

# 1984: Twentyfive years on: Is it Time to Move Forward?

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WHAT WERE THE CAUSES and the events of the tragedy of 1984? We have laid them bare over the 25 years, so I will not touch them today, but will instead explore three interconnected issues:

1. *A la* President Ahmedenijad of Iran, there are a growing numbers of Indians (largely non-Sikhs) who are turning into deniers of history. Such a monumental injustice as we document, they claim, never really happened. What to make of them is the question.
2. Then there are Sikhs and non-Sikhs who ask us to leave the past behind and move forward. It is, they say, an ever more important and urgent necessity. Our religion teaches forgiveness.
3. Finally, there is our bafflement that the world won't acknowledge the grave injustice done to us.

The Sikh existential angst with India dates - not from 1984 but - is rooted in 1947 and earlier events. Today, I will not connect them to the reorganization of India on a linguistic basis, or Punjab's vital issue of diversion of its river waters, and many other such matters.

Truth, they say, is stranger than fiction. The India-born Englishman, Eric Arthur Blair, earned his fame as George Orwell when he made the year 1984 famous by his immortal fiction that highlighted the excesses of despotic governments, and their deceits against their own people.

The government of independent India literally immortalized the year 1984 by a reality that transcends even the best of Orwellian fiction.

1984 may have become the watershed that changed the relationship Sikhs have with the political entity that is India.

India is arguably the largest democracy in the world. Over the past years, many governments have come and gone in India as well as in Punjab. Now, 25 years later, how do Sikhs, particularly in the diaspora, come to terms with it?

It is a topic that will not go away, nor should it; it deserves debate and discussion.

The orchestrated killings of Sikhs in 1984 and beyond remind one of the genocidal killings of Armenians at the turn of the last century, the Holocaust of the Jews in Nazi Germany and the killings in Rwanda just 20 years ago. I would be the first to concede that the events of 1984 in India were on a much smaller scale than the three I listed.

The parallels come from the techniques used: how a government goes about demonizing a segment of its own citizenry, and how it manipulates public opinion, both within and without its borders.

1984 was not just a matter of three days in June and another three in November. Those days ran into each other and were followed by a decade of State-sponsored killings of Sikhs in Punjab.

Along with many others, I can confidently assert that if the state-sponsored violence in Punjab had been curbed or explored by an independent judiciary, and followed by even minimal justice, the killings of Muslims in Godhra and the destruction of a historically important mosque (*Babri Masjid*) - and now the targeting of Christians - would likely not have occurred. Perhaps "*Hindutva*" would not have become as potent a force in India as it has become.

What a difference 25 years make?

In June 1984, when the Indian army attacked the Harmandir (Golden Temple) in Amritsar and 40 other gurdwaras across Punjab, the government was able to ring Amritsar and Punjab with the heaviest security cordons even seen. No one - certainly not a Sikh - was able to cross it. No news filtered out on the fate of thousands of pilgrims gathered in Harmandir for the commemoration of Guru Arjan's martyrdom.

Brahma Chellaney, a reporter, tried to report on the attack and was charged instead with sedition.

In 1984, the Indian government exerted absolute and full control over all media - press, television and radio. Rumours abounded but not an iota of news filtered out.

The world has changed and how. In recent weeks, Iran has been in turmoil. But, despite its best efforts, the Iranian government failed to put a curtain of total isolation around the country. The news filtering out of Iran kept us glued to our televisions day and night.

Thanks to technology that did not exist in 1984 - the ubiquitous internet, cell phones, twittering and youtube - the whole world knew what happened on the streets in Tehran as it happened. The eyes of the world were upon Tehran, and the government held to some restraint and worldwide embarrassment.

Things were different in 1984.

Barely five months after the army attack of June, the Indian prime minister was assassinated and a reign of terror was let loose on unarmed Sikhs in Delhi and many cities across India. Once again, Sikhs were held up as the face of terrorism by the Indian government - in total disregard of the truth. And the world believed it.

The world has changed for the better. The iron control that was possible in 1984 can no longer happen. The way the Indian government tarred Sikhs as terrorists across the world is no longer possible. The ignorance that most Indians still live in about what exactly happened in 1984 would not exist.

India now has a government headed by a Sikh, Manmohan Singh, an internationally-acclaimed economist; the president until recently was a Muslim, Abdul Kalaam, a first rate nuclear scientist; the ruling political party headed by Sonia Gandhi who was raised Roman Catholic. For the first time, a Sikh general, J.J. Singh, headed India's army. And India's genius of economic planning is also a Sikh - Montek Singh Ahluwalia.

