

High Cost of a Fake Democracy

AN INTERVIEW WITH *PATWANT SINGH BY SAN GREWAL*

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THE PUBLIC REACTION TO recent acquittal in the Air-India case has overlooked an important question: was the terrorism exported to Canada from India, a direct by-product of that state's long-standing anti-democratic policies?

And, perhaps more importantly, does the title "democratic" give countries that are anything but, a licence to operate darkly in the background while using the propped-up ideals of freedom as a veil?

A month before the Air-India verdict, which found the two men accused in the 1985 bombing of flight 182, Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, not guilty, a disturbing report was released in India, the world's largest democracy.

It was called the Nanavati report, named after former Indian Supreme Court judge G.T. Nanavati, who presided over a commission convened in 2000 to find out how thousands of Sikhs were systematically targeted and killed in the streets of New Delhi immediately after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was murdered by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984.

The report documented the commission's main findings that the widespread rioting and massacre were "organized" and instigated by members of the assassinated prime minister's ruling Congress party to "target the Sikh community" without any "meaningful intervention" by the police.

The Delhi riots carried on for three days while fires lit the city. Government reports estimated 2,000 Sikhs were killed. The death toll, according to independent citizens' groups was as high as 10,000.

"My own two houses were burned down in broad daylight," said Patwant Singh, a prominent Indian author who testified in front of the Nanavati Commission and was interviewed two years ago at his home in New Delhi.

"I went to see the president twice and the Home Minister while the riots were taking place. I urged them to send out military forces, the established procedure during a period of civil unrest. It became clear that it was not civilians leading the massacre of Sikhs.

"It was an eye-opener, the degree to which a constitutional government, a state, can allow and endorse crimes against its own people."

No charges have been laid, but five former Congress party members were named in the report for their involvement in the riots, including the former home minister, the former lieutenant-governor and a current Congress party MP.

"Whatever happened in India and elsewhere has to be seen against this backdrop," said Patwant Singh.

It's a backdrop that presents a disturbing sight in a country held up as an example of how democracy can succeed.

In 1975, when tension about Sikh autonomy mounted between Mrs. Gandhi and Sikh leaders, the Allahabad High Court handed down a decision upholding an earlier petition that had charged the prime minister with 'campaign fraud' during the 1971 election.

Instead of stepping down from office, as she had been ordered to do, Mrs. Gandhi, in an unconstitutional move, declared a state of emergency, threw 100,000 political opponents in jail (a disproportionate number were Sikhs), censored the press, banned political parties and suspended all elections for nearly two years.

It was a foreshadowing of how things would unravel.

"Sikhs were, and still are, second-class citizens," said Patwant Singh. "If there was even the faintest suspicion that a Sikh had anything to do with the struggle for autonomy for Punjab, they and their families were killed with impunity. Close to 200,000 were liquidated by government security forces (according to the National Human Rights Organization) and police during the decade following Mrs. Gandhi's death. The government won't even let Amnesty International in to investigate the claims."

In 1994, the U.S. State Department reported that the Indian government paid out over 41,000 cash bounties to police officers for killing Sikhs in the northwestern state of Punjab, where Sikhs still make up a slight majority and where many have agitated for an autonomous Sikh state.

Last April, the European Parliament called for a "Commission of Truth and Justice" under the auspices of the UN. The call was to "comprehensively investigate whether the slaughter to which Indian Sikhs were subjected in 1984 constituted genocide, as defined in the Genocide Convention and the relevant international law."

The point here is that the Air-India disaster did not occur in a vacuum. There is no justification for acts of mass murder, but that applies to governments as much as it does to terrorists. The slaughter and unlawful imprisonment of Sikhs in India during the 1970s and 1980s was, at the very least, condoned by a democratic government, if not outright instigated by it. Yet the world turned a blind eye to the killings, seeing the issue as an internal matter - until it landed on foreign shores.

This is the cost to the international community of not acting when a so-called democracy ignores the rule of law or enforces democratic principles in a selective manner.

The Canadian government welcomes immigrants into this country. But with the law-abiding come people such as Talwinder Singh Parmar, the suspected mastermind of the Air-India bombings, who in 1992 was killed by police in Punjab.

Parmar saw Canada as a safe haven from which he could foment hatred of the Indian government within this country's Sikh community.

It was a resentment that Patwant Singh and many other believe led directly to the Air -India bombing.

Not one person has yet been convicted for the worst air disaster in Canadian history.

And, as Patwant Singh said two years ago, “not one person has been charged for the deaths of thousands of Sikhs during the 1984 riots.”

