prevent any assistance to militants from the Pakistan side. However, neither political leadership had prepared the army nor army



Left to right: Major General KS Brar, Lt General K Sundarji and General AS Vaidya at the Golden Temple after the Operation

leadership its own troops to reorient for internal security tasks. In April 1984, XI Corps went ahead with its normal Corps exercise and troops were in training area when the exercise was shortened and on 27 May, troops were ordered back to their permanent locations.

9th Infantry Division commanded by Major General Kuldip Singh Brar was given the task of clearing the Golden Temple and he was informed about the operation only few days before the planned date. Brar's Deputy GOC was Brigadier N K 'Nikki' Talwar and Colonel Administration was Colonel E W Fernandez. Jallandhar-based 350 Infantry Brigade consisting of 9 Kumaon, 10 Guards, 12 Bihar and 26 Madras and commanded by Brigadier DV Rao was assigned the task of clearing the temple complex, supported by Special Forces from 1 Parachute Regiment and the Special Frontier Force (SFF). 15th Infantry Division commanded by Major General Jagdish Singh Jamwal was in the support role in Amritsar and along with other troops sealed the border with Pakistan during Operation *Wood Rose*. Deputy GOC of 15th Infantry Division was Brigadier 'Chikky' Diwan, GSO Intelligence was Lieutenant Colonel Adarsh K Sharma and Colonel Administration was Colonel Onkar Singh Goraya.

Troops involved in the main operation belonged to 1 Parachute Regiment (Special Forces) commanded by Lt Colonel KC Padha, 10 Guards commanded by Lt Colonel Israr Rahim Khan, 12 Bihar commanded by Lt Colonel K.S. Randhawa, 26 Madras commanded by Lt

Colonel Panniker, 9 Kumaon commanded by Lt Colonel K. Bhaumik, 15 Kumaon commanded by Lt Colonel NC Pant, 9 Garhwal Rifles and 10 Dogra,. All infantry battalions belonged to 9 Division with the exception of 9 Garhwal Rifles from 15 Division. Artillery was commanded by Colonel E W Fernandez, Armoured Personal Carriers (APCs) and BMPs of 8 Mechanised Infantry and tanks of 16 Cavalry were used in the operation. Paramilitary troops of the Border Security Force (BSF), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Special Frontier Force (SFF) also participated in the operation. SFF was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Chowdhury and controlled by the Cabinet Secretariat. 15 Kumaon and two companies of 9 Garhwal Rifles under the command of Deputy GOC of 15 Division Brigadier AK 'Chikky' Dewan were in reserve.

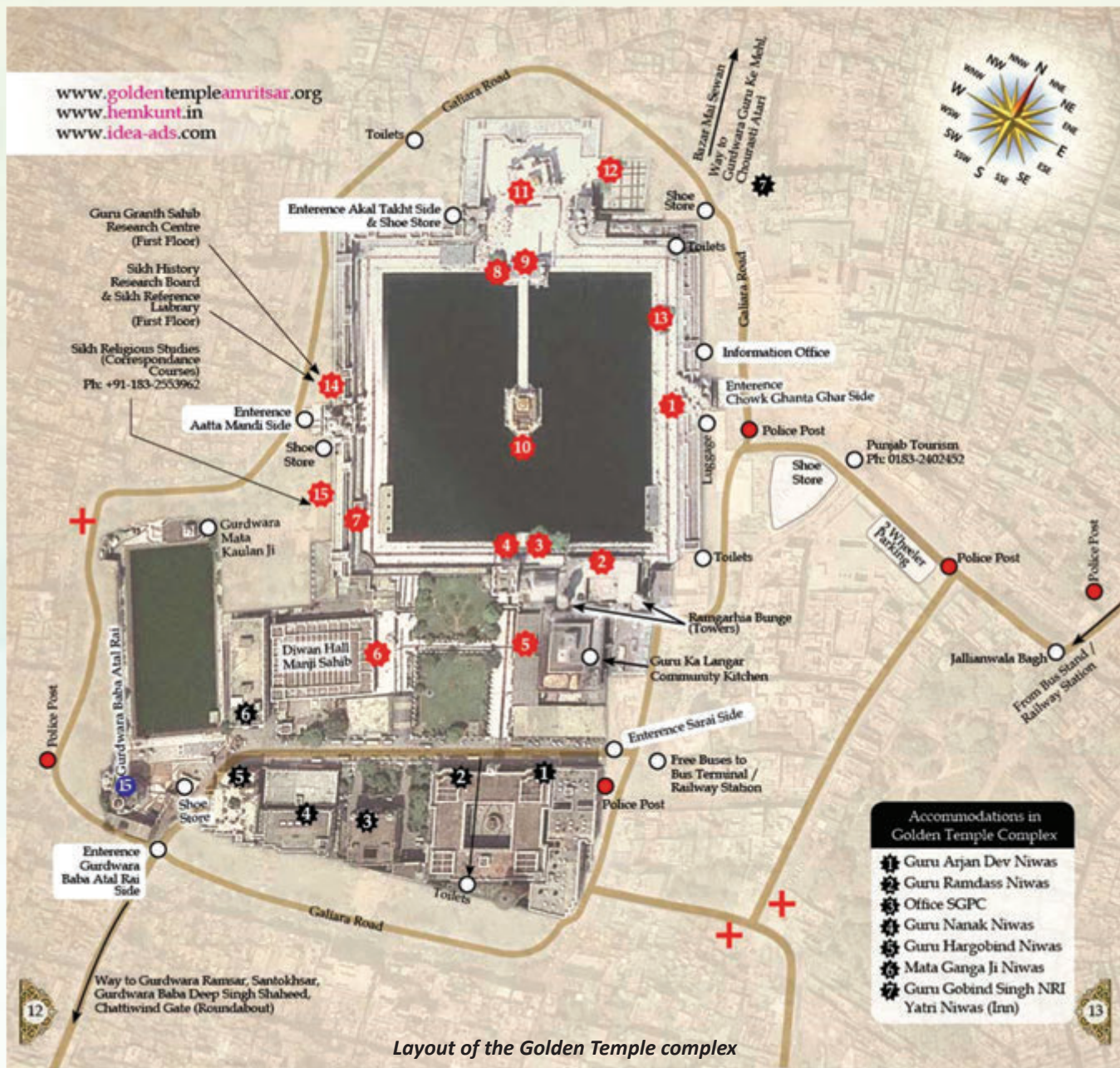
Lt General K Sundarji established his tactical headquarters at Chandimandir and 9 Division tactical headquarters was on the rooftop of a building near the Golden Temple. Later, Sunderji himself moved to the Division tactical headquarters. 350 Brigade headquarters was established at Kotwali and later moved to Brahm Buta Akhara after it was cleared of militants.

The military operation consisted of three phases: Phase I was to clear militants from buildings surrounding the complex and this phase actually started on 3 June. Phase II (code named SHOPS) was to eliminate or capture militants from the complex. This phase also included plans to quickly extinguish fires and repair any structural damage to the holy site. This is supported by the fact that three fire assault teams from 60 Engineer battalion were assigned for this task. Phase III (code named FLATS) was for mopping up remaining pockets of resistance all over the Punjab. A separate operation code named METAL was to secure the holiest place of Harmandar Sahib. A group of commandos was to swim through the *sarowar* (sacred pool that surrounds the holiest place) and secure Harmandar Sahib.

12 Bihar commanded by Lt Colonel KS Randhawa and troops of BSF and CRPF were used to seal all entry and exit points to the complex and provide cover to the assaulting troops. All formations assembled at

their launch positions around 7:30 pm and operation was launched around 10:30 pm (about half an hour late than original time of 10:00 pm). The operation at Golden Temple complex was divided into three phases. Phase I was main assault to neutralise militants, Phase II mopping up and Phase III securing of hostels and complete control of the complex and handing over all prisoners to other units. Different units were launched from different entrances to kill or capture militants. 26 Madras from southern (langar side) entrance to secure southern and eastern wings, 1 Para from eastern Ghanta Ghar entrance to secure Akal Takht (later this objective was taken away from 1 Para and it was tasked to only secure Darshni Deodi and Harmandar Sahib), 10 Guards from eastern Ghanta Ghar entrance to secure Akal Takht and northern wing and SFF from main north-western entrance to secure Akal Takht and western wing.

Akal Takht was heavily fortified and manned by hard core militants associated with Bhindrawale. Major General Shabeg Singh had placed observers and snipers on high towers and placed gun positions at multiple levels in such a way that it created a wide our kill zone. The assault by 10 Guards and 1 Para came to a standstill with heavy casualties. One of the first casualties was a Sikh officer of 10 Guards Captain Jasbir Singh Raina who lost both his legs. The plan of Operation *Metal* by commandos was abandoned as they could not move forward to swim through *sarowar* to secure Harmandar Sahib. Akal Takht was taken out of 1 Para responsibility and they were now assigned the task of securing Darshni Deodi right in front of Akal Takht. Advance of 26 Madras was stalled due to heavy fire from machine guns placed on *lungar* hall and Gurdwara Manji Sahib. Militants belonging to *Babbar Khalsa* and some from AISSF were manning these positions. When troops found themselves in a kill zone due to well-placed militant gun positions and their advance stopped, then tanks and APCs were requisitioned. Initially the main purpose was not to use firepower but the headlights of tanks to blind the militants and use APCs and BMPs to provide cover for troops. Some eight Vijayanta tanks of 16 Cavalry then part of 15 Division were used. Four tanks supported commandos while four supported 26 Madras. Eleven APCs/BMPs of 8 Mechanised Regiment were used, four BMPs supported 10 Guards and commandos and three



Layout of the Golden Temple complex

From: <http://www.goldentempleamritsar.org/images/guide-map-of-golden-temple-amritsar.jpg>

APCs and four BMPs supported 26 Madras. The lamps of tanks did not last long and one APC was hit by a Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) and disabled.

