

1984 - Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale: Martyr of the Sikh Faith@

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@ Excerpted from his book of the same title.

I am an apolitical Singapore citizen, though in the eyes of the world, I am an Indian, a Punjabi and a Sikh. I am proud of my Sikh identity although I am a Singaporean Sikh. I am equally proud of my Singapore nationality, for, I am a true-blue Singaporean. Indeed Singapore has been my only home for the last 80 years. As a historian my assessment of the events leading to the Indian army's attack on the holiest shrine of the Sikh faith is meant to be even-handed and objective although a little subjectivity is bound to creep in despite strict restraint. So many books have been published on the event, but no historian has yet been able to render a lily-white objective account.

I have read "Operation Blue Star - the True Story" by Lt. General K.S. Brar, the army commander who led the Indian army's assault on the Golden Temple in 1984. The book was published nine years after the event. It gives all the intricate details of the military operation and explains the circumstances leading to the tragic episode. Obviously, he is the best person to do so, but only from military angle. However, his perception of Sant Bhindranwale, in particular of what the Sant was fighting for, is inaccurate and misleading. He has succumbed to the Government of India's propaganda: the official line was that Sant Bhindranwale was a terrorist fighting for a separate sovereign state of Khalistan and, if left unchecked it would lead to the balkanisation of the Union of India. **But the Sant made no such categorical demand. All he wanted was a measure of political and economic autonomy for the Sikhs in the Indian Union.**

I have carefully scrutinised all the utterances of the Sant. There is no evidence at all that the Sant ever uttered the word "Khalistan" in any of his numerous speeches. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was not a Khalistani. Neither am I. Khalistan was proclaimed by frustrated Sikh militants at the Darbar Sahib in 1986, two years *after* the death of Sant Bhindranwale.

As a Singapore Sikh, I have no right or desire to get involved in the politics of Punjab. My only interest in examining the tragic events of 1984 is that of a historian. However, where the Golden Temple is concerned, it is the heart and soul of every Sikh no matter where he is domiciled. No self-respecting Sikh can ever forget or get over the pain and anguish suffered when the Golden Temple was desecrated and I am no exception. Faith inter-twined with deep love and even deeper devotion for the holiness of the Akal Takhat has been embedded into the consciousness of every *Amritdhari* Singh. I am one of them. Only time will heal and bitter memories fade into oblivion. **But history must be recorded accurately for posterity.**

The reason for publishing this monograph thirteen years after the events of June 1984 is to put the record straight and clear the much maligned Sant's name of the ignominy heaped on him by the misinformation and disinformation promoted by the Indian Government during Indira Gandhi's rule.

I have not been able to find in any recent book on the "Punjab Problem", and there are many, in which the Sant's acts and utterances have been objectively evaluated. In most books there is merely a passing reference to him, condemning him as a trouble maker, secessionist and traitor. **It is time that the Sant's short life of 37 years is dispassionately assessed and a true picture presented of the "intensely committed, deeply religious and highly dedicated Sikh missionary" who opted for martyrdom in**

courageously defending the holy shrine of his Guru against the Indian army's assault on it with tanks and artillery. The brave Sant proved to the world that he was a true Sant of the Sikh faith and no bogus holy man.

The ultimate story of Sant Bhindranwale is the story of guts, gumption and the glory of his martyrdom. His short but highly sensitive religious life as a Sikh missionary and his melodramatic methods of enforcing Sikh rights deserve more space than a mere foot note in history books. I believe that I have (in this small monograph) made a dispassionate analysis of Sant Bhindranwale, the man and his mission. Sikhs should be able to appreciate the Sant's martyrdom as the event is a contemporary one, witnessed by the current generation. It is a source of inspiration.

Jarnail Singh, a village lad, born in 1947, bereft of any formal education, became the *de facto* leader of the Sikhs in 1978. By then he had overshadowed all the other Sikh leaders, *Jathedars* and other chiefs of the *Khalsa Panth*, the Sikh nation. Jarnail Singh, who had by then also become a popular *Sant* (holy man), under the name of Sant Bhindranwale, was calling all the shots in Punjab and killing at will "the enemies of the Panth". He was able to do this because the State Government at Chandigarh, had become paralysed.

Why was he doing this? Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was an orthodox Sikh, a puritan and simple villager and a believer in truth: the kind of truth representing the golden thread running throughout the sacred Sikh scripture in which he was well versed. He understood basic history relating to the partition of India in 1947, the year he was born. He was aware that the Sikhs had been promised a "Semi-autonomous Unit" in Punjab if they would opt to remain in India, and that later, after independence, they were deprived of it when the Congress leaders reneged on their promises.