These are all remarkable "firsts" in modern India. For the first time in its history, the governing structure of India is multireligious, as it ought to be in a secular democratic nation.

Much has changed in India and the world but just as much remains tied to an unhealthy past.

Within hours of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, armed mobs in trucks carrying lists of Sikh-owned houses and businesses appeared in cities across India, including New Delhi. What followed was a systematic carnage of thousands of Sikh men, women and children. Credible witnesses labelled it attempted genocide by a government of its own people.

Why the charge stuck is not surprising if you know the socioeconomic realities of India in 1984 and since. Arms - guns and all kinds of ammunition - remain strictly controlled. Licenses for weapons are not freely available; they are expensive and require the filing of a zillion papers with a multitude of bureaucrats. Kerosene that was used to burn houses, businesses and victims is rationed - not freely available in the marketplace. Trucks are hard to come by. In those pre-Google days there was no way to download names and addresses of property owners.

How is it that a poor country could muster hordes of people within hours of Indira Gandhi's death and start them on a rampage? This speaks of awesome efficiency that is still not visible in much of Indian society.

Two days later, the carnage stopped as suddenly as it had begun, as if the job had been completed to the extent that it was desired and directed. Canny observers suspected the hand of the Indian government in the killings of Sikhs across India. After much stonewalling, the Indian government admitted that in Delhi alone over 2700 Sikhs were killed in the 48-hour period, but labelled the killings random acts of violence.

Where was the army, the third largest in the world? Safe in their barracks? The police stood by to watch, and even encouraged the killings.

Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded his mother Indira as the prime minister, continued to deny that there were any human rights violations in India, while reputable organizations like Amnesty International documented horrendous violations in Punjab and all over the country.

Six months later, under national and international pressure, Rajiv Gandhi signed a memorandum with Sikhs and agreed to an inquiry into the killings of 1984. Justice might happen, we thought.

One inquiry commission followed another only to leave the nation dumbfounded.

There were the Thakar Commission, Mishra Commission, Jain Commission, Banerjee Commission, Nanavati Commission, and many more - eleven inquiry commissions in 25 years.

Each started hopefully, only to end up with its report being buried. It is as if thousands of Sikhs mysteriously self-destructed in two days. This bespeaks unparalleled levels of incompetence or dishonesty by the judiciary and the government or, alternatively, of an efficient killing machine, the likes of which have never before been seen.

All these Commissions and their reports! I suppose this was really a war of attrition, with the hope of the Indian government that soon enough evidence would become lost or tainted and the perpetrators would be home free. In the meantime, the security forces of the Indian government killed thousands of Sikhs in Punjab, many in fake encounters, all without trials and in the name of national security.

In New York, an Indian government spokesman, chided us for raising this issue. He boldly asserted, "You Sikhs in the diaspora do not know the facts in Punjab. We killed not one innocent Sikh. Everyone shot by the police was a terrorist."

When I recovered from such an outrageous statement, all I could do was compliment him on the efficiency and training of the Punjab Police who could shoot a Sikh terrorist without the need to question him or give him his day in court. And I wondered aloud why the Delhi Police could not find any killers of Sikhs in so many years.

"Don't the police forces of Delhi and Punjab operate by the same laws and by the same training manuals," I asked? After all - 2700 killed in 48 hours, is more than 1200 in 24 hours, over 600 in 12 hours, about 50 an hour or almost 1 a minute. Fantastic!

He walked out of the panel.

The insurgency in Punjab ended over a decade ago but as yet there has been no attempt at a complete accounting of the dead and maimed.

All these reports! They are like the canary that coal miners carry into the mine-shafts with them. The canary warns them of unsafe air; the reports speak to the health of the Indian nation and the safety of its citizens. These canaries have sung their song. Actions must follow words.

In the 1990s, Yugoslavia and South Africa, both emerging out of a period of horrendous human rights violations, confronted their past by appointing "Truth and Reconciliation Commissions." Without such actions, a government risks losing its credibility - internally with its own citizens, and externally with the international community. Also due to neglect, the historical record is lost or tainted.

We, too, need to preserve history and to shift the focus of human rights in India from rhetoric to the healing power of truth and reconstruction.

India is the largest democracy on earth. India's and neighbouring Pakistan's nuclear capabilities make this an area ready to blow. India's human rights record is horrendous and has been documented by many international organizations.