Militants were posted on few high buildings overlooking the entire area especially the water tower and two high towers; Ramgarhia Bungas. Sniper fire from these positions caused significant casualties to security forces. Neutralisation of these commanding positions required use of heavy weapons. In view

of stiff resistance from militants and slow progress, around 11:30 pm, an ad hoc force consisting of the reserve of two companies each of 15 Kumaon and 9 Garhwal Rifles along with elements of 26 Madras was launched from western Atta Mandi Gate. In the meantime, about thirty commandos under the command of Major P C Katoch tried to secure Darshni Deodi in front of Akal Takht but suffered heavy casualties. A second assault by another team of thirty commandos led by commanding officer of 1 Para

was launched which also suffered heavy casualties. Of the sixty five commandos, seventeen were killed immediately and thirty one injured but they were able to secure Darshni Deodi. The SFF team of about fifty also suffered heavily losing seventeen men. A company commander of 15 Kumaon Major B K Misra was killed while B Company retreated after suffering seven killed and twenty three wounded.

By that time, Brar had received authorisation from New Delhi to use tank fire to neutralise militants entrenched in Akal Takht. Brigadier Chikky Diwan asked for one more chance to clear militants before the use of tanks. A small ten man team of 26 Madras led by Lieutenant Jyoti Kumar Dang was divided into two teams. One team was led by Subedar K P Raman Ravi. When this effort also failed with only three members of team surviving, it was then decided to use tank fire. Two tanks fired about twenty shells at Akal Takht that silenced the opposition. The remainder militants trying to escape from Akal Takht were killed and several surrendered. When the firing finally stopped, Bhindrawale and Major General Shabeg Singh too laid dead along with scores of militants but also large numbers of innocent civilians caught in the firefight.

Tank fire had resulted in destruction of invaluable Sikh archives where other treasures were also kept. Colonel Goraya was aware of the importance of securing this Sikh heritage but not sure about troops operating against the militants. There was only one Sikh unit in Amritsar; 2 Sikh Light Infantry (SLI) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel D D Singh. Goraya called the commanding officer and arranged for a ten man guard of 2 SLI under the command of a Naib Subedar to guard the Sikh treasures. Goraya's concern was not unfounded as later it was discovered that some men of 26 Madras were engaged in looting. Later, Major General Jamwal made sure that all items were returned.

Hostel complex around the *langar* hall had hundreds of rooms. 9 Kumaon and two companies of 15 Kumaon were assigned the task of clearing the hostel complex. Major H K Palta, a company commander of 9 Kumaon escorted Akali leaders from Guru Ram Das Sarai to a MES bungalow.

Later, 10 Dogra relieved 9 Kumaon and continued the mopping up operation. In an unfortunate incident 10 Dogra's medical officer Dr. Captain Rampal was snatched by militants while attending to injured soldiers. 10 Dogra tried a rescue mission but Rampal was killed by militants. In phase III of the operation, 19 Maratha Light Infantry (MLI) commanded by Officiating Commanding Officer Major Jagjit Singh (he was later arrested and tried by court martial for hiding weapons) arrested militants at Damdami Taksal without violence. 10 Assam commanded by Lieutenant Colonel S K Sharma arrested militants from a Gurdwara in Talwandi without any bloodshed.

The exact number of casualties is controversial. The Army suffered significant casualties owing to frontal assault and well placed defences of militants in the buildings creating 'kill zones'. Security forces suffered eighty three killed including four officers, four Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and seventy six other ranks. Two hundred and forty eight were wounded including thirteen officers, sixteen JCOs and two hundred and nineteen other ranks. 10 Guards suffered nineteen killed and fifty three wounded, 1 Para had seventeen killed and thirty one wounded, 26 Madras fourteen killed and forty nine wounded and 15 Kumaon seven killed and twenty three wounded. The exact number of Sikhs, both militants and civilians killed in the operation is hotly debated. Indian government claimed that four hundred and ninety two were killed including thirty women and five children and eighty six wounded. Sikhs claim that in fact, thousands were killed.

Militarily, there was poor planning and coordination at several levels. Two main commanders on the spot; Brar and Jamwal were both from the same battalion 1 Mahrata Light Infantry but didn't get along well. Jamwal's Division was based in Amritsar and was familiar with the operational area but he probably saw it as a slight that operation was assigned to 9 Division. 9 Division was chosen as government wanted a Sikh officer (although *Patit*) to lead the operation to avoid the allegation that Hindu soldiers were attacking the holiest place of Sikhs. 9 Division was not familiar with the operational area as there was no time for preparation, briefing or reconnaissance about a very

difficult and unconventional task. A delicate balance was needed where Sikh troops were not used for the fear that they may refuse to attack their holiest place but two Sikh officers; Brar and Dayal were put in the forefront. In defence of Brar, he was not given the option of taking his time for planning and reconnaissance before launching the operation.

With the benefit of hindsight, there is much criticism of the manner in which the military operations were conducted. These include timing of the operation; its conduct; the employment of heavy tanks and failure to anticipate the reaction of Sikh serving soldiers.

5 June was the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev when very large numbers of devotees were inside the temple. As Sikh leadership had called for non-payment of taxes from 5 June and some also felt that Bhindrawale would announce establishment of Khalistan on that day, the Army was directed to finish the operation quickly as it was feared that thousands of angry Sikhs from villages around would descend on Amritsar on hearing the news of attack on Golden Temple. Many suggested that the army should have cut off water and electric supply of the Golden Temple and forced militants to surrender. Thousands of devotees visit Golden Temple and such action was bound to cause major reaction. Few months earlier in Moga, police laid siege to a cluster of gurdwaras and cut off water and electric supply when they were fired upon from these gurdwaras. Sikh leaders had threatened to send 'martyr squads' to free these gurdwaras. One can easily imagine the kind of reaction from a prolonged siege of the Golden Temple. Some Sikh officers suggested that if army commanders had been briefed about the operation, they could have shared this information with Sikh soldiers to allay their concerns.

Fall out for the Army

Operation Bluestar enraged the entire Sikh community and discontent quickly spread to the Army as well. 9th Battalion of the Sikh Regiment stationed at Ganganagar; in Rajasthan were restive and on the night of 7 June 1984, broke into the armoury and fired in the air near officers' residential quarters forcing the officers to hunker down. Over 400 soldiers then commandeered the battalion's vehicles including CO Lieutenant

Colonel IS Sabarwal's jeep and headed towards the Punjab. Soldiers forced through an armed constabulary check post on the Rajasthan-Punjab border killing a constable. 11 Rajputana Rifles and 94 Field Regiment were given the task of intercepting these rebellious soldiers and were able to arrest some and later near Govindgarh a clash resulted in many casualties. Over 200 made it to Moga where they were surrounded in a gurdwara. A force consisting of 3 Garhwal Rifles, 15 Garhwal Rifles, 12 Grenadiers, APCs of 9 Mechanised Regiment and few tanks of 20 Lancers under the command of Brigadier AS Bains surrounded the Gurdwara. After tense negotiations soldiers surrendered without further violence. The battalion was disbanded on 1 April 1985 and has not been re-raised.

On 10 June, around 1500 Sikh recruits of the Sikh Regimental Centre at Ramgarh in Bihar mutinied. Although the Subedar Major rushed to Commandant Brigadier SC Puri's home to inform him, he along with Deputy Commandant Colonel Jagdesh Singh and battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel HS Cheema were fired upon and Brigadier Puri died from his wounds. Cheema was not severely wounded and he returned to the centre and tried to rally the soldiers. Mutinous soldiers and recruits commandeered civilian vehicles and headed towards Amritsar. Near Varanasi, they divided into two groups for their onward journey. The army dispatched 21st Mechanised Infantry Brigade along with an artillery unit to face the Sikh recruits. The other group of rebels was tackled by 20th Infantry Brigade along with some artillery. In the ensuing firefight, thirty five soldiers were killed and the others detained.

In Jammu, one hundred and thirty soldiers of 18 Sikh left their lines but later captured by 2 Grenadiers without violence as most deserters were unarmed. One hundred and thirty three soldiers of 14 Punjab Regiment (*Nabha Akal*) in Pune deserted with their weapons. 13 Mahar intercepted the deserters and later 2 Kumaon clashed with deserters killing many. On 11 June, over two hundred soldiers of the famous 3 Sikh ('Rattraits') stationed in Tripura deserted. They drove their vehicles to railway stations to head towards the Punjab but Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel G S Kalhoun persuaded them to return to the

lines. He allowed them to keep their weapons with them at night and next morning they deposited the weapons and 5 Mahar took charge of the quarter guard.

There was unrest in two artillery regiments with significant number of Sikhs. Ninety soldiers of 166 Mountain Regiment stationed in the east and twenty seven soldiers of 171 Field Regiment stationed in Alwar deserted. There was no act of disobedience from Sikhs in the armoured corps but army leaders were concerned as mutinous soldiers in armoured regiments could cause much more havoc than infantry troops. 46 Armoured Regiment commanded by Colonel BS Sandhu sent a tank squadron under the command of Major GS Ghumman outside Amritsar with orders to shoot at any tanks trying to enter Amritsar.

In the aftermath of this unrest, there were two opinions in the army. Non-Sikh officers, especially COAS General Vaidya suggested stern measures against mutinous soldiers (an exception was a Sikh senior officer then GOC-in-Chief of Southern Command Lieutenant General TS Oberoi) while Sikh officers and some others suggested a more considered approach. Five retired senior Sikh officers including Lieutenant Generals Jagjit Singh Arora (2nd Punjab Regiment), Harbaksh Singh (5/11 Sikh), JS Dhillon, MS Wadalia and Sartaj Singh protested that the case of such unrest was unusual and the affected troops be dealt with differently. They met President Zail Singh to convey their feelings. Zail Singh while understanding their concerns was helpless in this matter. General Vaidya ordered mixing of some single-class regiments and in this process 13th Sikh was reconstituted with Sikh, Dogra, Garhwali and South Indian companies. Some years on, this was reversed and the battalion is back to being a single-class Sikh unit.