Bhindranwale preached the truth, first the fundamentals of the Sikh faith as laid down in the scripture, and later the fact that the Sikhs had been deprived of their legitimate rights. This was well received especially by the young Sikh peasants in economically deprived Punjab and thousands became his ardent followers. The ever increasing popularity of Bhindranwale, especially in rural Punjab because of his *Amrit Prachar*, was looked upon by the authorities with disdain, but his religious training and beliefs gave him the courage to say and do what he considered right. A man of unflinching zeal and strong convictions, he could not be manipulated by the authorities to serve their political ends. His plain speaking in rustic language with quotations from Sikh history and *Gurbani* went well with the rural people. His charisma and eloquence overshadowed all other Sikh leaders. Furthermore, unlike them, he had no personal ambition. He proclaimed his mission to the world:

"I am only responsible for the cause of Sikhism, preaching the fundamentals of the Sikh faith. My responsibility is to see that your beards remain intact, your hair is uncut and that you do not go after the evil things of life, like alcohol and drugs."

"Amritsar", page 113

Bhindranwale took the lead in trying to put a stop to the mischief and chicanery of the Nirankari sect. He brought into sharp focus the political disabilities and injustices suffered by the Sikhs, in particular, the denial of partial self-government to the Sikhs. **He felt this political deprivation acutely because at all times Sikhs had been in the forefront in winning and defending the political freedom of India.** Despite being courted politically, he had the courage to criticise Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, because he was convinced of her insincerity. More over he believed that the truth was on his side.

Bhindranwale had tremendous power to mobilise the masses. Thousands listened to him with rapt attention at his regular Manji Sahib orations and later in the Golden Temple complex. He was easily the most committed and the bravest Sikh of his era. He became

more famous and commanded more respect than all the other Sikh leaders in Punjab. But he was concerned mainly with the preservation of Sikhism, in particular the traditions of the Khalsa. With his simplistic and one-track mind, he was out of touch with the modern world and incompetent for any enlightened role in managing Punjab politics. He was a novice in politics. But as a “rabble-rouser” he rendered yeoman service to the Sikhs by focusing in his speeches on Sikh grievances and discrimination against them. **He kept hammering away on the historically legitimate rights of the Sikhs and demanded the fulfilment of the promises made by Congress leaders to the Sikhs at the time of the partition of India in 1947.**

Bhindranwale was always surrounded by a coterie of armed militants who displayed an almost cult-like loyalty to him. They carried out his commands without question, not hesitating to kill if so ordered. This was because of their religious zeal; their anger over deprivation of Sikh rights and their belief that their hero, the *Sant*, could do no wrong. **They were not a simple band of extremists and criminals. They were committed militant siblings of the Sikh faith who considered it their religious duty to defend their *Panth* against encroachments and injustices. This has been appreciated even by a non-Sikh writer, Cynthia Keppley Mahmood in her essay entitled “Why Sikhs Fight,” observed:**

“Whatever Bhindranwale and his cohort had done in the years preceding Operation Blue Star (they were accused of masterminding and carrying out a series of murders) their vision of themselves was that they were soldiers in the dharma yudh, the righteous struggle. Their conception of their community and the fervor with which they were ready to defend it made them utterly fearless in the face of challenges. Unless we accept this at face value, we cannot really understand the dedication with which they fought at the Golden Temple Complex, nor the sacrifices their heirs are ready to make for the same cause today”.

“Abstracts of Sikhism,” Jul. 1995, page 72

Bhindranwale could not tolerate the deliberate and mischievous politics of Indira Gandhi. He embarked upon a “holy war” to enforce Sikh rights and made Punjab as ugly as he could. His men spread fear in Punjab. Bhindranwale was not the author of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution which demanded autonomy for Punjab but he made good use of it. He used it as a yard-stick for measuring any settlement with the Government. He proclaimed that unless and until the promises made to the Sikhs in 1947 were fulfilled and the Sikhs accorded their own semi-autonomous state in Punjab, the “holy war” would continue. He pressured those negotiating with the Government to demand total compliance with the Anandpur Sahib Resolution.

The Hindus branded him a “trouble maker” and saw him as an evil incarnate, out to finish the Hindus. The Union Government considered him a terrorist, a traitor and secessionist bent on establishing “Khalistan”, a separate independent, sovereign State in trouble-torn Punjab.

