

The Last Sikh Prisoners of Conscience in India

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IN THE LAST TWO DECADES MANY Sikhs were subjected to torture, which was brutal and imprisonment involving ad hoc executions in India. Some of these Sikhs were part of the Resistance Movement, others were not. It was a catastrophic situation and unfortunately most human rights groups could not get a grip on the situation, and were egotistical enough to pay lip service to collaboration, while wanting a monopoly on the Sikh Genocide. Human rights groups were simply not equipped and emerged out of nowhere, with no understanding of human rights save the human emotion to do something.

A similar situation has emerged amongst the human rights groups in Kashmir. One of the areas the human rights groups never could connect to, especially the ones who monopolized Sikh human rights in the West, was the humanitarian disaster that 15 years of repression did to the Punjab. Victims of torture and victims of police repression were never given aid and the Indian state did its best to ensure that any potential aid was blocked. Add to this the general humanitarian help which people could have coordinated by way of contributions to individual families, and you begin to understand why writing letters to prisoners of conscience could never happen. There were no Sikh systems in place, and those groups and organizations in the West never worked earnestly to create them despite being subjected to the scrutiny of Western agencies and non access to Punjab directly. Many human rights groups and individuals in Punjab struggled alone, even after the repressive years up till 1997 ended, indeed to this day.

“British lawyer Peter Benenson launched Amnesty International in 1961. His newspaper appeal, “The Forgotten Prisoners”, was published worldwide on 28 May 1961 and brought in more than 1,000 offers of support for the idea of an international campaign to protect human rights. The Irish Section of Amnesty International was founded at around the same time by, amongst others, the late Seán MacBride.” (Lynch and Power). But Why have the Sikhs forgotten their own prisoners through the past twenty years?

What is quite difficult to reflect on, from a personal view, is why the Sikh masses globally never considered writing letters to the Sikh prisoners of conscience, especially when there were vast numbers held directly from Operation Blue Star in places like Jodhpur? So called prisoners who were survivors of the Amritsar massacre had been traumatized with the massacre, or were students who had pledged to honour the Sikh nation, and in some cases had put their lives on the line. Whilst other so called prisoners were people -women and children - survivors of the Amritsar massacre. Some children were as young as three, and put in jail on suspicion of terrorism and yet were the victims of witnessing and surviving the Amritsar massacre, so called Operation Blue Star. It is quite difficult to gauge why the Sikhs in the West were unable to provide proper humanitarian aid in all these years. **It is quite essential that sikhs not just focus on dissertations on their theology, on their history, but on this disastrous contemporary history of repression, and analyse the role and trauma suffered further.** The use of

agencies, and Delhi as a block by the state didn't help, nor did the continuous oppression from 1984 through to the mid 1990's.

Yet the Sikh masses globally seemed to have been media brain-washed, gurdwara platforms sabotaged, and general chaos brought in, as well as self induced apathy, which made Sikhs very inward looking, and simply relying on the Indian press or non investigative local papers to tell them what was what.

It also made the Sikh masses unaware that they had to do something on an individual basis, and not to rely on Sikh systems and organizations which were not able to, nor wanted to operate effectively. It is still the case that most Sikhs imagine someone, somewhere is doing the work through an organization and the hype of certain groups does not help. Real, active work is rare, if not non-existent to reach the persecution survivors in Punjab today.

However, we as Sikhs, even in our consciences, never considered it important to send a letter of prayer to a political prisoner. If it had been China, if it had been Cuba or Bosnia, we might have understood. We in turn began using the labels of 'militant movement' and not see what the Sikh movement really was : a Sikh Resistance Movement, which like the French resistance movement did resort to violence, as well as peaceful methods, but ultimately was a resistance to the oppression of the state.

Have we as Sikhs stopped seeing our own political prisoners as human beings? Did we succumb to thinking that it would do no good? Did we think other people were doing it? And not realize that, as a community, in terms of international help we are prone to hype and made little long term effort? Did we hope that by closing our eyes and meditating it would be enough?

A letter is a ray of light between four walls. There may be some problems of some letters getting through, and censorship will prevail, but as one ex prisoner from Tihar told me- in the 1980's when he was locked up, he was not allowed the post. Accidentally an Amnesty International letter reached him, and it was a ray of light, by a perfect stranger across the world.

Now, to the question of how many prisoners of conscience are left from the Sikh resistance movement in India? The question is often raised by the lobby groups who have sought to get some form of recognition from very 'capital and arms related members' of parliament and the United Nations.