Aftermath

General angst among Sikhs at the desecration of their holiest place provided new recruits for the militants and in the years which followed, several small scale operations were carried out primarily by police and paramilitary troops to target any militant infrastructure. On 30 April 1986 Operation *Blackthunder I* under the direction of Director General of Police Punjab JF Rebeiro cleared some militants from buildings around the Golden



KPS Gill examining weapons seized from militants

Temple. In 1988, some militants again started to take refuge in the complex. Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of CRPF Sarabdeep Singh Virk was shot and wounded and in 1990, SP (Operations) Tarn Taran Harjit Singh was assassinated in a bomb blast. On 6 May 1988 Operation *Blackthunder II* under the command of new Director General of Police Punjab KPS Gill swept through Golden Temple complex to flush out militants. In this operation National Security Guards (NSG) under the guidance of its head Ved Marwah and Ajit Doval of the IB played a crucial role, a thousand strong Special Action Group (SAG) of NSG participating in the operation. In 1990-91 Operation *Rakshak I & II* was launched, the most affected areas being around Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Majithia, Batala and Gurdaspur. Some years later, the then Governor of Punjab Lieutenant General BKN Chhibber revealed that upto 28 brigades of the Indian Army were deployed for these operations, more than the entire Indian Army on the Western Front during the December 1971 war with Pakistan!

However, militants retaliated by targeting police officers and several officers were killed. In 1987, SSP Arvinder Singh Brar, SP Kanwar Ranbir Singh Gill, DSP Harpal Singh, DSP Tara Chand, DSP Gurcharan Singh and DSP Om Parkash were assassinated. In 1988, Senior Superintendent Police (SSP) Patiala Avindar Singh Brar and Superintendent Police (SP) Headquarters KRS Gill were assassinated on a jogging trail. In 1988, in Patiala, SSP Sital Das and SP (Detective) BS Brar were killed in office. In the same year, DSP Faridkot HS Gill was also assassinated. In 1989, DSP Gopal Singh Ghuman was assassinated. In 1990, Commandant 75 Punjab Armed Police battalion Gobind Ram was killed in a bomb blast. In the same

year, DSP Baldev Singh and DSP Harjit Singh were assassinated while DSP Surjit Singh Ghuman was killed along with his wife and two guards. In 1991, DIG Border range Ajit Singh was killed in an encounter in Tarn Taran and SP of Ropar Jogindar Singh Khaira was assassinated. In 1992, SP (Detective) RPS Teja and DSP Ram Singh and DSP Rupindar Singh were assassinated. There were also life attempts on DGP Julio Rubeiro and Governor Shankar Roy. At the highest level, in August 1985, Harchand Singh Longowal was assassinated and in 1995, Chief Minister of Punjab Beant Singh was killed in a car bomb explosion at Chandigarh.

During his two stints in Punjab as head of police, KPS Gill put in place some tough police officers giving them a free hand to tackle the militants. The list included SSP Taran Taran Ajit Singh Sandhu, SSP of Amritsar Izhar Alam, SP Bathinda SK Singh, SP Gurdaspur Vivek Mishra and DSP of Tarn Taran, Jaspal Singh Khalra. In such situations, problems with morale following target killing of police officers and government's concern about the potential sympathy of some police officers with their co-religionist militants prompted induction of several officers of paramilitary forces (mainly CRPF and few from BSF) in the Punjab. The list includes SS Virk, Rakesh Chandra, SK Singh, AK Pandey, Khubi Ram, SPS Basra, RC Sethi and SK Sharma. Several of these officers served at SP rank during most troubled times in areas heavily infiltrated by militants at great personal risk. They were later absorbed in Punjab Police in 2006 and rewarded with promotion to the rank of DIG.

Extra judicial killings

The Police used many controversial tactics including extra judicial killings. Some former low level police officials with criminal record were quietly hired for the job of infiltrating and in some cases eliminating militants in the countryside. The case of Dalbir Singh is a good an example of both benefits and risks of this approach. Dalbir was a constable in the Punjab Police was dismissed in 1983 on criminal charges. In 1986, he was quietly re-hired for a different task and worked undercover, helped in arrest and elimination of some high profile militants. He was promoted as Assistant Sub Inspector (ASI) and made a fortune from 'head money' of militants. He started to engage in criminal

activities including extortion and even robberies. After investigation into these allegations, it was decided to remove Dalbir from the force. He was asked to report to the police station in civil lines and interviewed by senior police officers. Dalbir pulled his gun and after killing SSP Sital Das and SP Brar, shot himself dead.

Militancy was finally subdued by the Punjab Police and this success was owed to strengthening of police in large numbers, proper equipment and training and selection of good officers to lead the campaign. Punjab Police numbers increased from 35,000 to 65,000 by the end of 1989, better weapons and communication equipment were provided and policemen were trained for the job. Punjab Police was also strengthened by 6000 special police and 20,000 home guards. Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Majithia, Batala and Gurdaspur were the most affected areas. In Tarn Taran alone, about 200 policemen, Special Police and home guard members lost their lives. Punjab Police and their families paid the price and in the years 1988-92, about 1600 policemen had been killed in the line of duty. In addition more than sixty family members of policemen were killed by militants in revenge attacks.

Like any crisis, there were examples of bad handling of a given situation but also many cases where volatile situations were professionally handled by competent men at great risk to their own lives. In Ludhiana, an angry crowd of Sikhs was demonstrating in the immediate aftermath of *Operation Bluestar*. Brigade commander Brigadier MM Lakhera was inclined to fire at the crowd to disperse them but Deputy Commissioner KR Lakhanpal dissuaded him and handled the situation at great personal risk.

The human side of the conflict is exemplified by two stories. Bhindrawale's own brother was Subedar Major Harcharan Singh Rhode then serving with 61 Engineers Regiment stationed at Jallandhar. Harcharan visited Akal Takht in his uniform right after the death of his brother at the hands of the Indian Army. A young boy named Bashir Muhammad joined the Punjab Police and served as guard of DSP Sukhdev Singh Chahal. The Punjab Police needed to infiltrate Sikh militant groups and Bashir was chosen for the task. He was instructed to grow hair and beard

and then a fake story was leaked that he had escaped from jail with arms and ammunition. He managed to join *Babbar Khalsa* and started to send reports back to police. However, he was soon taken up by the dedication and religious zeal of leaders of the group and decided to convert to Sikhism. He then informed leaders of *Babbar Khalsa* that he was a police informant but now wanted to join the Sikh cause. He was baptised as a Sikh and named Lachman Singh Babbar, and began operating on behalf of militants against the security forces. However, the Punjab Police finally subdued the situation, killing many to break the back of militancy. In view of the precarious situation, Lachman Singh moved to Calcutta with his wife. The Police finally traced Lachman Singh and in May 1993, SP Bathinda SK Singh and DSP Chahal with two other policemen went to Calcutta and shot and murdered Lachman and his pregnant wife in their apartment. This incident caused a major row between the Punjab and West Bengal provincial governments as these officers went on their own without informing West Bengal police and clearly extra-judicial.

The deep scars remain

Conflict in the Punjab had evolved over several years resulting from clashes between central and provincial political leadership, internal power struggle of Sikh leaders and especially use of religion for political purposes. The outcome of clashes between such volatile forces is never in doubt and Punjab proved to be no exception. Law and order situation was initially not tackled for political expediency and when it spun out of control, fear and inertia settled in starting from the top and seeping all the way down. Finally, when the government of the time decided to tackle the issue, a short-term use of brute force was thought to be the answer. Vicious cycle of incremental increase in force and predictable response of further alienation of Sikhs resulted in a conflict that lasted over a decade. As for the Sikhs, silence of priests of the Golden Temple, political leaders and civil society partly from sympathy and partly owing to fear, resulted in no vocal opposition to gathering of armed militants and military style fortifications inside the holiest place of Sikh religion. These gave militants wide room for manoeuvre and expand their influence. Over thirty years later, no Sikh is willing to talk on record against Bhindrawale and the

Sant has attained a virtual cult status amongst many Sikhs.

Operation Bluestar and the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 has left a deep scar on Sikh psyche. Elimination of militancy and re-newed political participation in the last two decades brought Punjab back to normalcy but 1984 still evokes deep emotions, even among the younger generation of Sikhs born after 1984—especially among Sikh Diaspora.

Dramatis Personae

Indira Gandhi – In mid-1984, as Prime Minister of India she ordered the army to flush out extremists entrenched in Golden Temple. On 31 October 1984, she was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. Beant Singh was killed on the spot while Satwant Singh was later convicted of murder and hanged in 1989. Kehar Singh, a friend of his, was also hanged, a matter, described by many as “judicial murder.” Indira’s assassination enraged many and mobs attacked Sikhs, the worst violence being in Delhi where Hindu mobs attacked Sikhs and some estimate that about 3000 were killed. Sikhs alleged that many Congress party office holders were directly involved in these attacks. Member of Parliament from Delhi Lalit Makan and City Counselor and friend of Rajiv Gandhi, Arjun Das were alleged to have a role in anti-Sikh riots. Makan was married to Gitanjali, daughter of former President of India Shankar Dayal Sharma. On 31 July 1985, Makan and his wife were gunned down near their house and in September 1985, Das was assassinated in his office.

Lieutenant General Srinavas Kumar Sinha – He was commissioned from the Officer Training School (OTS) at Belgaum in 1942, was the best cadet of his course and was commissioned in the Jat Regiment. After partition, he was transferred to the 3/5th Gorkha Rifles (FF) and he commanded the battalion in 1964. In 1983, he was GOC-in-Chief of Western Command and had strongly objected to the planned operation

against Sikh militants in Golden Temple, suggesting a different approach. In 1984, he was Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCOAS) and as the senior most officer expected to become Chief of Army Staff (COAS) on retirement of General Krishna Rao. In an unexpected move, the government announced appointment of then GOC-in-Chief Eastern Command Lieutenant General A S Vaidya as new COAS superseding Sinha. Lt. General Sinha was retired but later served as governor of Assam and in due course Jammu & Kashmir.

General Arun Shridar Vaidya – A cavalry officer who commanded Deccan Horse in the 1965 war, was a well decorated officer winning the *Maha Vir Chakra* (MVC) in 1965 and bar to MVC in 1971. In 1984, he became Chief of the Army Staff, retired in January 1986 and moved to Pune. On 10 August 1986, he was driving his car coming back home from the market when two gunmen ambushed his car killing him on the spot. In 1986 Sukhdev Singh and in 1987 Harjinder Singh were arrested and charged with murder of Vaidya. Both were convicted and hanged in 1992.