Truth has been a casualty in all accounts of the much maligned *Sant*. This monograph therefore attempts to put on record, for the benefit of future generations, what Bhindranwale stood for and what he was fighting for. It also seeks to clear his name of the ignominy heaped on him by the disinformation promoted by the Indian Government’s Ministry of Information. It attempts to show that Bhindranwale never uttered the word “Khalistan” in any of his speeches and had nothing to do with it. Bhindranwale’s demands were limited to economic and political autonomy for Punjab and the integrity of the Sikhs as an identifiably distinct religious community, totally separate from the Hindus.

“The Sant regularly and vocally challenged the notion that Sikhs are part of

Hinduism. Particularly galling to him was the fact that Sikhs are classified as Hindus (along with Buddhists and Jains) in Article 25, Section 2b of the Indian Constitution”.

Cynthia Mahmood “Abstracts of Sikhism”. July 1995, Page 72

Bhindranwale’s most crucial demand, on which he kept hammering away, was that the Government should fulfill the promises made to the Sikhs at the time of the partition of India in 1947 on which the Sikhs acted by opting to remain in India. It was the solemn promise of autonomy which persuaded the then Sikh leaders in Punjab to opt for India, the promise on which Nehru and his colleagues in the Indian National Congress later reneged. Since then the periodic Sikh demands for a measure of autonomy have resulted in Sikhs being subjected to *“unequal laws, religious and social bigotry and the destruction and desecration of their religious places of worship”*. In addition they have been branded by officialdom as terrorists, trouble-makers and secessionists. The Sant wanted a semi-autonomous Sikh State in the Union of India, where the Sikh community could protect and preserve their identity and their cultural and religious values in a Hindu dominated India.

Similar sentiments, the fear that Sikhs may be overwhelmed and absorbed into the Hindu fold, were expressed by Khushwant Singh as far back as 1966.

“The only chance of survival of the Sikhs as a separate community is to create a state in which they form a compact group where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh religion is compulsory, and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their Khalsa forefathers.”

“A History of the Sikhs”, Vol 2, Page 305

Bhindranwale was portrayed by the Indian press as a fanatical hoodlum who was wreaking havoc in Punjab from the sanctuary of the Golden Temple, but no one bothered to consider why he was doing it. **Hidden in the morass of disinformation and negative propaganda is the truth: Bhindranwale believed in the unity of India. Unfortunately he embarked on enforcing Sikh rights by out-dated 18th century methods - by the sword - in an era of battle tanks and helicopter-gun ships. It produced disastrous results. His method was wrong but his demand for a semi-autonomous Punjab was historically true and justified. Given the Government’s barrage of disinformation, which produced the negative climate of opinion against the Sikhs and him, Bhindranwale was the most misjudged and least understood Sikh on the Indian political scene.**

Gurcharan Singh Tohra, President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandik Committee, the governing body of the Golden Temple, and Harchand Singh Longowal, the President of the Shiromani Akali Dal, the political party of the Sikhs, were both weak men. They were unable to stop Bhindranwale and his militants from occupying the Temple and fortifying it. While this was going on, Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, deliberately caused the negotiations, between the Government and the Sikhs on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution to be protracted. This was because she wanted to portray the Sikhs as unnecessarily troublesome and committed to undermine national unity. She manipulated the media so as to project the Sikhs as villains. A ruthless campaign of misrepresentation and disinformation was mounted against them. **The procrastination tactics thus were calculated to influence public opinion against Sikhs in Punjab, while she bought valuable time to prepare the military for a “final solution” to the vexatious Punjab problem.**

Bhindranwale has been wrongly condemned for fortifying a religious shrine. The world did not know that the Golden Temple was seriously fortified as a defensive measure, only when Indira Gandhi threatened to invade it. How could a true Sant of the Sikh faith and Head of the Dam Dami Taksal allow the *parikrama* of the most sacred shrine of his Guru, to be desecrated by the trodding and trampling of the Indian army’s boots? It is common

knowledge now that the army had built a model of the Golden Temple at the Army's Camp at Chakrata, in the foothills of the Himalayas, and reportedly carried out several rehearsals of the impending military invasion. This is confirmed by two non-Sikh sources. [See Mark Tully's "Amritsar:" page 118 and Joyce Pettigrew's "Sikhs of the Punjab", page 8.]

