

Operation Bluestar and Government of India's White Paper

SPEECH DELIVERED BY SR. KHUSHWANT SINGH, MP (RAJYA SABHA) IN 1984

In July 1984, The Government of India published a White Paper on Punjab, which was a hurriedly concocted tissue of untruths and half-truths bristling with inherent contradictions. While the Sikh Congress MPs generally toed the line or simply kept mum, it was the noted historian and writer Sardar Khushwant Singh, then a nominated MP in the Upper House, who exposed the mendacity of the White Paper and the hypocrisy of the ruling party. Since the public memory is notoriously short, and few recall that Sardar Khushwant Singh had gone to Rastrapati Bhavan soon after the Army assault on the Golden Temple to return the title Padma Bhushan, we publish below the text of the speech he delivered in the Parliament - which echoed the sentiment of the Sikhs, and seems to have an uncanny relevance even today.

Ed. SR.

BEFORE I SAY ANYTHING I WOULD request you, Mr. Deputy Chairman, to keep your hand off the bell. I promise to keep my eye on the clock to make sure I do not exceed the time allotted to me. I would also request my brother members of the House not to interrupt me while I am speaking. I have many unpalatable truths to tell them. Bear with me till I have finished; there-after you will be more than welcome to refute them if you can.

Although I am only a nominated Member of this House and, therefore, the lowest of lower castes in this House, I make bold to assert that I speak on behalf of 14 million of your fellow citizens known as Sikhs. I go further, what you have heard, and may hear from other Sikh members of the ruling Congress party, does not echo the sentiments of the community.

We have had six hours of debate during which we have heard discourses on Punjab politics, Akali factionalism with a lot of recrimination between parties. There was total lack of a sense of gravity of the situation facing the country which is on the brink of an abyss, total absence of realization that the country is breaking up, a total absence of any viable suggestion of what we should do.

My heart is very full but I will be as unemotional and objective as I can. All I will say about the Army action is that it was a tragic error of judgment, a grievous mistake and miscalculation, which will cover many black pages in the history of India, Punjab and the Sikhs. I will dwell in greater detail on how to retrieve the situation.

Perhaps the best way of examining the thesis of the White Paper placed before us is to go backwards, to see the situation today, and back to the generals of this sorry business.

The situation today is that the religious susceptibilities of every single Sikh has been deeply wounded – 99% of these Sikhs had nothing whatsoever to do with Sant Bhindranwale, the Akalis, the government or politics of any sort. **This action has humiliated the pride of a very proud people. A proud people do not forget, or forgive very easily.** You have divided Hindus and Sikhs: the wedge was driven by the Akalis, widened by Bhindranwale and made unbridgeable by you. Sikhs who, till yesterday, regarded themselves as more than first class citizens, are now treated worse than third class citizens. Discrimination against them continues at airports and check points on rails

and roads. It has created a sense of isolation and alienation among them. They are beginning to ask themselves: "Do Indians still regard us as one of them?"

This being the situation, ask yourselves questions. **First**, could any action which alienated the feeling of 14 million fellow citizens, who form the backbone of our Defence Services, provide more than half the food for the country and live on the most sensitive border facing Pakistan, be ever justified? **Second, is it really true, as maintained in the government's White Paper, that it had no choice except to mount military invasion on the Golden Temple?**

My answer to both these questions is a categorical 'No'.

The White Paper has much to say about the Akali intransigence, its constantly changing stance making new demands and going back on points on which agreements had been reached under pressure of extremists. It says nothing about the government's own shifting of position and *resiling from solemnity given undertakings*. All this has been set out in a booklet published by Comrade Harkishen Singh Surjeet who, on government request, played a prominent role in the negotiations as well as by other Opposition party members privy to such consultations.

I will not go over them again, but it must be recorded that after every breakdown of discussions the Prime Minister came out with the stock reply that some matters concerned neighbouring states which had to be consulted. Apparently, in two years such consultations were not concluded.

It should also be noted that the White Paper has grievously erred in the chronology of events. Its main thesis is that the Akali Morcha gave birth to terrorism. The Prime Minister repeated this charge yesterday. The facts do not bear this out. **Terrorist activity preceded the morcha by more than six months and was born out of encounters faked by the Punjab police, and the armed conflict between the Nirankaris and Sant Bhindranwale beginning on April 13, 1978.** Both the Nirankari Baba Gurbachan Singh and Lala Jagat Narain were assassinated *long before the morcha* was launched by the Akalis.

The White Paper also makes no mention of the Home Minister's repeated statements in both Houses of Parliament and *the MP's assurances outside Parliament that the government had no intention to move the Army into the Golden Temple*. Nor does it tell us, in any convincing detail, how many men there were with Bhindranwale and how they came by the kinds of weapons the Government now alleges they had with them.