General Krishnaswamy Sundarji – He was commissioned in the Mahar Regiment and commanded 1 Mahar. He was GOC-in-Chief of Western Command in 1984, later serving as COAS from 1986 to 1988. He was author of *Exercise Brasstacks*, regarded as a prelude to fullscale war with Pakistan, stopped last minute by PM Rajiv Gandhi. He died of natural causes in 1999.

Lieutenant General Ranjit Singh Dayal – Highly decorated officer from 1 Parachute Regiment winning MVC in 1965 war (the ‘Haji Pir’ action). He became Chief of Staff of Western Command in 1984 later retired and died from cancer in January 2012.

Lieutenant General Kuldip Singh Brar – ‘Bulbul’ was commissioned in 1 Mahrata Light Infantry (MLI) and received a VrC for supporting Mukti Bahini operations in East Pakistan. In 1984, he was GOC of 9 Division which spearheaded Operation Bluestar. Promoted later to Lieutenant General, he became GOC-in-C Eastern Command and after retirement is housed in a highly secure bungalow in Mumbai.

Krishan Pal Singh Gill – An IPS officer of 1957 batch from the Assam cadre serving most of his career in the northeast, rising to the post of DGP Meghalaya. He also served as IG Punjab Armed Police (PAP), IG BSF – Jammu and DG CRPE. In 1988, he was brought to Punjab to tackle militancy. He served two tenures as Director General of the Punjab Police 1988-89 and 1991-95, attacked militants with ruthless efficiency, surviving at least five assassination attempts and remains hated by Sikhs. He died in May 2017 of natural causes.

Major General Shabeg Singh – His life story is amazing: a graduate of the Government College Lahore, he was commissioned in the 2nd Punjab Regiment, his battalion later becoming the 1st Battalion, Parachute Regiment in the Army’s re-organisation. He participated in every war which India had fought, in 1947-48 against Pakistan in Naushehra area of Kashmir. In 1962, Indo-China war, he was GSO-Intelligence at IV Corps headquarters. In 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, he commanded 3/11th Gorkha Rifles in Haji Pir sector of Kashmir. Later he commanded 19 Infantry Brigade in J&K. He later served as Deputy GOC of 8 Mountain Division during the Naga counter-insurgency operations. In 1971, in preparation for war with Pakistan, as a Brigadier he was given charge of *Delta Sector* with headquarters at Agartala to train Bengalis fighting against Pakistan and was instrumental in organising the Mukti Bahini later, when he refused to order troops to arrest Jay Prakash Narain, then agitating against the ‘Emergency’ he was posted to UP Area. In his enquiry against unauthorised Kumaon Regimental funds being given to a former COAS, Shahbeg was immediately relieved of his command and an inquiry started against him. Although, he was cleared, Shahbeg Singh was dismissed from service just a day before his retirement and subsequently became very bitter.

He later joined Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and was at the Golden Temple when Indian Army launched its operation in 1984. Ironically, his own 1 Para (Punjab) were at the forefront of the assault.

Travaills of Operation Bluestar for the Sikh Soldier



‘Operation Bluestar’ was a monumental blunder. The minds who decided this line of action completely ignored a great historical truth that, of the immense sacrifices and willing martyrdom that Sikhs had given whenever their religion or religious institutions were threatened. History is full of such examples and needs no reiteration here; this possibly was a flaw of magnanimous proportion, consequences of which are being faced till date. This cataclysmic event hurt the psyche of the Sikhs and particularly that of the Sikh soldiers no end; for the latter, the reverence for the Guru Granth Sahib and Sri Harmandir Sahib, the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Sikhs, is very special, etched in the minds and hearts of every soldier of the Sikh Regiment: every Sikh unit/ battalion has its own Gurdwara where veneration of the Guru Granth Sahib is absolute, and plays a central role in the life of a Sikh soldier.

A raw recruit is only admitted into the Sikh Regiment as a soldier after being initiated and taking oath on Guru Granth Sahib and, traditionally the Holy Book has always led the troops to battle; indeed, every operational task or matter of significance is preceded by prior recitation of the Ardas and a reverberating ‘*Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal!*’ Moreover, to pay obeisance at the Harmandir Sahib is a divine duty and every battalion of the Sikh Regiment has proudly endeavored to place a plaque at the Darshani Deori. This immense feeling for their faith has been very appropriately endorsed by Vincent A. Smith in the *Oxford History of India*, 1919 (Third Edition, pp.432) thus, ‘Those commands (meaning the ‘Five K’s’) are not always observed now, and modern Sikhism owes its continued existence chiefly to the influence of the corporate spirit of the Sikh Regiments.’ Some may differ with this statement, but for a soldier born and



brought up in the Sikh Regiment for over six decades this is so very true.

1984 was a challenging, difficult and most unhappy year for the Sikh Regiment. The scourge of militancy had spread in parts of Punjab and though the militants comprised only a small percentage but sadly, the needle of suspicion went on to point at the entire community: even a casual travel through the country could not be taken without detailed checks. The Sikh soldiers (like in every community across the country) are a close-knit part of society and, with nearly all of them coming from rural stock with a large number from the border districts of Punjab more affected by militancy, there was no way that the soldiers could remain immune to these happenings. ‘Operation Bluestar’ must be seen and studied in this back drop of the psyche of the Sikh soldiers. The operation was unexpected and like a whirlwind took the unprepared Sikh soldier by surprise; the sealing of the border with Pakistan by ‘Operation Wood Rose’ and blocking all moves to and from Punjab within the country gave no indication of what was to follow. The adverse fallout of the blanket ban on Indian media created a complete information void which was quickly exploited by BBC (and

Pakistani media) which went viral and began nefarious psychological warfare, windmill of rumours took over the environment, speaking of complete destruction of the Harmandir Sahib aka Ahmed Shah Durrani, destruction of villages, food supplies being cut off, atrocities on women etc. To expect that that the troops would be unaffected by these happenings would be very naïve: sentiments were grievously hurt, tempers rose, it was natural that Sikh soldiers would get swayed. In most Sikh units, where the leadership was alive to the problem and incidentally closer home, necessary steps were taken to educate the men and the situation was controlled, but where this was not done, matters went out of control, as happened at the Sikh Regimental Centre at Ramgarh (in Jharkhand) and in three Sikh battalions. Although hurt religious sentiments took the better of discipline in these units, but what stood out was the loyalty and respect that the men had for their officers (majority were non-Sikhs), as these officers moved around unsuccessfully to stop their men from doing a wrong. The men ensured that no harm came to their officers or the non-Sikh element in the units, and in the odd case, as an inquiry later proved, their was more due to panic and random firing and not because of any premeditated plans.

The after effects of this sad episode for the Sikh Regiment was telling, the first casualty was the reliability and trust of the Sikh soldiers (from officers down to a sepoy), suspicions took over across the board, actions were misconstrued and many bright careers at various levels were ruined. Some officers and men (approximately 2000) from the affected battalions were transferred to other Regiments of the Army and for most, there was no progression in their careers. Unprecedented steps were taken, firstly to disband one Battalion (9 Sikh) and secondly to have mixed caste troops in the other two battalions (3 and 18 Sikh). Later in February 1985, when a new battalion (13 Sikh) of the Sikh Regiment was raised, this was also with mixed class of troops. The other major adversity was that many sepoys and non-commissioned officers lost their only livelihood as they were sent home without pension; those found guilty of indiscipline were severely punished by military courts, returned home after serving their punishment also without any source of income, very few could manage some other vocation. Sadly little or no help came from Sikh Institutions who should have looked after them as per tenants laid down by our Gurus, but the less said of this the better. The experiment of mixed troops was not very successful, realisation dawned that the resilience and loyalty of the Sikh soldier was unshakeable, better sense prevailed and by May 1986, both 3 and 18 Sikh were reverted to a pure Sikh status and subsequently, 13 Sikh was also made a pure Sikh battalion in 1999. However, despite the lapse of 33 years 9 Sikh has not been re-raised and that hurt lingers on.

Whatever may or may not have been achieved by this operation, it is clear that it stood out for poor planning owing to lack of perception of a very delicate situation. It was a failure of leadership at the highest level which did not perceive the religious sentiments of the Sikh troops, a clear case of those who do not learn from history will only have to repent.



When the need was to keep the troops informed of what was going to happen, a grave folly was committed by imposing an information black out on Indian media and within the Army. This gave rise to nefarious propaganda, rumours rose which besides effecting the Sikh population also gave the community adverse publicity world -wide. Post the operation, rather than pacifying and healing wounds, the punishments were severe.

A question oft asked is whether this operation could have been done differently? Yes, it could have been, as planning at the highest level lacked comprehension of the situation and likely after effects: all Sikh troops should have been taken into confidence and kept informed, media black-out was ill thought of. The fact that lessons learnt were implemented in the subsequent successful *Operation Blackthunder* in 1988, under open glare of cameras and media, asking the militants to surrender, which they willingly did proves the point.

ਸੁਰਾ ਸੇ ਪਹਿਚਾਨੀਐ ਜੁ ਲਰੈ ਦੀਨ ਕੇ ਹੇਤ ॥
ਪੁਰਜਾ ਪੁਰਜਾ ਕਟਿ ਮਰੈ ਕਬਹੂ ਨ ਛਾਡੈ ਖੇਤੁ ॥

– Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1105

Lt Gen RS Sujana (Retd.)
(former Colonel of the Sikh Regiment and ex-Chairman,
Punjab Public Service Commission)

Targetting Gurdwaras throughout the Punjab



Blue Star over Patiala

The world remembers Operation Bluestar and the assault on Darbar Sahib in Amritsar. Less known is that some 37 or more Gurdwaras all over the Punjab were simultaneously assaulted by the army or para military forces in the first week of June 1984. These included those at Moga, Mukatsar, Faridkot, Patiala, Ropar and Chowk Mehta. The exact number of Sikhs killed are not known but 257 people were shot and killed during the storming of the Gurdwara Dukh Nivaran Sahib in Patiala itself, as recalled by Mallika Kaur, a lawyer and writer in the USA.