Unfortunately, some lobby groups have floated various figures without really becoming part of the long term help for the situation over the past two decades. Recently emerging lobbyists in the past couple of years, especially in Britain and the United States, are from a new generation of Sikhs who hope to form collaboration with different working groups at different levels even if people do not all form part of the same umbrella. It is not in our interest to discredit statistics unless we can prove a case that helps our people. This is a negative cyclical argument that has pervaded the elites - an argument that actually benefits the Hindu fascism of India. In twenty years it has offered no protection to human rights activists, never allowed Amnesty International access to the Punjab, nor any form of humanitarian aid, save at sparse, sporadic levels. And human rights activists who have sought to establish what has really happened in terms of numbers of the dead or tortured, have come under paralysis of fear by the Indian agencies, indirect methods of harassment, arrest, other charges being put on people. Now, twenty years later, the Hindu right wing

fascism is just as casual in their estimates of how many Sikhs have been killed in Punjab and tortured. The fact is that fascism has won in declining numbers. One such important piece of information is : **how many Sikh political prisoners of conscience are still in prison in India?**

It is a travesty to stay that as many as one hundred are still being harassed with one TADA charge after another. Indeed Simranjeet Singh Mann, ex-member of parliament, who is very outspoken on India's violation of human rights, is still facing an old TADA charge from the early 1990's where he supposedly made a speech that advocated Sikh separatism. If he denies the charge- he is discredited in front of the Sikhs, after having served many years on the grounds of being a political prisoner of conscience for the Sikh Movement. If he does not deny the charge he faces imprisonment. As one of the rare Indian parliamentarians who speaks up against the Indian state's failure in human rights and condemns its persecution of minorities, India cannot afford to lose him.

It can safely be said that more than 52,000 Sikh prisoners would have passed through the prisons, been interrogated and mass tortured for over two decades. And this could be a conservative estimate. The numbers of mass tortured go into over 100,000, though because of the way in which the state has paralysed human rights in the region, thorough documentation is difficult to comprehensively census.

Currently, by several sources who visit Sikh prisoners of conscience, there are less than a hundred Sikh political prisoners in India. They face very contorted and exaggerated numbers of TADA charges. The repeated TADA charges targeted as soon as any of them is cleared, mean that years are drained away from their lives, and paucity of money to defend their legal cases gets acute. The Indian state has done this for twenty years and continues to do this.

There are currently around 38 prisoners of conscience left in Nabha, several in Tihar, many in Rajasthan, several in Ambala (who come from very poor backgrounds) to name but a few. Some are very bright, former students and thinkers, who clearly the state does not want released, for they would make shining examples of Sikh leaders. It is easier for the state to release militants who no one would have followed in the first place, rather than let out the intelligent, charismatic prisoners.

Examples of this level of terrible endurance include: One prisoner in Rajasthan, famous ex-militant, Daya Singh Lahoria whose nephew of 12 was killed by the police, and whose wife is in prison in Calcutta for past few years.

One prisoner in Nabha, Gursewak Singh, has been locked up for 15 years before charges against him were cleared, and yet now is about to face a charge from 1983. This level of harassment is very cruel. It would be good if the Sikhs could do some campaigning for this case. The solidarity of remaining prisoners is good as is the camaraderie of survivors. There are prisoners in the US, Canada, UK who too have never received letters of prayer from anyone in their community.

Some prisoners, like Daljit Singh Bittu, a former veterinary science student, have had 26 TADA cases collapse on him, with three left. Yet the state persists in putting him and prisoners like him, through years of persecution.

The last prisoners in Nabha would tell you the worse forms of torture were used in the 1990's, and many fellow prisoners suffered 15 years on charge after charge under TADA. Now some prisoners face lapsed TADA charges, and years of delay from the Indian courts to have trials. Today there is a relatively different form of tragedy. Not one of the torture levels, as before, but that the Sikh resistance movement has finished, and that the Sikhs as a community have forgotten their former heroes. Still some of these prisoners underwent years of underground hiding from police persecution, braved on without money, or help, as they tried to save themselves (and others) from the persecution of the state. One such youth spent seven years in prison for being part of the All India Sikh Student Federation. There were various charges of conspiracy against him. Charge of 'conspiracy' was often used by the Indian government when all else failed in trying to subdue the Sikh Resistance Movement. Now he spends his days visiting the remaining Sikh prisoners of the previous two decades resistance movement when he has time.

