

## 1984: Reflections and Recollection

SINCE 1984 A WHOLE NEW generation of Sikhs has ushered in an era of spectacular success and entrepreneurial skills, as doctors, lawyers, builders, bankers, and professionals in every field, both in India and abroad. Many of them are sons and daughters of devout parents who chose to leave the shores of India in the wake of the fateful 1984. Twenty years on, the contours of Sikh culture have broken geographical barriers. Sikhs are as much at home in New Zealand or Australia as in New York, Los Angeles, Vancouver or Toronto, not to mention the migration, a hundred and more years ago, of working families who established themselves in Kenya, Malaysia and Singapore.

In the present times, Amritsar has become one of the world's top ten tourist destinations. The Golden Temple shines again in the middle of the shimmering *sarovar*, even as the Akal Takht domes reach up to the blue skies and *Bungas* rise seven storeys high. There is no trace of the traumatic tragedy that struck the holy precincts in June 1984. But a total recall is vital for posterity. We publish, in this issue, eyewitness account of the "horrendous debacle" that was Operation Bluestar.\*

In an earlier age, Indians in general and Sikhs in particular experienced another catastrophe of gargantuan proportions: Partition of Punjab and exodus of millions of Sikhs and Hindus from West Punjab, NWFP, Sind and Baluchistan. The arbitrary and precipitate decision to carve out Pakistan made by the last British Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, and his 'interim' cabinet headed by Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, spelt a catastrophe which resulted in the loss of over a million people and uprooted many more millions, from the land of their forefathers hallowed by Guru Nanak and unified by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

None of the national leaders (barring perhaps Mahatma Gandhi) had any inkling of the enormity and scale of human suffering, much less of the deep anguish and deprivation caused by the exclusion of Nankana Sahib and hundreds of holy shrines, from East Punjab territory. A little known English barrister, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, hurriedly commissioned by the Viceroy, determined the borders between two Punjab. Despite the disastrous Partition, the hardy Sikh farmers in less than two decades blazed the trail of a Green Revolution. In ten years from 1966 to 1976, India's cereal production doubled from 50 million tonnes to 110 million tonnes, propelled by phenomenal contribution from the scientists of the Punjab Agri University and Indian Agri. Research Institute.

Surely free India owed the Sikhs the "glow of freedom" promised by Nehru as far back as 1946. But federal autonomy in free India remained a distant dream. When the Indian Union was reorganised on 'linguistic basis' in 1956, Punjab was bypassed. It was not until 1966 that a "shrunk moth-eaten Punjabi suba" was conceded - without the city of Chandigarh which, though conceived and built as the new capital of Punjab, was designated as a Union Territory. At the end of their tether, the Sikh leaders, under the aegis of Shiromani Akali Dal, hammered out a *Magna Carta* called the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1970s. As expected, this resolution, embodying the realistic and dignified goals, was dubbed as a 'secessionist document' by the Centre, as well as the media which was then largely controlled by loyalist press barons.

Not long afterwards, in June 1975, the government under Indira Gandhi promulgated an emergency, partly to suppress the Sikh unrest but mainly to counter Jaya Prakash Narayan's "total revolution". Hundreds of Sikh leaders, and others, including the ailing 'JP', were arrested and detained under MISA (abbr. for Maintenance of Internal Security Act) - the forerunner of TADA. The popular movement however fizzled out because of sheer incompetence of leadership after JP passed away. The largely apathetic masses in 1980 re-elected the Congress, and Indira Gandhi was once again the PM. She promptly dismissed the Akali government in Punjab and brought the state under President's rule. No wonder the unrest in Punjab grew apace and brought to the forefront the charismatic Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who, in a meteoric career, became the rallying point for the frustrated and disillusioned youth. Blamed and praised by foe and friend, he became a cult figure sought by every politician. Even the Akali leadership felt sidelined, and the Centre's half-hearted attempts at negotiations proved fruitless. Indira Gandhi never forgave the Sikhs whose seething discontent boiled over into sporadic violence, followed by repressive police action. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale emerged as the sole spokesman and conscience keeper of the younger Sikhs. To add to the confusion, Sanjay the younger son of Indira Gandhi tried to win over the *Sant* in order to isolate Akalis.

In every age, lust for power has been the enemy of justice. It is the breeding ground for sychophancy. Just as the emergency had been imposed in 1975 without a collective cabinet decision, the situation in Punjab was handled by a coterie of loyalist henchmen, Arun Nehru and Arun Singh, both close confidantes of Rajiv Gandhi. Early in 1984 even as Mrs Gandhi kept a facade of negotiations with sundry Sikh leaders, the triumvirate of Rajiv and "the Aruns" had already started rehearsing a full scale Army assault on Amritsar. Historian Bipan Chandra and veteran journalist Kuldeep Nayar pleaded with PM not to invade Amritsar. This writer (then a retired civil servant fairly recognised by prime minister) was also given an appointment to see the PM in mid-May of 1984. But the telephonic summons never came because she 'remained busy in the Parliament'. The opportunity simply slipped away. Not that it would have made any difference.

A bizarre parallel consists in the aftermath of 9/11, wherein the USA President George Bush made up his mind to invade Iraq - avowedly to destroy WMD, unmindful of the consequence. How a single individual can change the course of history remains a matter of perennial debate. In 1919 it was Brig General Dwyer who precipitated the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar. In 1984 India's home minister PC Sethi assured the Parliament that 'force would not be used in Amritsar.' Of course, Sethi had no inkling of the invasion that the PM's son and his cohorts were planning with exquisite precision. Even Gyani Zail Singh, then several months into the highest office of President of India, was not kept in the picture. He was told only when the troops had laid seige to the holy city in the end of May 1984 and the Punjab border had been sealed. All journalists including foreign correspondents were summarily ejected. As Ketherine Frank observes, Delhi deliberately played the "Hindu card" and kept the Sikh leadership divided. Indeed, the PM's broadcast to the nation on 2 June 1984, gave no indication of the army invasion and appealed to the people: "Don't shed blood, shed hatred", - precisely when she had preordained the bloodiest assault on the heart of Sikhism.

Many Hindus applauded and celebrated the army action. As her biographer points out, “after the June 1984 (invasion) Indira Gandhi was assailed by an obsessive fear of assassination, and she performed *puja* to ward off any evil consequences. She even prepared a will, and later publicly gave vent to her fears during a visit to Orissa on 29-30 October. A Sikh commander Major General KS Brar had been handpicked for the operation. His comment: “We went in with prayer on our lips” was pregnant with irony, considering that some 300 bullets riddled Harmandar Sahib, and an unknown number of the best preserved sacred manuscripts dating back to Guru Arjun Dev Ji went up in flames at the Darshani Deorhi - entrance to santum sanctorum. The gallant Indian army had behaved like Nazi storm troopers. The number of the men, women and children who were killed far exceeded the official figures given in a hurriedly cobbled *White Paper*.

One does not have to be a cold hearted cynic to deal with memories. In fact history has a strange way of repeating itself when people tend to forget the sacrifices and sufferings of their forefathers, or the atrocities and repression perpetrated by the rulers.