As they drop their children off at schools, clock into factories, perform surgeries, drive taxis, and teach classes, many Sikhs around the world ride a wave of mixed sensations every first week of June: parents grow quieter and the children of 1984 will again waver between saying nothing and asking too much. Meanwhile, news about Indian paramilitary troops marching into Amritsar, Punjab, home to the golden-domed Darbar Sahib, accompanies the handful of usual political suspects calling for a shutdown of Amritsar to mark the black anniversary of that June 1984 attack.

Once upon a time, as per the government version, extremism was being promoted by an uneducated but charismatic ideologue, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who misguided some Sikhs, making military intervention necessary in June 1984. The world has learnt since then, including through declassified British documents, that the Indian Army's attack on Punjab resulted from long pre-planning rather than exigency and was centered at the heart of Sikhdom, Darbar Sahib in Amritsar, where Bhindranwale and his men

put up a stiff fight against the Army for days. Through censorship and fear psychosis, the accompanying deaths of thousands of innocent civilians remains shrouded, known only to few.

As some 100,000 soldiers sealed the Punjab on 1 June 1984, worshipers and visitors were trapped not only in Darbar Sahib at Amritsar but also in other gurudwaras hundreds of kilometres away from Bhindranwale, against whom there was no arrest warrant or legal case at the time. Over three decades after the terrible events, I listened to this old man, who reminded me about the sights and smells imagined as a child whenever I heard the sanitised term 'Bluestar':

"You know how when a turban is washed, and then you wring it out, and water splatters out, just think about that...but with blood. So much blood. All these bloody turbans. Blood everywhere...we could not even estimate how many bodies this had come from. Because there were no bodies there, just the blood....and the loosened soil below had porously retained so much blood."

With a team of volunteers from the *1984 Living History Project*, recording testimonies and memories of the watershed year, here I was listening to a man I had never met recount the macabre sights and smells from the premises of Dukh Nivaran (meaning ‘Eradiator of Suffering’). His house had been 250-350 meters from the boundary wall of Dukh Nivaran Gurdwara in Patiala. In his words, “my father’s relative’s home in Patiala had been farther away from the gurdwara. He lived to tell the story of witnessing, from his rooftop, the Army move into the city. He recounted hearing three to four loud explosions then continuous firing for many hours, seeing parts of the gurdwara lit up in flames, and then, hearing a persistent growl, like that of a large, wounded animal before it dies”. Perhaps thankfully, rather than visualising the bullet-ridden bodies of trapped pilgrims who had slept the night before on the cooler marble floor of Dukh Nivaran Sahib in the sweltering Punjabi June heat, my child’s mind had imagined only a monstrous howl, which my relative’s testimony re-awoke.

For many of those who were there first-hand, the monstrosity was overwhelming. Jadish Kaur, the principal of a Nursing College in 1984, explained how her husband came back home after a week and remained “mentally tortured” by what he had seen happen in Patiala. They both soon quit their government jobs, and migrated to the United States. It was only years later that their children could join them and the family was reunited.

“Darbar Sahib was one...but what of the other 37 gurdwaras? It means this attack was in fact to destroy all Sikh morale,” she summarised. There remain varying estimates of the total number of other gurdwaras attacked in north India in June 1984: 41 (*Reduced to Ashes*), 75 (*Politics of Genocide*), 38 (*The Guardian*). The Indian government’s official White Paper, released hurriedly after June 1984, divulges that there were 42 other gurdwaras. The casualties at Dukh Nivaran Sahib at Patiala, just one of these many, were recorded at 257 by Justice Tiwana. Tiwana was appointed by the Punjab government in 1985 to investigate the fate of various Sikh boys and men picked up on the immediate heels of army attack on Sikh Gurdwaras and tortured in detention at Ladda Kothi, southwest of Patiala, just one of the many notorious jails.



Growing up, we had heard, including from doctors in Rajindra Hospital, Patiala, the fate of those killed during the attack. Our relative had made his way, through back roads, to the home of friends who lived right across the gurdwara and who had a young child forced to go without food or milk for days. As he handed a small can of milk to the petrified family, he heard stories about the lorries they had been counting, each laden with dead and almost dead bodies before wobbling their way out of the city limits.

Years later, I listen to Manjit Kaur’s testimony on YouTube. She speaks of the reddened earth in the



Devotees at Gurdwara Dukh Nivaran Sahib, Patiala

Patiala gurdwara, and later the overwhelming smell the locals inhaled, coming from the village of Badoongar. “The smell gave us the idea of what was really going on... what was really going on was the mass burning of the bodies,” she recounts. The dead of Patiala were whisked away, just like the bodies from Amritsar were recorded being carted away in garbage trucks to be disposed of through quiet mass cremations. They left the earth red in their trace.

Says the eyewitness who as a boy counted bloody turbans: “[The] Indian mass population doesn’t know this... they didn’t let this come out at all... If anyone

else from Patiala listening to this can come forward, they too can add a wall to this foundation, so we can build toward the facts.”

Instead of accounting or remembrance, what Punjab sees again is reporting on shrill political maneuvering in Amritsar, under the hawk-eyed watched of the central government troops. Once again, we see a violence-centric, selective telling of the Punjab story. This telling does little to amplify the voices of ordinary citizens, or to diminish antagonisms, or respond to the prevailing intolerance that prevents any human rights remedies for the wrongs committed under the guise of Bluestar.

Recalling the attack on **Muktsar Gurdwara**

Over 37 gurdwaras in the Punjab, many of them historical, were simultaneously attacked in the first days of June 1984, ostensibly to contain any militants within their premises. The historic gurdwara at Muktsar Sahib was one of them, as recorded by Colonel (Dr.) Dalvinder Singh Grewal.



In the modern era, 1984 remains the darkest year for the Sikhs, when they not only suffered grievous loss of life and property, but also an irreparable loss to their power and prestige. I would confine this article only to the historical events of 1984 at Gurdwara Tuti Gandhi in Muktsar. No political thought or consideration has been taken into account. The details of this account have been provided by eye-witnesses of the event : Bhai Bahadur Singh, Bhai Piara Singh, Gyani Suba Singh, Sardar Bhatia and Sardar Swaran Singh - with confirmation from the available official and unofficial records.

4 June 1984 was the Martyrdom Day of Guru Arjan Dev, Fifth Guru of the Sikhs. Like Gurdwaras everywhere, the congregation at Muktsar had come for obeisance at the Gurdwara that day. Apart from the public, those present within precincts of the Gurdwara complex were the sewadars, head Granthi and families of the employees to whom living quarters had been allotted within the periphery of the Gurdwara.

The Gurdwara complex had a boundary wall all around, with eight gates (numbered 1 to 8) along the periphery, for entry into the complex. Gurdwara Tuti Gandhi was next to Gate No. 1 and at the front were a historical banyan tree and the well known as *Bohad Waala Khuh*. The main door of Gurdwara Tuti Gandhi was towards Gurdwara Shahidan in the north while on the left corner of the Gurdwara was erected the Nishan Sahib, made of Sarb Loh metal, which the Maharaja of Nabha had imported from England to celebrate the birth of his son, Hira Singh. Alongside, a multi-storied building, known as Attari, was constructed, the Nishan Sahib being supported by the Attari by attaching iron rods to it.

In the first days of June, 1984, curfew had been imposed and the BSF deployed around the Gurdwara Complex. On the houses adjoining the boundary wall the BSF had made bunkers wherefrom they kept regular observation on the entire Gurdwara complex and the

area around. Some young Sikh students had earlier come in with antique weapons, most of them young Sikh boys from neighbouring villages who, having been hounded by the police because of assumed past connection to Bhindranwale, having taken shelter in Gurdwara complex to save themselves from 'encounter killing'. Indeed illegal encounter killings were rife.

In the early hours of 4 June 1984, even as *Operation Bluestar* was launched in Amritsar, another 37 Gurdwaras in the Punjab, including that at Muktsar were savagely attacked by the Army, including use of tanks during which action. Gurdwara Tuti Gandhi Sahib was virtually destroyed. The holy sarovar, which became site of the battlefield, was behind the Gurdwara Tuti Gandhi, having steps of lime stone. In between the steps and the Gurdwara was a baradari at one corner with the counter for *karah parsad* at the other, close to number 1 gate, between the well and the Banyan tree on one side and gurdwara at the back.

According to Bhai Bahadur Singh, who was then on guard duty at the Gurdwara complex, loud speakers announced at 2.40 a.m. that 'whosoever was in the Gurdwara complex must surrender immediately; otherwise firing is going to start.' Exactly one hour later; at 3.40 am, heavy firing begun including by artillery from Gate Number 4, on other side of the sarovar. The first rounds hit the Attari and then continued, creating havoc. Bahadur Singh remembered seven rounds having been fired that set the buildings ablaze.

First shells hit the Attari, then the Baradari and subsequently the Gurdwara itself. Gunfire was so intense that girders of the Gurdwara and Baradari melted in the fire. Holy Birs of Guru Granth Sahib were also destroyed in the fire. (*New Birs were later brought from Amritsar and installed after a new Gurdwara complex constructed through kar seva*).

The few armed young men of the Sikh Student Federation had already left the Gurdwara complex much before the first rounds were fired and the few who were left behind were amongst the visitors who were trapped within the complex due to the curfew and did not know where to go. Bahadur Singh further

recalled, "when the first announcement was made, I was on duty and started helping families staying in the Gurdwara complex them jump over the boundary wall. "The present Jathedar of Akal Takht was then the Head Granthi of Gurdwara Tuti Gandhi Sahib. I helped him along with his family to cross over the wall. But when I was about to jump across, I was caught by the soldiers, who also fired a burst towards the Jathedar; who however escaped. Many animals belonging to a carpenters hut were killed alongwith him by the soldiers, his last rites performed later in the day behind Tamboo Sahib Gurdwara in the dera of Nihang Sikhs.

After the artillery fire soldiers charged at the Gurdwara complex with LMGs and assault rifles. The firing continued till morning. No one knows how many students or pilgrims were killed as soldiers took away bodies of the dead and wounded.

