

# 1984: A Tragedy Complexified

On first impulse, we did not want to revert, this June, to the agonizing assault on Amritsar in 1984, deceptively code-named Operation Bluestar. We thought times have changed. Almost a quarter of a century has passed. A whole new generation is gamely coping with challenges of the modern era. The state of Punjab has largely regained its élan and dynamism. Careers in industry, business and organised sectors have transformed the agricultural economy, while the latter has also diversified into non-cereal export-oriented cash crops and horticulture.

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At the psychological plane also, people are normally averse to recalling gory details of historical events: they would rather dream about the future.

But on deeper deliberation, we realized that our present and future are inextricably linked with our past. Complex as the strands of history may be, awareness is the key to progress. Besides, there is no substitute for truth. In India, subjective distortion of history has been the norm - over the ages. In fact this dubious distinction is also shared by western countries. The US Department of State was hugely embarrassed recently that, twenty after the much-venerated Nelson Mandela was freed from a 25 years prison sentence and fifteen years after he was elected President of South Africa, their Immigration Code still listed him as a terrorist!

In medieval India kings could do no wrong. In 1606 the Mughal emperor Jahangir saw to it that Guru Arjun was tortured to death at Lahore in mid-summer, because (as he recorded in Tuzhak-ê-Jahangiri) Guru Nanak's fourth successor had become "popular not only among Hindu masses but also for many 'misguided' Muslims who became his devotees - and called him Sacha Patshah. Added to this was the allegation that the Guru had provided shelter to the rebellious Prince Khurram. That martyrdom is strangely reminiscent of the crucifixion of Jesus during the Roman rule in Judaea.

A campaign of similar disinformation had been mounted by Indian press and official media in the early 1980's to demonize Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. No less a person than the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Mr Lal Krishna Advani has, in his recent autobiography 'My Country, My Life', argues: "The history of militancy in Punjab clearly shows Bhindranwale became a bhasmasur" ( the mythical demon who destroyed by fire). This is not the place - or time - to counter such calculated propaganda mounted by official agencies before 1984. Even in the worst scenario, a military assault on the holiest of Sikh shrines is unthinkable. As the veteran General ML Thapan, had observed in the aftermath: 'Nothing was more foolhardy than the use of the Army in Operation Bluestar.' The plea of political 'compulsions' has often been bandied about by apologists of the ruling party: that the Sikh leadership had lost control; that the ultras preached secession from Mother Country, that the holy precincts had become an armoury of sundry weapons including mortars. An unexpected longterm fallout of Operation Bluestar has been a drastic reduction in recruitment of Sikhs in Indian army, which is calamitous for Sikhs as well as for India.

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All those arguments not only sound hollow and pretentious, but have little, if any, basis in truth. An authoritarian Centre - a coterie around Mrs. G simply wanted to crush the spirit of the Sikhs. Far back in 1947, the outgoing British had recognized the Sikhs as the 'third party' - after the Congress and the Muslim League for transfer of power in India. The Sikh leadership had in fact opposed Partition of the subcontinent, they trusted Jawaharlal Nehru who had, in August 1946, assured the Sikhs of "a region and a dispensation where the Sikhs could feel the glow of freedom."

Not only were the solemn assurances forgotten after independence, the state boundaries were adversely re-arranged, its capital converted into a Union Territory; the credit for Green Revolution was assigned to outsiders. The Sikhs' agony was all the more hurtful because, in June 1984 the military assault was mounted on Guru Arjun's martyrdom day. Leaders of other communities remained silent - even jubilant - onlookers. The Sankaracharyas and the Imams shrugged; the former simply forgot that Hinduism, as the major religion in North India, had survived primarily because of the supreme sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675, ending forever the emperor Aurgazeb's zealotry.

More significantly, in 1984, it was left to the Pontiff of the world's 900 million Catholics, in Rome, to share concern and sympathy for the traumatized Sikhs. Addressing pilgrims at St. Peter's Square, at Vatican City on Sunday, June 10, 1984, Pope John Paul had said:

"In recent days there has been news of increasingly grave events" in Punjab. They (the events) unfortunately still do not seem to have come to an end. It is not my desire to enter into the delicate and complex reasons that are at the base of these disturbances in a great country. There rises up an immediate sentiment of human pity for all the victims, accompanied by an appeal that in a mutual comprehension there may be found a way to settle the current strife."

Those in power in India largely remained unmoved. The crisis only deepened and President's Rule was clamped in Punjab. It was then that two 'jaanbaz' youths (ironically, in prime minister's bodyguard) assassinated Mrs. Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984. All hell broke loose. A general massacre of the unwary, utterly innocent Sikhs, masterminded by henchmen, and facilitated by those in power (identifying Sikh homes in the capital, confining Delhi's Sikh police personnel to barracks and - more significantly - ignoring the Sikh elite's plea to summon the army) resulted in a holocaust of the innocents unprecedented in modern Indian history.

It is in this context that the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh's 'Apology' to the Nation (and the world) delivered in Parliament on Aug. 11, 2005, should be viewed (The Sikh Review: Oct. 2005). The apology doubtless bears the stamp of sincerity and acted as a balm upon the long festering wounds. But it must be remembered that the apology was not in respect of the launching of the 'Operation Bluestar', but confined to the massacre in Delhi in the days following Oct. 31, 1984. The Prime Minister's speech significantly mentioned: "Four thousand people were killed in this great national tragedy that took place in 1984". Evidently, such a general statement can be highly misleading, much as we respect both the 'office' of the prime minister and the sage person who currently occupies it.

Let us, in this context, revert to the Swiss organisation S.A.H.'s Report published from Zurich, Switzerland (in 1992) [vide SR: January 1993] which investigated "the influx of 2600 Sikh 'refugees' in 1991-92 who had applied for asylum in Switzerland." The Swiss team, which had visited Delhi and Punjab, reported that the assault on the Golden Temple - the holiest shrines of the Sikhs, and the post - Mrs. Gandhi's assassination of Sikhs 'in several parts of India', 'particularly in New Delhi, and which was provoked and led by some leaders of the ruling Congress Party' ..... resulted in the killing of over 10,000 Sikhs, but those who were responsible for these heinous crimes were never brought to book.... The massacre and the indulgent manner in which the Government dealt with it served as the spark that lit the fire of the movement demanding an independent Sikh state, Khalistan....".

Arguably, comprehensive account of the events since 1947 needs to be made a compulsory reading for the new generation of Indians, both Sikhs and others, who have a stake in the peace and prosperity of our great nation.

