

# 1984 Attack on Akal Takht

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*"When Mrs. Gandhi was told that Operation Blue Star had started, she must have wondered whether it would provide the decisive inspiration for the Sikh independence movement..."*

It was BETWEEN ten and ten-thirty in the evening (of June 5, 1984) that Major General Brar decided he must launch a frontal attack on the Akal Takht. Commandos from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, wearing black denims, were ordered to run down the steps under the clock tower on to the *parikrama*, or pavement, turn right and move as quickly as they could round the edge of the sacred tank to the Akal Takht. But as the paratroopers entered the main gateway of the Temple they were mown down. Most of the casualties were caused by Sikhs with light machine-guns who were hiding on either side of the steps leading down to the *parikrama*. The few commandos who did go down the steps were driven back by a barrage of fire from the buildings on the south side of the sacred pool. In the control room, in a house on the opposite side of the clock-tower square, Major-General Brar was waiting anxiously with his two superior officers to hear that the commandos had established position inside the complex. When no report came through he was heard over the command network saying, "*You bastards, why don't you go in?*"

## **Withering Fire:**

The few commandos who survived regrouped in the square outside the Temple, and reported back to Major-General Brar. He reinforced them and ordered them to make another attempt to go in. The commandos were to be followed by the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Guards Commanded by a Muslim, Lieutenant Colone Israr Khan. This battalion had Sikh soldiers in its ranks. The second commando attack managed to neutralise the machine gun posts on either side of the steps and get down on to the *parikrama*. They were followed by the Guards who came under withering fire and were not able to make any progress towards their objective, the Akal Takht. Lt. Colonel Israr Khan radioed for permission to fire back at the buildings on the other side of the tank. That would have meant that the Golden Temple itself, which is in the middle of the tank, would have been in the line of fire. Brar refused permission. He still believed it would be possible to achieve all his objectives, including preserving the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht intact. But then he started to get messages from the commander of the Guards reporting heavy casualties. They had suffered almost 20 percent casualties without managing to turn the corner of the *parikrama* to the western side of the complex where the Akal Takht is situated. The Guards were not only being fired at from the northern and western sides. Sikhs would also suddenly appear from man-holes in the *parikrama* the Guards were fighting from, let off a burst of machine-gun fire or throw lethal grenades, made in the complex itself, and disappear into the passages which run under the Temple. These machine-gunnners had been taught to fire at knee-level because Major-General Shahbeg Singh expected the army to crawl towards its objective. But the Guards and commandos were not crawling, and so many of them received severe leg injuries.

### **Casualties:**

Brar then decided on a change of plan. As he said after the battle, 'I realised that it was difficult for the battalion to progress operation any further and there was no point in them remaining at the ground floor level. Unless you got on to the first floor and to the rooftop, and got it to control the situation, you would continue suffering casualties. So the task given to them was, under all circumstances, to get a lodgment in spite of all the casualties they had suffered and I must give full credit to the battalions commander, a very dashing young soldier, Lt. Colonel Israr Khan, who rallied his boys together and worked his way up and did succeed in getting an alignment in this particular area.' That allotment enabled the Guards to neutralize some of the positions on the south side of the tank, but they were still hampered by the order not to fire in any directions, which would endanger either of the historic shrines.

### **Pincer Movement:**

In spite of the very heavy firing, some of the commandos did manage to get round that corner of the *parikrama* and make their way to the courtyard in front of the Akal Takht. But they fought their way into a lethal trap. The Akal Takht itself was heavily fortified; there were sandbag and brick gun emplacements in its windows and arches, and holes had been made in its sacred marble to provide firing positions. On either side of the shrine are buildings, which overlook the courtyard. They had been fortified too, as had the *Toshakhana* or Temple Treasury opposite the Akal Takht and the houses, which overlooked the building from behind. So when the commandos got into the courtyard, bullets rained down on them from all sides. They were driven back suffering 30 percent casualties. The courtyard in front of the Akal Takht had been turned, in Major-General Brar's words, 'into a killing ground'. To make matters worse, there was no sign of the Madrasis who were meant to be entering the Golden Temple complex from the southern side to form the other half of a pincer movement on the Akal Takht. When it became clear that the Madrasis had either got bogged down or lost in the narrow alleys, Brar asked his superiors for permission to use troops from another Division the 15<sup>th</sup>. The infantry from his own division was fully deployed. The Guards were inside the Temple on the northern side, the Madrasis were trying to make their way to the eastern entrance the Kumaons were clearing the hostel complex, and the Biharis had thrown a cordon round the Temples. Their main responsibility was to ensure that neither Bhindranwale nor any of his followers escaped.