The firing stopped at day break. All those arrested were now ordered to lie down on the floor (parikarma) of the sarovar. The construction of Tamboo Sahib was in progress those days, being done through (karsewa) organised by Baba Harbans Singh and Karnail Singh *Kar Sewa Wale*. They too were in their dera outside the periphery of the Gurdwara complex but were also brought in the parikarma and thoroughly questioned, later released after the officers got a phone call from Delhi.

Many innocents were 'murdered' by troops. One Gurdeep Singh of village Maujewala had come to pay obeisance at the Gurdwara on the eve of Guru Arjan Dev ji's martyrdom day, and when a soldier asked him to raise hands; he did not understand the order, but when he raised his arms, a cloth bag fell from his arm pit and tried to grab it with his second hand. The soldier probably thought that the person was going to throw a hand grenade and fired an LMG burst, killing him instantly. A Nihang of karniwala was also killed in similar manner.

"As the day dawned, the floor became blazingly hot owing to direct hot sun rays in that month of June (*Asadh*), our bodies burning from the heat. We were very thirsty, but if we requested for water, we got kicks

in return. The whole day we went through this extreme torture. We could only remember the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev and his tortures by the Mughals. Could we stand such torture? We took solace that we were not yet dead and sang in our hearts,

“ਤੇਰਾ ਕੀਆ ਮੀਠਾ ਲਾਗੈ
ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਪਦਾਰਥੁ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਮਾਂਗੈ”

The day passed in the burning heat and facing tortuous questioning. In the evening, of about 400 Sikhs encircled, 62 were separated who were then taken to a nearby college building and confined in a single room where there was no light or water or fan. These 62 people also included employees of the Gurdwara Sahib, their ages ranging from Lal Singh of 70 years to Gurbal Singh of 12 years. We were all locked in a small room where we could barely breathe and faced by extreme heat and thirst, storekeeper of the Gurdwara, Baldev Singh died in agony.

On the second day “they” started questioning us about our past and present activities. Hunger and thirst had made us so weak that we were barely able to speak. Seeing this state and to meet the requirement of questioning they gave us two dry chapattis each, then put in prison and case number 162 was filed against us on 7 June 1984, under provisions of 307/201. 435/295A, 322/353, 156 and Arms Act 25 54/59. I got a copy of the charge-sheet alongwith the list of all the individuals who were listed in the charge-sheet. The arrest was shown on 17/6/84 and the first police remand was obtained upto 25/6/84 after which this remand was extended upto 1/7/84 we being described as “very clever and hardened criminals”.

“They” tortured us beyond the breaking point. One Thanedar, Amar Singh was full of evil and hatred and made false cases and tormented us incessantly. He tied cloth on our eyes, attached wooden nameplates and photographed us many times.

Sometimes he would place grenades or other weapons and take our photographs with them. He wanted—and got—our signatures and thumb impressions by force, to be used later in false cases. The 70 year-old Lal Singh was shown as a driver of Bhindranwale and was charge-sheeted for this as well even though he did not even know driving and had no such license. Another Sikh Army officer was also very rude but his Rajput colleague, who belonged to the Sikligar community, had most sympathy and treated us humanely.

The food given to us in the jail was too rotten to eat : the chapattis were half-cooked and dal just boiled water with a few grains. We went through this hell for over six months, till our cases were admitted in court and we were shifted from Muktsar to Fardikot Jail. There the SDM, was a very good person and we were better treated than Muktsar Jail. We went to the court and remained in jail but nothing criminal was proved against us. Finally all 61 persons were released by the Barnala Government after 18 months and 11 days of ceaseless torture and hellish life. When we came out, we came to know that Jaskaran Singh of Rupana, Harminder Singh and Darshan Singh of Muktsar had been martyred in “encounters” and Waryam Singh Khapianwalli was tortured to death. Others may have also been killed but I do not have much information.”

This account of Bahadur Singh was also corroborated by other direct witnesses of the events: Gyani Suba Singh, Gyani Balwant Singh Rasia and some others.



“De-classify!”

Knowing the extent of UK’s involvement in planning of ‘Bluestar’

In January 2014, the National Archives in London declassified certain documents under the 30-year declassification rule which revealed that Mrs Gandhi had sought British military help to evict dissidents from the Golden Temple in February 1984, even though, until the last minute, she maintained publicly that she was looking for a negotiated settlement and had promised Sikh leaders abroad that “under no circumstances” she would send the army to the Golden Temple.

This story was first broken by *The Guardian*, London, and later picked up by some Indian papers, *The Indian Express* and *The Tribune*. In her book ‘*Bluestar over Amritsar: the real story of June 1984*’, Harminder Kaur gives the following details:

A letter dated 3 February 1984, to BJP Fall, Principal Private Secretary to the British Foreign Secretary, sent by FER Butler, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s Principal Private Secretary, acknowledges receiving New Delhi’s request for “advice on plans for the removal of dissident Sikhs from the Golden Temple.” A UK special forces expert visited New Delhi and advised the Indian authorities on how to retake control of the Golden Temple. A top-secret letter written on 23 February 1984, by Fall to the British Foreign Secretary, states: “The Indian authorities recently sought British advice over a plan to remove Sikh extremists from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The Foreign Office decided to respond favourably to the Indian request and, with the Prime Minister’s agreement, a SAS officer has visited India and drawn up

a plan which has been approved by Mrs Gandhi. The Foreign Secretary believes that the Indian Government may put the plan into operation shortly.” He further goes on to write: “An operation by the Indian authorities at the Golden Temple could, in the first instance, exacerbate the communal tension in the Punjab. It might also, therefore, increase tension in the Indian community here, particularly if knowledge of the SAS involvement were to become public. We have impressed upon the Indians the need for security, and knowledge of the SAS officer’s visit and of his plan has been tightly held both in India and in London.”



The British and Indian Prime Ministers in London

Commenting on the documents after their declassification had raised a furore in British Parliament as well as among the Sikh Community, Labour MP Tom Watson said in the British Parliament: “The claim that the British Government colluded with the Government of India over Operation Bluestar will cause huge upset and offence to many British Sikhs. I’ve seen the documents this morning (13 January 2014) and there are others that have been withheld. This is not good enough. It is not unreasonable to ask for an explanation of the extent of the British military collusion with the Government of Indira Gandhi...I am writing to the Foreign Secretary about this matter and will raise it in the House of Commons. I expect a full explanation.”

The authenticity of the documents was confirmed by the British government after Prime Minister David Cameron ordered an inquiry about British assistance to India in planning Operation Bluestar. UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague told Parliament in London that the advice was “purely advisory” and given months in advance of Operation Bluestar. Hague said an “unnamed British military adviser” sent to India in February 1984 recommended that any attack should be as a last resort. The same advisor suggested using an element of surprise, as well as helicopters, to try to keep casualty numbers low, but no equipment or training was offered.

Hague then said the Indian plan “changed significantly” in the following three months as a considerably large dissident force had built extensive fortifications in the temple complex.

An investigation into the British role in Bluestar was carried out by UK Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood. It involved searching 200 files and 23000 documents. Hague concluded: “The Cabinet Secretary’s report finds that the nature of the UK assistance was purely advisory, limited and provided to the Indian government at an early stage; it had limited impact on the tragic events that unfolded at the temple three months later; that there was no link between the provision of this advice and defence sales and there is no record of the (British) government receiving advance notice of the operation.”

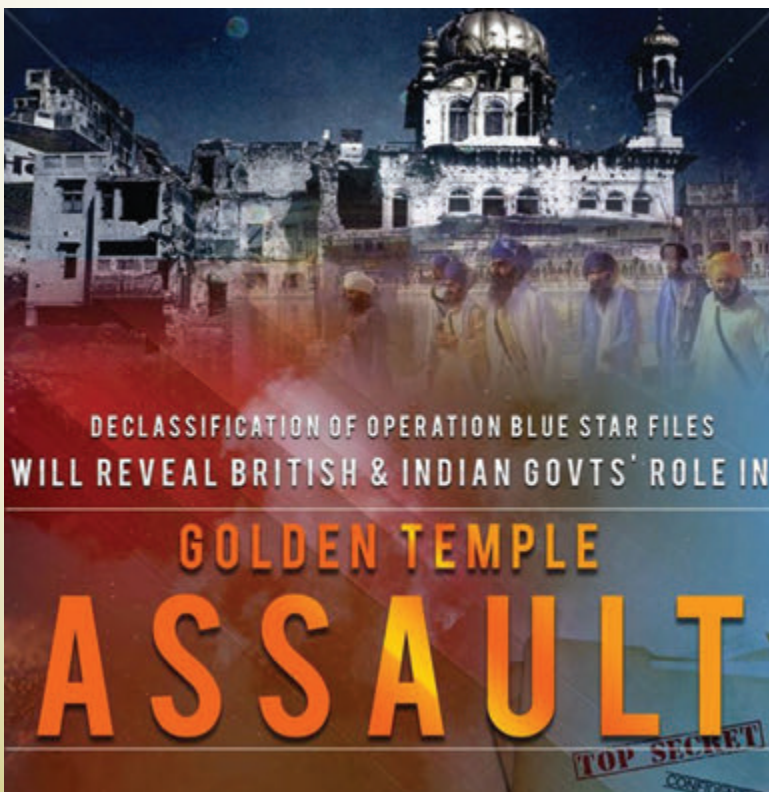
The matter, however, is far from settled as during the January 2017 British Parliamentary elections Labour Party Leader, Jeremy Corbyn wrote to the British Prime Minister, Theresa May calling for a “fresh, independent investigation into Britain’s alleged involvement in the ‘appalling’ Operation Bluestar.” Corbyn had made Operation Bluestar probe his election pledge.

Corbyn’s letter to Ms. May dated 4 January 2017, made the demand following “significant representations” from the Sikh community demanding details of the full extent of UK’s alleged role in the military action on the Golden Temple in 1984. “Given concerns regarding the effectiveness and integrity of the January 2014 review, I believe we must consider a fresh, independent investigation into this episode in British history.” Corbyn’s letter underscored that the 2014 review was felt by many to be inaccurate and the presentation of its conclusions to be misleading. A valuable opportunity to bring greater transparency to this was lost with the recall of 33 Foreign and Commonwealth India files from 1984, which had only been released in August 2016 after 32 years (contrary to the 30-year rule.) May has not responded yet.

