

25 Years on: 'Operation Bluestar' remains deeply hurtful

THE AGONY OF THE 1984 ARMY ASSAULT on the Golden Temple is indelibly etched in the psyche of most adult Sikhs. The month of June marks the martyrdom of Fifth Guru Arjun Dev in 1606 AD under orders of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. June 4, 1984 coincided with the anniversary of that great sacrifice. By some diabolical urge the then prime minister ordered a virtual martial law in the state of Punjab ahead of the Shahidi Gurburab. The precincts of the holiest of the Sikh shrines were invaded massively even as armoured tanks crushed the parikrama.

Could 'Operation Bluestar' (and, consequently, the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi) be averted? This is an exercise in conjecture. This writer, having served in the echelons of government, had a brush with destiny – almost. As adviser to Governor, Assam (1982-3) I had –more than once – met the prime minister and found her receptive to advice. So, after retirement, with the Punjab situation spinning out of control, I asked for an appointment with the prime minister. I was asked to meet her on May 15, 1984 – at her Parliament House office. But certain pressing engagements seemed to have kept her busy, and her secretary RK Dhawan conveyed apologies. I lost an opportunity to counsel moderation.

Then came her televised message to the nation on June 02, 1984. Punjab had already been 'sanitized' for army occupation and assault. Ironically the chief of army staff was Gen. Arun Vaidya, who had been previously GOC-in-C in Calcutta. The assault on Amritsar was mounted by Lt. Gen. Sundarji, assisted by Lt. Gen. Ranjit Singh Dayal, earlier a Corps Commander in Assam during my tenure as Adviser in Assam during President's rule in 1982-83. We are - more often than not – simply pawns in the hands of fate!

The story of the army assault on the holiest of Sikh shrines doubtless marks a watershed in the history of independent India. Its trauma has burnished deep into the psyche of the Sikhs and forever become part of the Punjab folklore.

'Warriors of God' or 'terrorists':

Without doubt the heroism of the small band of 'warriors' who fell while defending the sacred precincts will be celebrated – in ardas – by every succeeding generation of Sikhs. They had no chance against the mighty armour of the world's fourth largest army. Altogether some 5,000 people perished, among them pilgrims, men, women and children, priests and *sewadars*. Their bodies were hurriedly carted away in municipal conservancy lorries for mass cremation. The exact details of the holocaust will probably never be known. The White Paper issued by the Government in mid-July, 1984 turned out to be a pathetic exercise in cover-up. The many who took part in the assault, and the few who were selected for gallantry awards, in a glittering ceremony at New Delhi's Presidential palace on 25th March, 1985 shall have to carry the albatross of guilt around their necks unto their dying day. Dire punishments were handed out to the Sikh troops who had 'revolted' at the diabolical sacrilege, in cantonments as far as Ramgarh.

The world history is replete with instances of similar selective holocausts – fashionably called 'ethnic cleansing.' 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, the 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 truth, honour and freedom of faith - ideas that are imbedded in the foundations of Amritsar.

The Sikhs' agony was all the more hurtful because, in June, 1984, leaders of other communities remained silent – even jubilant-onlookers. One wonders how the religious people of India could suffer such calamity as Operation Bluestar to happen without demur. The Shankaracharyas and the Shahi Imams merely watched and shrugged, their silence deafening! It was, significantly, left to the Pontiff of the world's 900 million Catholics in distant Rome, to show concern and sympathy. Addressing pilgrims at St. Peter's Square at Vatican City on Sunday, June 10, 1984, Pope John Paul II had said:

“In recent days there has been news of the increasingly grave events in Punjab. They unfortunately still do not seem to have come to 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. (But) 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.”

But those in power were unmoved. They had no desire to settle the basic issues. The crisis, as well as the conflict, simply deepened in the years that followed. The strife escalated. Draconian laws were hurriedly passed by a seemingly callous and captive Parliament. Rule of the gun was promulgated in the Punjab. Thousands were hauled up for detention without trial, their fate symbolized by the agony of the innocent four hundred in Jodhpur Central Jail who were finally released in 1989 – after five years of undeserved incarceration.

Genesis: Few historians have cared to analyse how harshly have the Sikhs been treated in post-1947 India. Since the birth of Sikhism, the Gurus taught us never to succumb to injustice and oppression. The later Mughals had tried to resort to mass conversion of Hindus. The Kashmiri Pandits had sought intervention of Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675. He courted death in order to arouse the country's conscience. Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Order of the Khalsa in 1699 to assert the freedom of faith. The Sikhs fought for long decade in the 18th Century to put an end to invading hordes of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali. Establishment of the Khalsa rule under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1849) brought peace and prosperity to North India.

So in 1947, when the subcontinent was partitioned, Sikhs expected a fair deal - of a region where (in the words of Nehru) they could 'feel the glow of freedom'. Instead, they lost their canal irrigated farm lands to West Pakistan. The Indian Constitution dismissed them as "as a sect of Hinduism" in a Footnote. No wonder Sant Bhindranwale was livid and assembled a band of armed 'militants' within the Akal Takht.

As adversity is sometimes bitter medicine, Operation Bluestar is not without its positive side. It put Indian democracy to its severest test and focused attention on violation of human rights. It triggered a resurgence of the basic sovereignty of the Sikh doctrine and created a sharper awareness of the Sikh identity world-wide. In the decade, while parts of India had been engulfed in communal strife, Punjab demonstrated the validity of the Gurus' message of amity, in the miracle of Hindu-Sikh harmony, particularly in rural areas where the Sikhs command an overwhelming majority. Yet Punjab was again divided, carving out the Haryana state and ceding territory to Himachal.

On the negative side, the Sikhs lost the flower of their youth and suffered an unprecedented diaspora. Recruitment to army plummeted to an all time low, which is a pity.

Government also lost grace and credibility by sending Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh, Sukhjinder Singh and Harjinder Singh to the gallows, while allowing the perpetrators, of the November 1984 massacres to go scot-free. There is unwillingness – and much deviousness – to confront the key issues in Punjab, such as transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, fair distribution of river water and, the basic question of a region where Sikhs can feel “a glow of freedom”.

Post Script: We feel impelled to recall that our Editorial in the July 1984 issue was hastily banned by a Notification issued by government in Chandigarh. Further, the Defence Ministry debarred serving officers from subscribing to ***The Sikh Review***, whereby we lost scores of valued members from our rolls. Several years later, in 1990s’, mainly due to the good office of (the late) Justice RS Narula and Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora, the ban was lifted. But it was too late for erstwhile subscribers to resume membership – a loss that continues to rankle.