It is not easy to visit prisoners, but some have not forgotten what prison is like. Many Sikh groups and their members will laugh off years in prison, when they compare it in memory to other great sacrifices. And in an attempt to appear 'hard', will laugh off a few years in prison. But prison is prison, as one ex prisoner, Gurinder Singh, said to me. 'The four walls close in on you and you have no life of your own.' Some Sikhs are trying to help in the backgrounds and are footing a substantial bill in trying to get remaining prisoners freed, and trying to help often deprived families who are now without their breadwinner. If anyone wants to help out the families that are not fully supported, contact the newspaper and we'll find a way for you to make direct contact with them. Families come with bags of fruit and milk (two things never provided in the jails), on journeys over 100km to just see their loved one as often as is allowed.

I would say to anyone who thinks prison is easy: confine yourself in your house for a week. Make sure the toilet is in your 'room' and you have no so called luxuries. And even if you're not being tortured. Rest assured, by the second week it will be a test of your endurance. Your life is never your own, your body is not your own, your safety is not your own, your time and who you see is never your own. But now fast forward into years, indefinitely, and your life is never your own. I would also say that a Sikh Resistance Movement that has so many victims, these are people who are still alive and should not be forgotten. In the safety of your own home you can post one letter, without a return address, and do your good deed of the day.

"Conspiracy" charge under TADA (now POTA) has been used for twenty years to take away the precious lives, year by year, of prisoners of conscience of the Sikh Resistance Movement. **Even when the conspiracy charges fail- and remain unproven- as in the case of Devinderpal Singh Bhullar, a former young lecturer from Punjab, where one of the three Supreme Court judges, found him not guilty- he still faces execution. For the first time in Indian Supreme Court history, Bhullar is to be executed on a split verdict. Progressive democracies cannot ever move towards executing prisoners on whom there is no evidence. Out of the 133 witnesses produced by the prosecution not one could identify Bhullar.**

The one case of execution pending, is that of the activist, Devinderpal Singh Bhullar, whose whole family underwent persecution, who does not deserve to be in the cruel situation he faces now for his sacrifices for the Sikh resistance movement. It is now the case that the Indian President is deciding what will happen next and a date to be executed is pending.

Devinderpal Singh prays regularly and keeps his brave *Sikhi* spirit with him. His mother and wife visit him often. People can always write a letter to him and other prisoners of conscience without having to give their personal details. Do be aware that letters are subject to censorship- so only send prayers and letters of well wishing. They do not need slogans or political theses sent. I was really happy to know that a letter of prayer I wrote to him reached him. And we must not only keep up our lobbying efforts but also send our prayers and wishes to:

Davinderpal Singh Bhullar, son of Balwant Singh, Ward no. 8, Jail No. 3, Tihar Jail, New Delhi- 110 064. India.

I will now leave you with a list that, uptill now, has remained unpublished. It is not the last word, but a start for us to get a grip on the situation: The Last Sikh prisoners of conscience in India:

Prisoners Lodged in Maximum Security Jail, Nabha.

- 1) Balbir Singh- in jail since 1992- serving life sentence.
- 2) Jasvir Singh- in jail since 1999- under trial- 4 pending cases.
- 3) Dilbagh Singh- in jail since 1999- under trial with cases in Punjab, Haryana, U.P.
- 4) Daljit Singh (Bittu)- in jail since Apr. 1996- 3 cases pending at Ludhiana.
- 5) Paramjit Singh- U.K. citizen- in jail since 10th Oct- 2003 arraigned in a concocted case dating 1992, pending at Jalandhar.
- 6) Lal Singh- in jail since July 1992- life convict.
- 7) Amarjit Singh- in jail since 1994- life convict.
- 8) Gursharan Singh- in jail since April 1996- facing 3 cases at Ludhiana.
- 9) Palwinder Singh- in jail since July 1992- lifer.
- 10) Baldev Singh- in jail since last year- under trial- 1 case
- 11) Gulzar Singh- in jail since 1999- serving 7 years sentence.
- 12) Didar Singh- in jail since 2002- serving 5 years sentence.
- 13) Sukhwal Singh- in jail since 2000, serving 5 years sentence & 3 cases pending against him.
- 14) Mangal Singh- in jail since 2001- under trial 1 case.
- 15) Gursewak Singh- in jail since July 1986- now 7 cases pending against him in Punjab, Rajasthan and Delhi.
- 16) Teja Singh- in jail since 1994- lifer.
- 17) Hardeep Singh- in jail since 2002- under trial-1 case against him.
- 18) Hardayal Singh- in jail since 2002- 1 case pending.
- 19) Hardayal Singh Chatra- in jail since 2002- 1 case pending and life imprisonment.