Keep in mind the victimization, not only of Sikhs, but also of all minorities, like Christian and Muslims as well as low caste Hindus with the active collusion of the government, and with little hope of justice. There is more than ample reason for the world to pay attention to the fissiparous internal structure of India.

Why is it then that India appears to be protected by the hand of God? Despite our many efforts, we have not been able to draw much critical international attention to India and how it treats its own citizens.

Some nations, like some people, appear to have all the luck. They can do the most awfully ridiculous things, totally muck up everything and everyone around them, and yet come out smelling like a rose; it's like angels hover over them.

Others barely think of an evil thought and retribution is unfailingly sure and swift.

Some individuals, too, have this Teflon coating. Remember Ronald Reagan, the ultimate Teflon-coated president. Nothing tarnished his nobility - not even his misadventures all over the world. His predecessor, Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, had more than his share of good character, good intentions and intelligence, yet his was a failed presidency. Anything he did, however well intentioned, came to haunt him and diminish him.

Teflon coating is not a trait limited to products of the American political machine.

In India despite character lapses and policy failures, M. K. Gandhi had so much of it that he continues to be revered as Mahatma. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru's charisma was such that he was able to promote a family dynasty of heirs who progressively decimated India's democratic institutions.

It seems that India, as a nation, must also have this Teflon coating, or shall we call it the protective hand of God, even though, India's record on human rights is horrendous. Indian bureaucracy has a reputation for corruption that is second to none. India has been inconsistent, belligerent and hostile towards its neighbours.

Moreover, for many years, the nominally secular India's multi-religious fabric was ripped apart by the government that promoted and enshrined Hindu values and ethos (*Hindutva*) as official state policy. For instance, over 25 million Sikhs, adherents of a 500-year-old religion, are not even recognized as a separate religion, but are lumped under the Hindu laws for legal purposes in the Indian Constitution.

Why is it that when India acquires nuclear power or uses its formidable army to suppress its minorities or threaten its neighbours, no world organization or nation takes much notice? Why is it that when India engages in unfair trade practices and copyright infringements, the world community and particularly the United States, do not hold it accountable? Why are India's egregious violations of human rights swept aside?

Yet, how many nations like Iran and North Korea would be salivating for such a nuclear pact that India signed with the United States?

I know that some United States Senators and Congressmen approved non-binding resolutions and letters that are highly critical of India's human rights record or its nuclear policy. But there has been no concerted effort by the United States or any major voice in the United Nations to force India towards a more human and humane direction.

What gives India its Teflon coating in world affairs? It seems that India's good fortune may rest on a different set of global realities.

Some nations in Asia like Japan, Singapore and Malaysia have economies that are far more vibrant than those of India or China. But these nations are small. Asian giants remain China and India. China is larger, more populous and militarily stronger than India. In the post-Soviet world, if any nation has the potential of rivalling America, it is China. It is highly competitive and flexing its growing muscle, whether in the global economic marketplace or in space exploration. Its neighbours - Korea to Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan and even India - understand this. To America, China will likely always remain a competitor, even militarily.

In Asia, only one nation has the potential to rival China and that is India. India has the manpower, the infrastructure and a motivated middle class, but aspiring to become a power rivalling China is no easy matter. India understands this and in the heyday of the Soviets, nurtured their friendship to enhance its own global ambitions. But now, as the only superpower, the United States is the only nation that can play India's protective nanny.

It is a matter rooted in the bitter reality of geopolitics - a la Henry Kissinger. The United States needs to nurture a rival to China that is both economically formidable and militarily strong. As long as the Indian economic engine keeps chugging along, its sins will be forgiven. America doesn't ever again want a bipolar world, where China becomes the only

major superpower in Asia that can challenge American hegemony in the world, as the Soviets used to do. A strong vibrant India can keep China in check.

Such a goal is also in India's own interest. Pakistan does not have the infrastructure, the population or the resources. It is too small and fragile. More importantly, it is an Islamic state with nuclear technology, which it has tried to share with its Islamic neighbours. Can you imagine our troubles if the Muslim nations of the world came together in the name of religion? It would change the realities of the Middle East and of global politics in a trice. How secure would our oil supplies be or our lifestyle?

America's cause in the world is not necessarily democracy, justice and human rights, notwithstanding George W. Bush's or even Barack Obama's claims to the contrary. It is geopolitical realities and the balance of power that drives us. Not many American allies in the developing world ever had a democratic notion in their heads. And India shines like a star, even though it acts at times more like a glorified banana republic.