Lt.-General Sunderji and Dayal agreed to reinforcing the operation and so two companies of the 5<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles were put under Brar's command. The Garhwals also come from the foothills of the Himalayas in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Brar ordered them to enter the Temple from the southern side and try to relieve the pressure on the Guards and the commandos on the northern side. As soon as they entered the southern gate they came under heavy fire. An officer of the Garhwals said. 'They seemed to be firing on us from *everywhere*. It was impossible to know where to fire back.' But the Garhwals did manage to establish a position on the roof of the Temple library. Their commanding officer reported this to his Brigadier. A. K. Dewan.

### **Thin Tempers:**

Dewan was very much a soldier's soldier, always wanting to be in the thick of it. The Brigadier should have left the fighting inside the complex to the battalion officers, but he could not resist the temptation to join in himself. The Lieutenant Colonel commanding the Garhwals tried to dissuade him, saying that his men were under very heavy fire, but this was an added attraction for Dewan. When he got into the Temple he reported to Major-General Brar on the wireless. Brar, whose temper was wearing a little thin by this time, could be heard over the whole network shouting at Dewan: "What the hell are you doing in there? I am in command of this operation. You don't move without my orders.'

Then Brar calmed down and asked Dewan to stay inside and let him have a *sitrep* as soon as possible. Dewan realised that it was very unlikely that the Guards and the commandos would be able to achieve their objective. But he did reckon that his position on the southern side was fairly secure and that if he could reinforce it, he might be able to storm the Shrine. When he reported this back to Brar he was given permission to call up two companies of the 15<sup>th</sup> Kumanos. By this time the operation had been in progress for about two hours and Brar was nowhere near achieving his objective. His short, sharp commando operation had got bogged down; so he decided to allow Dewan to fight his own battle inside the Temple complex.

### **Retreat:**

Dewan made repeated attempts to storm the Akal Takht but each time the Kumaons or Garhwals turned the corner of the *parikrama* and ran into the courtyard in front of the Akal Takht, they came under withering fire and had to retreat. Dewan himself was striding up and down the southern side of the *parikrama* encouraging his men. But their task was impossible. Although both the northern and southern sides of the *parikrama* were by now in the control of the army, they had not been able to make any impression on the main fortress and the defences surrounding it, and the four companies had suffered 137 casualties. Of course they were still hampered by the order not to fire in any direction which would endanger the Golden Temple.

Dewan decided to wait for the Madrasis who were still trying to get to the Temple complex and then make one last attempt to storm the Akal Takht. The Madrasis eventually made it at about three o'clock in the morning, some five hours late. They came into the Temple complex through the gate on the hostel side. When they entered heavy firing was still going on and it was dark. In the confusion the Madrasis opened fire on Dewan's troops. The Brigadier shouted, 'Don't shoot! I am the deputy GOC!' When that little 'cock-up', as one officer put it, had been sorted out, Dewan launched his final attack.

### **Charge of the Light Brigade:**

There was no way anyone could get into that fortress without taking out its defences first. Dewan's repeated charges were as futile as the charge of the Light Brigade, and he now realised it. He got on the wireless and told Brar that he would have to call up tanks to bombard the Akal Takht. He said, 'I can't afford to lose any more men. I can't accept defeat.' Brar later told the press his version of what happened next:

‘The infantry was in danger of being massacred. . . . Hesitatingly I had to ask my superiors that I must take a tank in. I cannot allow the infantry now to get massacred. The infantry just cannot carry on doing the impossible task. I must say that the reaction was instantaneous and that was due to the fact that both Thy commanders were sitting barely fifteen metres away as the line of sight is from the scene of action.’