The major question which is left unanswered is: whether or not the Government had any alternatives other than sending in the Army into the Golden Temple. I can suggest two, neither of which has been mentioned in the White Paper. First was a commando action by men in plain clothes designed only to take Bhindranwale and his men alive or dead. This would have spared us the loss of innocent lives as well as the massive destruction of sacred property. The second was for the army to cordon off the Golden Temple complex, occupy the *Guru ka Langar*, cut off supply of food, fuel and electricity and force Bhindranwale's men to come out of the Akal Takht and the *parikarma* to fight. The result would have been quite different.

However, neither of these alternatives was given serious consideration and, instead, we had six Army division moved into the Punjab (more than we had in the three wards with Pakistan), a force led by a Lt. General and two Major Generals equipped with armoured personnel carriers, tanks, mountain guns, all to flush out no more than 300-500 men armed

with nothing more sophisticated than L.M.G.s, antiquated 303 rifles, some hand grenades and a rusty bazooka.

My Deputy Chairman, Sir, I visited the Golden Temple a month after the army action, interviewed many people who were in the complex at that time, and saw the damage done with my own eyes. Let me tell you, and through you, the rest of the country, that this White Paper has grossly underestimated the number of lives lost, overlooked mentioning that the dead, *included hundreds of totally innocent men, women and children.* The Government spokesmen have repeated ad-nauseam that no damage was caused to the Harimandir; *as a matter of fact it still bears fresh bullet marks by the score*; a handwritten copy of the Guru Granth pierced by a bullet; a blind raagi, Amreek Singh was killed inside while doing keertan; the Akal Takht is a total wreck – and besides the entire archives consisting of nearly 1000 manuscript copies of the Guru Granth Sahib and innumerable *Hukumnamahs*, bearing signatures of Gurus, gone up in flames.

What is most painful about this vandalism is that it took place after resistance had been overcome. So also was the fire which broke out in the offices of the SGPC and the Akali Dal. All their records have been destroyed – and with only object, viz, to cover up the extensive loot of cash and property. Who did this. I leave to your conjecture.

Now we hear of the healing touch. The “place of honour” – in inverted commas – should go to the Government controlled media – All India Radio and Doordarshan and an abjectly subservient national press. **For days on end, the TV screen showed the Harmandir at a distance so that no damage to it could be seen; the destroyed Akal Takht was carefully kept out of view.** At first the Press told us that 13 women had been killed, then that no woman had been killed, then that they have, been killed by a grenade thrown by the extremists. That Bhindranwale had committed suicide, he had been killed by his own men – and, ultimately, that he had fallen in battle; that hashish, opium and heroin had been found, then, that he was found outside the Temple complex; that women of loose character were with the extremists, some of them pregnant!

How more pregnant with lies can anyone’s imagination be? Let me nail another canard spread by the Government, viz. *Gurubani keertan* is relayed from the Golden Temple every morning. It is not. Tapes are played from Jullunder Station, the poor man incharge obviously knows nothing about the *Asa-di-var*, and mixes up the tapes. For days on end I have heard with my own ears the *Ardas* which comes at the end of the morning *Asa-di-var* service played right in the middle, and the rest of the *kirtan* follows.

And the latest in “the healing touch” is the hiring of Santa Singh Nihang, self-styled *Sultan-ul-Qaoum*, and the truck loads of villagers and Congress-I workers to carry out *kar-seva* – in total defiance of a *Hukumnama* issued by Jathedars of the five Takhts and the near-unanimous opinion of the entire Sikh community. **All I can say is that an administration that does not know the difference between applying a soothing ointment and rubbing salt on wounds is not worthy of governing this country.**

It is evident that despite what you have done, you have not broken the back of terrorism. It continues. There is hijacking, breaching of canals and looting of banks. It is also evident from the fact of the enormous security precautions that, in this free country, you have to provide for our President and the Prime Minister. We are living in the midst of fear. You also know that you cannot keep the army in Punjab for ever. You cannot keep a people down

with bayonets for too long. You should realize what the consequences will be when the army is removed and suddenly an inflamed people discover that it has gone.

We must provide palliatives to avoid this situation. I would like to place certain positive suggestions. I believe in grand gestures. I proposed, at one time, that the Prime Minister should go to the Golden Temple as a pilgrim. My proposal was not taken seriously. I proposed later that the President should go to the Golden Temple. No notice was taken of this proposal either. They visited the Golden Temple *after* the damage has been done. May I suggest now a grand gesture?

I would suggest that the leaders of this country, Jagadgurus Shankaracharyas and others, leaders of Hindu parties, like Advaniji, Vajpayeeji, and others, should join us in this *kar-seva*. This is one of the ways in which we can heal the wounds inflicted on the Sikhs. Lastly, we have a great day coming – the 11th of August – Raksha Bandhan. Let every Hindu tie a *rakhi* on the hands of a Sikh which we shall reciprocate. These are some of the ways in which you can repair the damage which you have done.