As soon as Bhindranwale received intelligence of Indira Gandhi's diabolic plan, he strengthened the fortifications of his Guru's shrine. Obviously as a "saint-soldier" Bhindranwale's motivation was to prevent desecration and trampling of the Golden Temple. He was prepared to meet the might of the Indian army.

Bhindranwale followed the tradition set 200 years earlier by another famous martyr of the Sikh faith. In 1762 when another tyrant, the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali, arrived at Amritsar to destroy the Sikh shrine, he found Baba Gurbax Singh with 30 Sikhs ready to do battle and defend the shrine. Armed only with *Kirpans* they were no match against Abdali's hordes and guns. They offered symbolic resistance and earned martyrdom when Abdali blew up the Darbar Sahib with gunpowder.

Consequently Bhindranwale's defensive fortifications were spiritually motivated; those steeped in the Sikh tradition and religion will find it difficult to fault him. This perspective has generally been missed by most observers. Different cultures have different perceptions.

Non-Sikhs can never appreciate the love, reverence, absolute loyalty and passionate commitment of the Sikhs for their Darbar Sahib, the proud and indestructible symbol of their living faith.

The Indian Government had no right, according to common public opinion, nor justification, to attack the Golden Temple with battle tanks and heavy guns. The Golden Temple is, for Sikhs worldwide, their holiest shrine and for Sikhs in India a living spiritual institution. There were other peaceful ways of dislodging Bhindranwale and his loyalists. "Operation Blue Star" was reportedly Indira Gandhi's spiteful method of delivering a "**coup de grace**" on the troublesome Sikhs who had become a thorn in her side.

Indira Gandhi's "Operation Blue Star" was motivated by sheer malice; it was well planned and well rehearsed. It was calculated to hurt Sikh pride and to undermine their will permanently. Many writers have reached this conclusion. According to Khushwant Singh,

"Most (Sikhs) had no interest in politics of any sort. And it was they who felt that the Government had used Bhindranwale as an excuse to give the entire Sikh community a bloody punch on their nose".

The Punjab Story, page 11

Dr Indarjit Singh, the Editor of "The Sikh Messenger" of London, wrote in his Journal:

"The slaughter of young Sikhs brought in from the villages in the surrounding countryside shows that it was an attack directed at the fabric of Sikhism, in short to give the irksome Sikhs a bloody nose, humble them forever and remove the threat of any further revolt".

Lest the above quotations are considered biased outbursts of angry Sikhs, note the following comment of Dr. Joyce J.M. Pettigrew, a Scottish anthropologist who spent much time in Punjab doing independent research on the Punjab problem:

"The initial crime (Operation Blue Star) was celebrated and indeed had been planned for a year beforehand. The Darbar Sahib complex, a place of great beauty, the spiritual and political centre of the Sikh way of life and of the Sikhs as a whole, their historic home through years of invasion from the West, had its sanctity shattered. The army went into Darbar Sahib not to eliminate a political figure or a political movement but to suppress the culture of a people, to attack their heart, to strike a blow at their spirit and self-confidence".

"The Sikhs of the Punjab", Zed Books Ltd. London, page 8

Mark Tully has also commented adversely on "Operation Blue Star" in his recent book, "No Full Stops in India", at page 153 :

"Operation Blue Star, the Indian army's clumsy attack on the Sikh Golden Temple at Amritsar in June 1984 shook the foundations of the Indian nation. It deeply wounded the pride of the Sikhs, the most prosperous of India's major communities. It strengthened the cause of those Sikhs campaigning for the setting up of a separate Sikh state - Khalistan - and gave them a martyr - Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the fundamentalist preacher who had fortified the Golden Temple Complex and died defending the shrine. It caused Sikh soldiers to mutiny. It led directly to the assassination of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, and to the worst communal violence since the partition riots of 1947. What particularly hurt the Sikhs psyche - a phrase I must have heard a thousand times - was the attack by the tanks on the Akal Takhat, one of the two most sacred shrines in the complex. The Akal Takhat symbolizes the temporal authority of God, while the Golden Temple itself symbolizes His spiritual power".

And again, at page 180 :

"India is not alone in the world in facing terrorism, but Operation Blue Star, and the military rule that Indira Gandhi imposed on the Punjab after it, went far beyond anti-terrorist tactics. There have never been any significant political protests in India against the brutal tactics used by the army and paramilitary police in curbing uprising or other challenges to the central government's authority whether in the remote tribal states of the north - eastern hills, in Punjab or now in Kashmir. It is surely because politicians know that they have the ultimate sanction - the power to declare war on a section of their own people -that they do not feel bound to look for political solutions to problems. If Indira Gandhi had not known that she could always use the army to suppress the Sikhs, she would never have allowed the situation in Punjab to deteriorate so far that she was obliged to mount a military operation against the Golden Temple".