### **Tanks to the Fore:**

Sunderji’s reaction was not instantaneous. He first contacted Delhi where a special operations room had been set up to keep track of the battle. The Deputy Defence Minister, K. P. Singh Deo, a former army officer himself, was in charge, assisted by Rajiv Gandhi’s most trusted aide, Arun Singh, who, although not a practicing Sikh, came from one of the Punjab royal families. The army and the government were now faced with a dilemma. Sunderji had always insisted that the operation must be completed by daybreak, otherwise his men inside the Temple would be sitting ducks for Bhindranwale’s snipers. There could be no question of withdrawing and trying again the next night, because the news that Bhindranwale and Shahbeg Singh had forced the Indian army to withdraw would certainly leak out somehow. That would have disastrous consequences in the villages of Punjab and among Sikhs in the army. The only answer seemed to be tanks. They were the only equipment with the firepower and the accuracy to blast a way into Bhindranwale’s fortress. But tanks meant that the army would fail in one of its tasks – the preservation of the Akal Takht. They also meant the horrifying prospect of one mistake by a gunner seriously damaging the Golden Temple itself. In the end, Delhi agreed that the tanks should be used and a message was sent back to Lieutenant-General Sunderji, nearly two hours after ‘Chicken’ Dewan had asked for them.

In the meanwhile Major-General Brar had made one more effort to get his men into the Akal Takht. He called up a Skot OT64 armoured personnel carrier. Tanks had to break down the steps leading to the *parikrama* from the hostel side so that the eight wheeled, Polish-built APC could get in. The aim was to drive the APC right up to the Akal Takht so that the men from the mechanised infantry, one of the newest units of the Indian army, could get into the fortress under the cover of its wall. But as the armoured personnel carrier approached the Akal Takht it came under fire from two Chinese made, rocket-propelled grenade launchers. One of the grenades found its target and the armoured personnel carrier was knocked out. The Captain commanding the platoon was wounded.

### **Out-witted:**

This forced the Generals to rethink their strategy once again. They had no intelligence reports of Shahbeg Singh having armour-piercing weapons at his disposal. Even the tanks, which had by now made their way on to the *parikrama* to await government clearance to open fire, were now at risk, although the maximum armour of the tanks was more than twice as thick as the APC’s. The tanks had been trying to blind the marksmen in Bhindranwale’s fortress with their searchlights. As soon as Brar realised that the enemy had armour-piercing weapons, he ordered the tank commanders to switch off their searchlights. The tanks had ploughed up the *parikrama*, each of whose marble slabs was inscribed with the name of the devotee who had donated it to the Temple.

### **Akal Takht Bombarded:**

The Vijayanta was the army's main battle tank, being an Indian-built version of the Vickers 38-ton tank. When the orders came, they opened up with their main armament. Photographs of the shattered shrine indicate quite clearly that the Vijayantas 105 mm main armaments pumped high-explosive squash-head shells into the Akal Takht. Those shells were designed for use against 'hard targets' like armour and fortifications. When the shells hit their targets, their heads spread or 'squash' on to the hard surface. Their fuses are arranged to allow a short delay between the impact and the shells igniting, so that a shock-wave passes through the target and a heavy slab of armour or masonry is forced away from the inside of the armoured vehicle or fortification. Lieutenant-General Jagjit Singh Aurora, who studied the front of the Akal Takht before it was repaired, reckoned that as many as eighty of these lethal shells could have been fired into the shrine. The advantage of a tank's main armament is that it fires with pinpoint accuracy. Indian army officers talk of the Vijayanta's ability to post shells through letterboxes.