So, to my Sikh friends, and other minorities in India, who are daily frustrated by India's divisive policies, and who wonder how America can close its eyes to India's sins against humanity, I would say - welcome to the reality of this world at this time.

So mine is essentially not an anti-India tirade at all; it is a global perspective.

How then to commemorate 1984 so that it makes a positive difference in the world, to India, and to Sikhs.

We are talking of matters that happened over two decades ago. Isn't it time to move on and not become prisoners of our past? To move forward we must put the past behind us. Confession and atonement must precede redemption.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took the first step of confession when he offered the nation's regret and apology in the Indian parliament; atonement and justice still wait.

Such actions don't come easy to governments. Just look at the case of the 120,000 Japanese interned in America during the Second World War. An apology came 50 years later from President Bill Clinton.

Our oral history needs to be preserved, like the Jews have been doing with theirs. I propose a Sikh Research & Documentation Center affiliated with a University.

Let us collaborate with museums to establish appropriate exhibits, and with universities to preserve the historical record - oral history, recordings, relics, visual artifacts, correspondence, reports and personal recollections. And ensure that the material is available to researchers of any bent - particularly to those who deny that such atrocities ever occurred.

*An aside:* Even today more than 60 years later, many Jews will not buy a Volkswagen - a wonderful little car, but it was developed under Nazi patronage.

Jascha Heifetz, Russian born American Jew and a violinist of the first order, and Arthur Rubinstein, a legendary pianist, would not enter Germany to perform.

Such is the bitterness of the holocaust. Others are different - the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin had no such compunctions.

There are surely Sikhs on both sides of the spectrum. Let them be.

India and Indians now tell us that 1984 was a mere blip on the stellar record of the world's most populous democracy, and the killings were just "those bad or unfortunate times" that happened 25 years ago. The past will only hold us back, they say. The new mantra is that India is now on a fast track of moving forward and no one and no nation can tie India down.

The deniers of history tell us the "troubles" of 1984 lasted only two days in Delhi. The reason that no more than a handful of people have been charged with the wholesale killings of Sikhs over those two days, they claim, is because no more than a handful died. In any case, it was anti-Sikh *rioting* - spontaneous because the country's beloved prime minister had been assassinated.

This is the same old litany of half-truths and distortions. It is not a measure of moving forward.

To put a genocidal killing spree together within hours speaks of a sea change in management skills that has not been seen in India before or since. That's why I don't label it as anti-Sikh *riots*. There was no spontaneity to the violence. Riots they were not.

The history, the attempted genocidal killings, the 11 commissions in 25 years! To put all this aside is not a measure of moving forward.

Yet, as our friends say, we must move forward. The ball and chain of the past will not save us.

The past is a prologue to the future. Without our connection to history, we become like an untethered balloon floating off to somewhere we may not want to go. But the past must not hold us back fixed in one place in time and space.

World opinion would likely not come to our aid all that readily. Why? Because global realities and geopolitics tell us so.

India is the only possible counterweight to China's growing heft in Asia. Also, we need to keep the Islamic world in check - it sits astride the world's oil resources and has access to a nuclear arsenal. India is ideally suited geographically and strategically to help manage the stalemate.

Yet, to deny the logic of the injustice done to the Sikhs is Orwellian. It does not wash.

To establish a Research & Documentation Center is moving forward. To work for Truth & Reconciliation Process is moving forward.

To move beyond such horrendous sins requires that we face them, acknowledge them and atone for them. And then we can carry forward with us the lessons learned.

How then to accomplish all that?

The Indian judiciary, never entirely independent, can deliver a modicum of justice. We need to cultivate international human rights organizations. Progress will come albeit very slowly.

A "*Truth & Reconciliation Commission?*" It requires some truth and a lot of honesty, no matter how embarrassing it appears to be. This could even be liberating. Many nations - Sierra Leone, Argentina, Bolivia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, Timor and Peru have trod this path.

India needs to.

From such a step, honestly undertaken, neither the Indian government nor the Sikh leadership is likely to emerge unscarred and unscathed.

I think of all the times that we Sikhs have been accused of acting without patience and having gone too far. Now I know that we have been patient long enough and that we did not go far enough.

Now 25 years and 11 Inquiry Commissions later, I would say: "Years from now, historians will reconstruct history from what we say and do today. Never let the story die." □