Meanwhile, efforts were stepped-up in March 2018 by freelance journalist Phil Miller and Sikh Federation for making public documents related to Britain’s involvement in Operation Bluestar.

Miller, a British freelance journalist, felt that the David Cameron enquiry was of limited scope. He made requests for further papers to be made public but his request was declined. Miller then approached the information commissioner, who after a year turned down his appeal. Miller then made an appeal to the First-Tier Tribunal, but due to various reasons, including the witnesses in the case being busy officials, the case was put up for hearing only after a year.

Finally, on 6 March 2018, the three-day proceedings began in the Phil Miller versus UK Information Commissioner case at the First-Tier Tribunal in London. The outcome of the Tribunal will decide whether documents relating to Britain’s involvement



in the Indian military operations at the Golden Temple in Amritsar in June 1984 can be released in the public domain in entirety or be kept away on grounds of national security and international relations.

On the first day of the hearing, four witnesses gave evidence: Philip Barton, director general, consular and security at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Owen Jenkins, former FCO director for South Asia and Afghanistan; Dabinderjit Singh of the UK Sikh Federation and journalist Miller. Barton's evidence was taken behind locked doors. The bulk of the session was held in secret as Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials explained their stand that the declassification of the files posed a threat to national security and international relations with India. The final decision in the matter was to be taken in six-weeks and was not known at the time of going to press.

Politicisation of the SGPC –and the Sikh clergy



For quite some time, the role and function of Sikh institutions in articulating of Sikh aspirations, expectations and frustrations has raised fresh questions. Particularly, on the erosion in the autonomy, independence and sovereignty, or whatever remains, of the apex organs: SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) and Akal Takht.

Reformation of Sikh institutions?

Given the ‘hire and fire’ policy in respect of the clergy, religiously followed by the ‘politicised’ SGPC at the bidding of its political bosses, a subservient attitude is discernible. Even the system of appointment or removal of the SGPC President is arbitrary and politically motivated. In the prevailing cloistered

religio-political system, the incumbents are expected to show ‘unalloyed loyalty’ to their political masters.

The politicisation of the SGPC and Sikh clergy is a cause of concern, given the contradictions and opaqueness in decision-making. Why has there been a continuous erosion and denigration of these institutions? Even as the jury is out on the juxtaposition of religion and politics, the fact is that vested interests have politicised religion. Religion has not been evoked as a detergent to cleanse politics.

Then there is the growing cult of *sants*, *mahants*, *babas* and *gurus*; sects, cults and *deras*. Punjab provides a fertile ground for them to flourish, ostensibly under



‘state’ or ‘political’ patronage. The key Sikh institutions have failed to checkmate these. Understandably, a majority of those who flock to the *deras* is from among the ‘weaker sections, Scheduled Castes and other backward classes’. The *deras* are not just a vote-bank, but something more than that. This vast section of society feels left out of the state’s ‘welfare schemes’ denying them economic emancipation, social equality, income generation, employment opportunities and affordable, quality education and health delivery services. They have been ignored and marginalised by the Sikh religio-political leadership. This has alienated them, depriving them of societal recognition, respect, equality, and human dignity.

Thus, *deras* flourish as they provide their followers ‘recognition’, something neither the governments nor Sikh religio-political leadership gave them. While the governments ignored them, Sikh institutions never welcomed them into their fold. Resultantly, there are sharp divisions based on religion, caste, creed and class in villages, where segregation is widespread. Proof lies in the existence of separate cremation grounds, gurdwaras and dharmshalas for different communities.

Strangely, in the wake of the countrywide outcry against ‘atrocities’ on the minorities, cow vigilantism,

saffronisation of institutions, the Akali leadership has maintained a silence for fear of annoying the BJP or losing a Cabinet berth. And, the religious wing never made any attempts to ‘own’ the estranged sections that opted for *deras* and invested their faith in ‘gurus’ and ‘babas’.

To reverse this trend, it is time the government implemented its ‘welfare schemes’ and changed its approach towards *dera* followers. It is also time for radical reforms to restore dignity, independence, sovereignty and autonomy of the Sikh clergy and SGPC. It is equally important to restore ‘inner democracy’ in the SAD. Punjab must maintain communal harmony, peace and tranquility, which is ever so fragile.

Often, concerned scholars, not necessarily neutral, have suggested alternatives to ride out the crises. Since conflict, contradiction and confrontation dominate the Sikh institutions and Sikh psyche, scholars need to cooperate and coordinate in the larger interest of the state and the Sikhs.

Have there been attempts to reform or restore lost dignity of these institutions? One attempt was initiated at the World Sikh Sammelan in Amritsar in September



1995, with Sikhs mostly settled abroad demanding a broad-based SGPC with a representative character; widening its ambit, worldwide. Then (between 1994 and 1996) by a retired Army Colonel, the late Gurdip Singh Grewal, floated the idea of setting up of a Global Sikh Senate. But all such attempts were scuttled by those who hold sway over them, fearing the loss of hegemony and control, since they drew 'power' from these institutions. Numerous seminars have been held to 'forge' unity in Sikh religio-political folds. These attempts have remained stillborn.

Grewal's idea was to enable the Sikh community at home and abroad to meet the challenges and adapt itself for optimum viable prosperity moving into the 21st century. He believed that such a senate was imperative for globally integrating secular Sikh social order: Sikhs, he believed, being a consensual society, the senate could create a virtuous circle of consensus for the prosperity of the entire community.



He was of the opinion that the existing imperfections were on account of two factors: one, the casting of Sikh politics into an archetypical mould of thoughtlessness and attitude of confrontation; two, the guardians of gurdwara-based politics, generally ultra-orthodox, maintained a stranglehold on the Sikh affairs, obstructing enlightened minds from participating.

At the 1995 World Sikh Sammelan, besides it was also resolved that a World Sikh Council and Zonal Sikh Councils be set up under the Jathedar of Akal Takht.

The concept was aborted due to differences cropping up among the power-wielders (including Chief Minister Badal). And, the then Jathedar, Giani Puran Singh, disbanded all units in March, 2000.

With the Akali leadership, having parceled various religio-political institutions between themselves for decades, showed little or no interest either in the World Sikh Council or in the concept of Global Sikh Senate.

Besides the key reforms needed for reinventing the SGPC, SAD and Akal Takht, other pending issues include: failure of the Sikh leadership to either get an All-India Gurdwara Act enacted, in the past six decades or to rein in the growing cult of saints, mahants, babas and gurus; sects, cults and deras; or on the voting rights of Sehjdhari Sikhs in SGPC elections. The matter is in the court.

It is time the government recalibrates its policies and approach towards nearly 50 per cent of the population that believes in deras and feels alienated, and the religio-political Sikh leadership comes out of its orthodoxy-shell and think of out-of-the-box reforms.

PPS Gill
(Former Information
Commissioner of Punjab)
First Published in 'The
Tribune'

Can there be closure from The pain and politics of Bluestar ?



The British court's decision to declassify documents relating to *Operation Bluestar* brings back questions about the number of people killed in the Golden Temple in June, 1984 and the options that PM Indira Gandhi had had to avoid it.

Several questions related to *Operation Bluestar* remain unanswered. These include the total number of men, women and children who were killed during the storming of the Golden Temple complex in the first week of June in 1984. The tremors of this unprecedented army action, ostensibly targeted at Sikh militants commanded by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale holed up in this most sacred shrine of

the Sikhs, continue to be felt even after 34 years, not only in India but also in countries with the Sikh diaspora.

These questions are now back in focus following a court order in the UK to the British government to declassify the documents relating to *Operation Bluestar*. A part of the tranche that was declassified earlier had for the first time revealed that India in February 1984 had sought British consultancy for this action. Sikh radicals are active in the UK where large-scale protests against the arrest of Jaggi Johal by Punjab police in the case of killing of Hindu leaders

in the state were recently witnessed. India cold-shouldered Canada Prime Minister Justin Trudeau early this year as he was perceived to be pandering to the Sikh radical political discourse there.

It was the deadly politics of *Operation Bluestar* that not only consumed Bhindranwale but also took the lives of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, retired Army Chief General AS Vaidya in Pune and then Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh in Chandigarh in 1995. That politics is still to witness closure. It is for this reason that certain questions must be answered and that is possible only in case the entire record is declassified.

Five-time Chief Minister of the Punjab Parkash Singh Badal continues to be in a denial mode on the nine secret meetings between Akalis and the government. But his party stalwart Gurcharan Singh Tohra went on record years later on a meeting held on May 26, 1984 in Delhi that was also attended by Surjit Singh Barnala. Those present from the Centre included cabinet ministers PV Narasimha Rao, Pranab Mukherjee and Shiv Shankar. The government representatives told the Akalis to wait after four hours of deliberations as the Prime Minister was to be consulted. They returned and said, "Very sorry. Madam does not agree." Earlier, Badal was airlifted to Delhi on 28 March for secret consultations.

This then is the record of this meeting which would reveal the real reason for the storming of Golden Temple eight days later.

While the Akalis were one dimension, the other was Bhindranwale. He was not averse to talks and he had disclosed his mind during the one-hour long one-on-one interaction with this journalist at Akal Takht on 25 May 1984. An interlocutor met him on 28 May and the entire conversation was tape-recorded. The recording was sent to the Prime Minister. This was followed by yet another round.

All such details must be revealed as Bhindranwale had only been pressing for the implementation of the Anandpur Sahib resolution that was one of the demands on which the Akali Dal had launched Dharam Yudh Morcha on 4 August 1982. Bhindranwale had never unequivocally raised the demand for Khalistan and this was the product of Operation Bluestar.

Yet another aspect associated with Bhindranwale is the perception of his being an instrument created by the then ruling Congress. Even a section of the Akalis used to attack him for this during that period and he had been rebutting this allegation.

In case he was so, there might be some hint in the official papers. It is an issue on which the alliance could cash upon in elections in case the allegation is proved. The country was hit by this violent political

discourse rooted in Punjab for about 15 years in which thousands of people were killed.