The effect of this barrage on the Akal Takht was devastating. The whole of the front of the sacred shrine was destroyed, leaving hardly a pillar standing. Fires broke out in many of the different rooms blackening the marble walls and wrecking the delicate decorations dating from Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time. They included marble inlay, plaster and mirror work, and filigree partitions. The gold-plated dome of the Akal Takht was also badly damaged by artillery fire. At one stage during the night Major-General Brar had ordered his Colonel (Administration) to mount a 3-7 inch Howell gun on to the roof of a building behind the shrine and fire at the dome in an attempt to frighten the Sikhs into surrender. Brar explained to his Colonel, 'Maybe the noise and the sting will have its effect.'

The artillery did not scare Bhindranwale's men; but the tank barrage was a different matter. The effect it must have had is impossible to imagine. As shockwave after shockwave rocked the building, the gallant, if misguided, defenders must have feared it was going to come down on top of them. Deafened by the explosions, they were driven to the back of the building by the flames and falling masonry. The deadly machine-gun fire which had been raining down on the army stopped.

Still sporadic resistance continued from some of the buildings overlooking the courtyard in front of the Akal Takht. By now it was light and Brar decided it was too dangerous to make the final assault necessary to re-establish control over the shrine from which Bhindranwale and Shahbeg Singh had withstood the Indian infantry attack. So Brigadier Dewan was ordered not to follow up the tank attack until darkness fell again. The three Generals at the command post knew that they had knocked out Bhindranwale's fortress, but they still faced the agonizing possibility that the Sant himself might have escaped.

### **Mendacity:**

After the battle Brar told the press that only one tank had been driven on to the *parikrama*, and that it had only fired its secondary armament, a 7.62mm machine-gun. But the damage to the Akal Takht tells a different story. There was no machine-gun which could have brought down so much masonry, and the shell marks were clearly those of high-explosive squash-heads. As for

the number of tanks involved, other officers Satish Jacob talked to said that as many as six were brought into the complex. As one Vijayanta only carries forty-four rounds of main armament ammunition, it is certain that more than one was used. It also seems likely that the gunners fired from more than one position because the Golden Temple itself was in their arc of fire, standing as it does in the middle of the sacred *sarovar*.

The battle for the Akal Takht was not the only one raging that night. Across the road running along the eastern side of the Golden Temple complex, another battalion of the Kumaon Regiment was involved in the second operation that Lieutenant-General Sunderji had been ordered to carry out. He had been told by the government to 'prevent internecine fighting between the two major groups lodged in the Temple and the hostel complexes, the one of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the second of Mr. Longowal and his followers. To prevent the two groups fighting each other, the Generals had decided that the hostel complex housing Longowal and his men must be cleared at the same time as the Golden Temple.

The first problem was to get into the complex. The iron gates at the top of the public road between the hostels and the Temple had been barred. A tank had to break them down. Armoured cars were then positioned along that road to separate the two battlefields, and the 9<sup>th</sup> Kumaons moved in. They came under fire from the roofs on both sides of the road but, unlike their colleagues inside the Temple complex, they managed to fight their way into the buildings they had been ordered to clear.

Most of the terrified pilgrims, supporters of the Akali Morcha, and of course the two members of the Akali Trinity with their staff were huddled together in two buildings. They were without water because the water tower had been destroyed during the preliminary operations, and without electricity. Longowal, Tohra, and some of their senior colleagues were in Tohra's office on the ground floor of the Teja Singh Samundari Hall. The SGPC Secretary, Bhan Singh, later described the situation in that building:

'They cut our electricity and water supplies. It was very hot in the rooms. There was no water. We had only two plastic buckets of water. Longowal had to place two people as guards over the buckets. Many people would squeeze their undershirts to drink their sweat to quench their thirst.'

The army entered the Teja Singh Samundari Hall at about one o'clock in the morning. According to one officer, Tohra and Longowal were in their vests and underpants. The army says they surrendered. Bhan Singh did not accept that statement. He said, 'We did not give ourselves up. The army forced its way in and took us prisoners.' That is really just a matter of semantics. What is absolutely clear is that Longowal and Tohra made no attempt to resist the army.

