

Whose Freedom is it anyway? Some Reflections

BENDING HISTORY HAS BEEN A popular pastime of rulers over the ages. During the Mughal period in India, court historians beant over backwards to write what most pleased their masters.

As Delhi's hold over distant provinces weakened the Mughal governors' loyalty to their monarch also became tenuous. Zakariya Khan in Lahore not only assumed autonomous powers, he sided with the marauding Afghan, Ahmed Shah Abdali, and ruthlessly massacred the Sikhs during his 20-year reign.

The Shahidganj Gurdwara in Lahore, bears testimony to his brutality. There, his "*jallads*" had snatched infants from mothers and strung them up on spears – savagery that has become a poignant part of the daily Sikh *ardas*. But Indian history books are singularly silent about such 'minor' details.

Let us now switch the 'time machine' to 21st century. Recently, in a romantic throwback to 1857, Indian Parliament held a joint session to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the first freedom struggle, which the erstwhile colonial rulers had derisively dubbed 'the Sepoy Mutiny', then crushed it within weeks.

In the Parliament it was the courageous duo of Sardar Tarlochan Singh, MP (RS) and S. Charanjit Singh Atwal, Dy Speaker, Lok Sabha who reminded the august gathering that, while celebrating Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, and other heroes, Indians should not forget the Punjab war of 1845 and the heroism of Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala who fought the English and embraced death at Sabraon in 1846. Of the four Anglo-Sikh wars and heroism of the Khalsa army, Governor-General Lord Hardinge later wrote: **"Policy precludes me from publicly recording my sentiment on the gallantry of our fallen foe, or to record the acts of heroism displayed not only individually but also collectively, by the Sikh Sardars and the army..... I could have wept to have witnessed the slaughter of so devoted a body of men."**

It is well known how treachery led to the annexation of the kingdom of Punjab in 1849, even as the folk poet, Shah Mohammad lamented the absence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Punjab's legendary warrior-king:

Sw h muhmdw iek srkwr bwJoN

PojW ijq ky AMiq f hwrlAW ny]

Freedom is worth fighting for – and dying for – anytime, anywhere. It is a tragedy that on independence in 1947 the sub-continent had to suffer grievous dismemberment on both flanks, that too, on the basis of religion.

As we complete 60 years let us hope and pray that the centuries integrity will never be violated again. In this context a peaceful solution to the Jammu & Kashmir is of crucial importance, because Hindus and Sikhs have, for centuries, lived amicably with that State's Muslim majority, and also because the *Firdaus* (paradise) of India has, for too long, been smeared with blood of the innocent of all faiths. We recall with horror the Chittisingpura massacre of 40 Sikhs on March 20, 2000 –

ironically, the daily US President Bill Clinton stepped on the Indian soil on a state visit. The horrendous mystery has yet to be unravelled.

In his picturesque "*Discovery of India*" Nehru hails the 1857 revolt as "**the first national upsurge**" against colonial rule, but unfairly blames 'educated Bengalis of that time for choosing to remain neutral.' The book, is being serialized by Doordarshan TV as 'Bharat – Ek Khoj' (with Roshan Seth, as Nehru, narrating the events). Even as the British Governor-General in 1849 acknowledged the matchless bravery of the Sikhs, the Nehru narrative virtually skirts the inherent heroism of the Sikhs, while being unfair to Bengal.

Sr. Tarlochan Singh's intervention in Parliament reminds us of similar activism of Sr. Mehtab Singh Ji, (of Delhi Chief Khalsa Diwan) who, in 1993, sent us a copy of Piara Singh Padam's book "*Swatantarta Sangram Te Sikh*" (Punjabi) giving a stirring (but sketchy) account of the Sikhs' contribution to India's freedom struggle. He had hoped that, some day, some historian would undertake a comprehensive study of the Sikhs' contribution to liberation of India, not only from the Colonial Britain in 19th and 20th Century, but against invasions of Abdali from the northwest in the 18th Century.