- 20) Baljinder Singh- in jail since 2001- 7 years sentence
- 21) Zora Singh- in jail since 1994- lifer.
- 22) Gurdev Singh- aged 83 years old- in jail since 1994- life sentence.
- 23) Kuldip Singh- in jail since 1994- lifer.
- 24) Laxman Singh- in jail since 1994-lifer.
- 25) Swaran Singh- in jail since 2000- lifer.
- 26) Major Singh- in jail since 1991- lifer.
- 27) Gurnam Singh- in jail since 1992- life sentence.
- 28) Nirmal Singh- in jail since 1999- 7 years sentence.
- 29) Jagtar Singh- in jail since 1999- 7 years sentence.
- 30) Manjit Singh- in jail since last year- under trial- 2 cases.
- 31) Pargat Singh- in jail since last year- under trial- 1 case.
- 32) Palwinder Singh- in jail since last year- under trial- 1 case.
- 33) Avtar Singh- in jail since last year- under trial for one case.

Central Jail, Jalandhar:

- 1) Darshan Singh- convicted for seven years since 2001.
- 2) Narinderpal Singh- under trial since 2000.

There are perhaps 2-3 more people according to our source, who are also connected to the struggle. For anyone interested in sending humanitarian letters of prayer, we will find these other people.

Central Jail Ferozepur:

- 1) Gurmail Singh- under trial.
- 2) Bhupinder Singh and Buta Singh- undertrial since 1999.
- 3) Pargat Singh - convicted for life.
- 4) Angrez Singh- convicted for life.
- 5) Swaran Singh- under trial since 2001.
- 6) Kulwant Singh- under trial.

Central Jail, Amritsar:

- 1) Resham Singh- under trial since last year.

Maybe 2-3 persons more.

Gurdaspur Jail:

- 1) Dr. Sarup Singh- under trial since 2001.
- 2) Gurnam Singh- 5 years sentence.

Bhatinda Central Jail:

- 1) Surinderpal Singh- convicted for life.
- 1-2 persons more.

Chandigarh (Burial) Jail:

All the following are under trial.

Beant Singh- since August 1995; Jagtar Singh Hawan, Jagtar Singh Tara, Lakhwinder Singh, Gurmeet Singh, Nasib Singh, Navjot Singh, Balwant Singh Paramjit Singh.

There may be one more detainee connected to the Movement.

Ambala Central Jail, Haryana:

- 1) Bakshish Singh - undertrial since 1999
- 2) Gopal Singh and Balwinder Singh- 7 years in September.

Connected to attack on Banlara Baba at Ambala

- 3) Daya Singh- convicted for life
- 4) Gurdeep Singh- under trial since 1998.
- 5) Balbir Singh - under trial since 1998.

There can be one more person.

Tihar Jail, Delhi:

- 1) Devinderpal Singh Bhullar- capital punishment.
- 2) Satvir Singh Sunny- under trial since 2001.
- 3) Parshottam Singh- under trial since 2001.
- 4) Gurcharan Kaur- under trial since 2001.
- 5) Lakhbir Singh- under trial since 2001.
- 6) Gurdeep Singh- convicted for life- In Jail since 1992.
- 7) Ranjit Singh Gill (Kuki)- convicted for life, in jail since 1986, served 2 years over life.

There are 3-4 more detainees.

Ahmedabad Central Jail, Gujarat:

Jarnail Singh- under trial since last year.

Central Jail, Nagpur:

Balwinder Singh- "Dharmi Fauji"- in jail since June 1984- suffering severe mental illness.

Nishan Singh and Ravinder Singh- In jail since 1992- convicted for life.

Calcutta, W.B.:

Kamaldeep Kaur (wife of Daya Singh Lahoria) under trial since 1995- may be released soon on bail.

Jaipur, Rajasthan:

Daya Singh Lahoria- under trial since 1995.

There are 5-6 people in Jammu jails.

There might be 10 people in some other jails of India. In all, there may not be more than 80 persons incarcerated in jails all over India as part of the Sikh Resistance Movement.

Note: Anyone interested in sending goods, to the families of the poor prisoners, or who can especially help with shipments through the airlines, please contact *The Sikh Times* (project TaRaN:) info@thesikh-times.co.uk.

We can provide you with particulars of victim families over the two decades who have not received any help from Sikh groups, from and are below the poverty line within Punjab. Only offers of help as there is no resource dedicated to administration in "TaRaN."

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