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The White Paper admitted that seventy people, including thirty women and five children, died in that incident; but the government put all the blame on the terrorists, saying nothing about the army firing.

According to Bhan Singh, the survivors were made to sit in the courtyard of the Guru Ram Das Hostel until curfew was lifted the next evening. He said they were not given food, drink or medical aid. Some people, according to the SGPC Secretary, drank water which had poured out of the tank the army had blown up and had formed puddles in the courtyard. Karnail Kaur, a young mother of three children, who had come with sixty-five other people from her village to join in Longowal's agitation, said, 'When people begged for water some jawans [soldiers] told them to drink the mixture of blood and urine on the ground.'

Bhan Singh also told the journalist and historian, Khushwant Singh, that the army did shoot some of the young men they had brought out from the Teja Singh Samundari Hall. He said:

'I saw about thirty-five or thirty-six Sikhs lined up with their hands raised above their heads. And the major was about to order them to be shot. When I asked him for medical help, he got into a rage, tore my turban off my head, and ordered his men to shoot me. I turned back and fled, jumping over bodies of the dead and injured, and saved my life crawling along the walls. I got to the room where Tohra and Sant Longowal were sitting and told them what I had seen. Sardar Karnail Singh Nag, who had followed me, also narrated what he had seen, as well as the killing of thirty-five to thirty-six young Sikhs by cannon fire. All of these young men were villagers.'

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Inside the Guru Ram Das Hostel, where the rooms were crowded with pilgrims, conditions were reminiscent of the Black Hole of Calcutta. The schoolteacher Ranbir Kaur and her husband he locked themselves into Room 141 with the twelve children they were looking after. Ranbir Kaur said:

'We were all huddled together. We didn't know what was happening. The noise was terrifying. We had not been out of the room for more than twenty-four hours and we had no food or water. It was a very hot summer night. I told the children that we must be ready to die. They kept on crying.'

The Kumaon Regiment also entered the Hostel at about one o'clock in the morning and ordered everyone to come out; but this was not the end of their ordeal. Ranbir Kaur described what happened next:

'Early on the sixth morning the army came into the Guru Ram Das Serai and ordered all those in the rooms to come out. We were taken into the courtyard. The men were separated from the women. We were also divided into old and young women and so I was separated from the children, but I managed to get back to the old women. When we were sitting there the army released 150 people from the basement. They were asked why they had not come out earlier. They said the door had been locked from the outside. **They were asked to hold up their hands and then they were shot after fifteen minutes.** Other young men were told to untie their turbans. They were used to tie their hands behind their backs. The army hit them on the head with the butts of their rifles.

Two young Sikhs, Sardul Singh and Maluk Singh, who had gone to the Golden Temple to celebrate Guru Arjun's martyrdom day, were not released when the army entered the hostel. An elder from their village wrote to the Sikh President of India Zail Singh, about their experiences. In his letter the elder Sajjan Singh Margindpuri, said:

'The young men and some other pilgrims were staying in Room Number 61. The army searched all the norms of the Serai. Nothing objectionable was found from their room. Nor did the army find anything objectionable on their persons. The army locked up sixty pilgrims in that room and shut not only the door but the window also. Electric supply was disconnected. The night between June 5<sup>th</sup> and June 6<sup>th</sup> was extremely hot. The locked-in young men felt very thirsty after some time, and loudly knocked on the door from inside to ask the army men on duty for water. They got abuses in return, but no water. The door was not opened. Feeling suffocated and extremely thirsty, the men inside began to faint and otherwise suffer untold misery. The door of the room was opened at 8 a.m. on June 6<sup>th</sup>. By this time fifty-five out of sixty had died. The remaining five were also semi-dead.'

The five survivors of that night of horror were arrested by the army and taken away to interrogation camps. So were Ranbir Kaur, her husband, and the children in their care. Two months later three of the children that Ranbir Kaur had been looking after were released after a well-known social worker had filed a petition in the Supreme Court in Delhi. Ranbir Kaur was released at the end of August. She rejoined the three children who had been released but no one could tell her what had happened to the other nine.