Notably, the Akali Dal-BJP alliance in its common minimum programme for the 1997 election had promised: "We will set up a special commission of inquiry, headed by a retired judge, to expose the Congress hand behind the violence in Punjab." Badal backtracked after coming into power, saying it would reopen old wounds. But the wounds still need closure. Going by the CMP, it was the Congress that instigated violence and the symbol of that militant struggle was Bhindranwale. It was Badal as the Akali Dal patriarch who gave the green signal to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee to raise a memorial in the Golden Temple complex to commemorate Bhindranwale and his associates who died in that battle.

The number of deaths, both civilian and military, in *Operation Bluestar* continues to be a part of the speculative domain. The estimates vary from a few hundred (493) as mentioned in the White Paper issued by the Centre in July 1984 to many thousand. This is a huge gap. The facts must come out.

Then there is another unanswered question as this attack coincided with the martyrdom anniversary of the Fifth Sikh Master, Guru Arjan Dev, when the number of devotees in the Golden Temple is much higher than normal. The first instalment of British papers debunk the official version that Khalistan was going to be declared and that would have created a situation like the one in 1971 when East Pakistan turned Bangladesh.

This was the first such action in independent India against one's "own people" in which tanks and artillery guns were used and an entire state was brought under 72-hour curfew during which even bullock carts did not move. Were there no other options?

These are some of the questions that need urgent examination.

Jagtar Singh
From : *The Tribune*

Resolution

by The Sikh Forum



The Sikh Forum, an independent think tank body was established in late 1984 by prominent Sikhs of New Delhi led by Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, in the wake of the holocaust perpetrated against the Sikh population of India's capital and many other cities. Over the decades its role has broadened from essentially being an organisation to assist victims of the November 1984 pogrom, to becoming an opinion maker on various issues concerning the Sikhs, including those in the diaspora.

The Forum has continuously held annual functions in New Delhi, one in early June every year to mark that ignominious *Operation Blue Star* and the second, in early November every year, on the genocide by politically-sponsored elements against the Sikh community at large.

The theme of this largely attended special function at the India International Centre, New Delhi on 3 June 2018 to mark the 34th Anniversary of *Operation Blue Star* was on 'Recovering our Heritage', which referred to

the very first admission in three decades by Government authorities that priceless books and documents kept at the Sikh Reference Library at the Golden Temple at Amritsar, had been taken away by the Army in June 1984, which fact was denied for 33 years.

The main speakers at The Sikh Forum function, moderated by Dr Amarjit Singh Narang the Vice President, were S Surinder Singh Jodhka, Professor School of Social Sciences, JNU, New Delhi, Harminder Kaur, senior journalist and author of several books including 'Blue Star Over Amritsar', S Tarlochan Singh, former MP and Chairman National Commission, Minorities, S Sukhdev Singh, Chairperson, INTACH at Amritsar and Mr Rahul Dev, an eminent journalist and language activist.

At conclusion of the function, a Resolution was proposed by the President S Pushpinder Singh and unanimously adopted for forwarding to the Prime Minister of India (and reads) :



Audience at the India International Centre, New Delhi



Thirty four years after that ignominious operation in which the Darbar Sahib in Amritsar, the very heart of Sikhism and over 37 other Gurdwaras in the Punjab were assaulted by the Indian Army using heavy weaponry, it is time that the Government of India appoint a 'Truth And Reconciliation Commission' to expose the background behind that decision and its flawed execution resulting in the killing of thousands of innocent devotees at Amritsar and youths in the border belt of Punjab, an extreme instance of the violation of Human Rights.

Tragically also, most priceless documents which included 'puratan' hand-written Adi-Granth, Hukamnamas of Sikh Gurus, transcripts of books, reference library records and paintings were ostensibly removed by Army personnel shortly before the Reference Library and Museum was set in fire. The Sikh community continues to remain in anguish, with a terrible sense of hurt in the absence of any sincere explanation and dispensation of justice about whereabouts of their most valued and sacred documents.

The Sikh Forum while thanking for Ministry of Home Affairs for release of 53 books to SGPC, as confirmed by their letter No. 17012/5/2002-IS. VII dated 4.1.2018, demands that all available documents still held by the Army or Ministry of Defence or Ministry of Home/CBI or any other Departments are forthwith returned to the Sikh Community (via SGPC) in any condition, wherever they are. This would go some way in assuaging the deep anguish that persists in the Sikh Community.



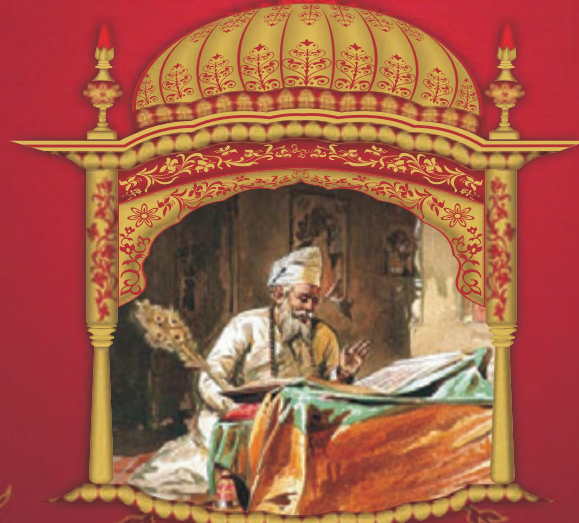


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T H E G U R U E T E R N A L



With Message from Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India
Dr. Mohinder Singh

To mark the tercentenary of the Gurgaddi Divas of Guru Granth Sahib in 2008, this volume is being brought out to highlight some distinctive features of the Sikh scripture.

This book features the history of the compilation of *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Pictures of various Gurdwaras and ceremonies covered by India's leading photographers.

A photo montage on the morning and evening ceremony of the *Granth* at Harimandir Sahib.

A look at the world's smallest and biggest *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Important *Banis* of all the contributors to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, along with their translations.

Paintings contributed by the most renowned artists and other collections from around the world.

The first ever camera photograph of the Golden Temple by William Baker.

Glimpses of rare *Guru Granth Sahib Birs* from different repositories in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and U.K.

Pictures of *Mool Mantra* in the hand of Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Har Krishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh in different rare *Birs*, *Hukamnamas* and relics of the Sikh Gurus.

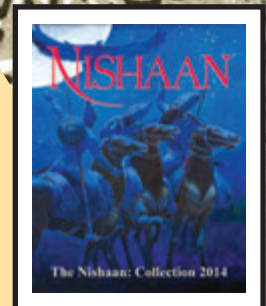
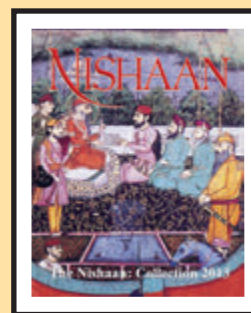
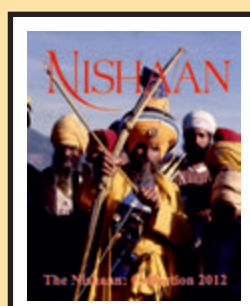
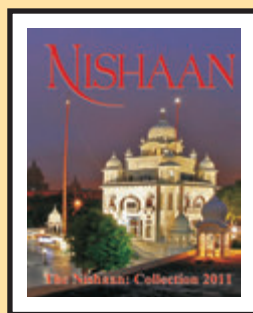
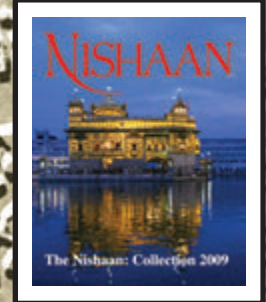
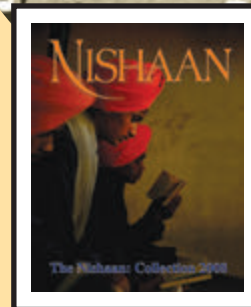
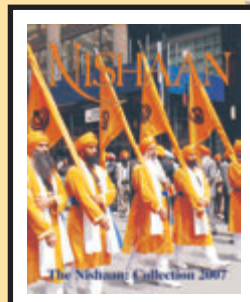
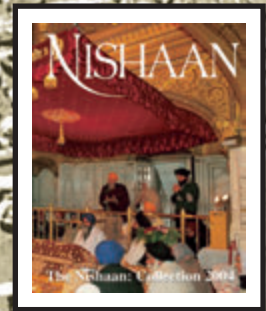
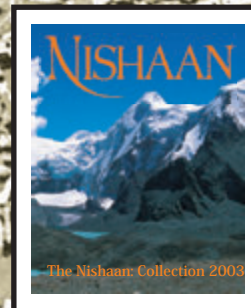
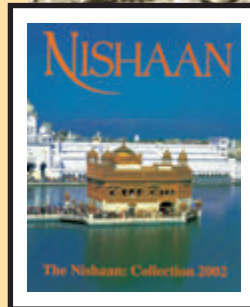
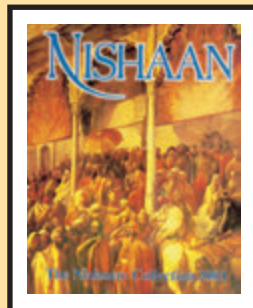
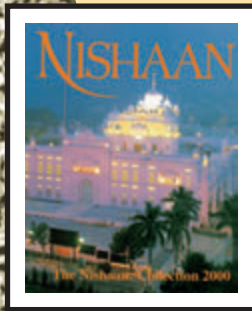


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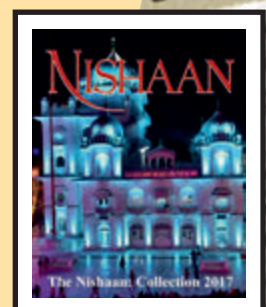
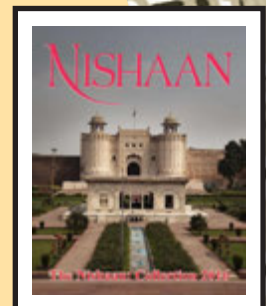
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