Bhindranwale knew, well before the actual invasion of the Temple, the date on which the army would commence its attack. He could have, together with his defiant loyalists, vacated the Temple if he wanted to. **Bhindranwale considered it his religious duty to resist the entry of an armed force into the Golden Temple with all the Sikh loyalists at his command.** To Bhindranwale it was *Jihad* - holy war. He proved to the world that Sikhs do not hesitate to lay down their lives in defence of their sacred shrines. To Sikhs he was reviving their pride and reminding them that the spirit of past Sikh martyrs' was very much alive. Bhindranwale also proved that Sikhs do not run away from a fight, no matter how heavy the odds against them. Bhindranwale told a foreign journalist, "We have lived like lions and will die like lions". True to his word, Bhindranwale and his men did not buckle under the blistering artillery and gun fire of the Indian army's tanks. None of them surrendered. **They fought to the last man with limitless courage and gave a credible account of traditional Sikh valour against a far superior army supported by armour and artillery.**

As pointed out by Saran Singh:

"Those in power seem to forget, time and again, that you can kill men but not the ideas that drive them to a higher destiny. Lenin, a diehard non-believer is credited with the axiomatic statement: "The harder you strike at religion, the deeper it strikes roots." Those who have even a nodding acquaintance with history of the Sikhs know how determinedly they defend the truth, honour and freedom of faith, ideas that are

imbedded in the foundations of Amritsar.”

“The Sikh Review”, June 1993

No amount of killing of Sikhs can make them abandon their historical claim, to a semi-autonomous Sikh state, which is based on a historical truth. Bhindranwale gave his life for the fulfilment of this historically rightful demand.

“Bhindranwale undeniably showed Sikhs how to die with dignity and honour. But in his short life he never raised the slogan for an independent Khalistan, though he has now become the inspiration for its struggle.”

Professor I.J. Singh in “Sikhs and Sikhism”, Page 77

The result of Indira Gandhi’s monumental blunder due to her maladroitness handling of Bhindranwale is succinctly spelled out by Khushwant Singh in his book, “*India - an Introduction*” at page 206:

*Mrs Gandhi lost her cool. She listened to advice of people who knew little about the Sikhs and the veneration in which they held the Golden Temple. She was grievously misinformed about the strength of Bhindranwale’s men; she was told that they would lay down their arms if there was a show of strength - and if they fought their resistance would be overcome within a matter of hours. She put the state of Punjab under army rule and ordered it to take Bhindranwale dead or alive. “Operation Blue Star” was launched on 5, June 1984 when thousands of innocent pilgrims were inside the precincts of the temple paying homage to its founder, Guru Arjun Dev on the anniversary of His martyrdom. Instead of a couple of hours as anticipated, the Operation took five days. And far from surrendering in the face of show of strength, Bhindranwale and his men fought with fanatic zeal to the very last. The death toll was horrendous. The army lost several hundred jawans, the defenders and innocent pilgrims caught in the cross fire accounted for another three thousand dead or so. The Akal Takhat was wrecked; the temple archives reduced to ashes. **The Sikhs felt deeply humiliated and became vengeful. Mrs Gandhi was not big enough to admit that she had blundered.** She had a White Paper published giving the history of her negotiations with the Akalis, the reign of terror let loose by Bhindranwale and details of “Operation Blue Star”. The White Paper was dismissed by most people as a whitewashing exercise.*

After Operation Blue Star, Mrs Gandhi (and those connected with the army action) were marked for destruction by Bhindranwale’s supporters. Many conspiracies hatched to get her were foiled. No one had suspected that she would meet her end in her own heavily guarded home at the hands of men sworn to protect her. On the morning of 31st October 1984 two of her Sikh security guards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh who had earlier taken vows at the Golden Temple to avenge its sacrilege, pumped pistol and sten-gun bullets into her frail body. A couple of hours later she succumbed to her injuries at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi.

Her gory end was followed by a pogrom of the Sikh population in towns and cities of Northern India in which between five to ten thousand innocent Sikhs perished, thousands of Sikh homes looted and hundreds of crores worth of Sikh property destroyed. Thus ended the sixteen years dynastic rule of the most powerful woman monarch of all times.

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