

March 2000 Massacre of Sikhs in Kashmir

The tragic loss remains shrouded in Mystery

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Seven years after the brutal assassination of 40 Sikhs in their ancestral Kashmir village, neither the state of J&K nor the Union Government have provided any conclusive answers to the horrendous incident that had coincided with the arrival in India of the then US President Bill Clinton.

- Ed. SR

Chati Singhpora (Anantnag): Thirty-five members of the minority Sikh community were butchered by heavily-armed gunmen dressed in military-style fatigues who raided this typical Kashmiri roadside village along the Anantnag-Pahalgam highway late on night of March 20, 2000.

The carnage was the first such against Sikhs during the decade-old insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. Altogether 50 militants, mostly foreign mercenaries according to the government, swooped down on the village armed with A-K 47s and grenade, ordered all members of the Sikh families out of their houses and segregated the men before shooting them at a point-blank range. The village has 250 Sikh families.

In New Delhi, the national security adviser, Mr Brajesh Mishra, said the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and the Hizb-ul-Mujahiden were behind the massacre, report agencies. He said the government had evidence that the two organisations were behind the massacre. He, however, did not disclose the evidence.

The massacre evoked wide-spread resentment among the minority community throughout the state and elsewhere. Amid mounting tension and surging crowds taking to the streets at a number of places, curfew was imposed in Jammu, the state's winter capital, as a precautionary measure. However, this was likely to be lifted by late Tuesday night, officials said.

Udhampur, Rajouri, Poonch, R.S. Pura, Anantnag, Mattan and some other towns and parts of Srinagar, Tral and Baramulla observed a spontaneous bandh to protest and mourn the massacre.

Several thousand Sikhs drove here from different parts of the Valley to attend the funeral of slain men. Emotional scenes marked the cremation.

Witnesses and the police said that unidentified gunmen had descended on this village and its periphery Karewa at about 9.30 pm on Monday. "They were in military-style uniforms and said the village was under a crackdown (cordon-and-search operation regularly conducted by the security forces in search of militants and dumps)", said one witness, Gurtej, who escaped. After segregating them to congregate in an open space near Gurdwara.

As soon as men did so, the gunmen opened indiscriminate fire from their automatic weapons. Thirty-four persons died instantly, and one of the two men who were injured succumbed while being evacuated to Anantnag, the district headquarters, the police said.

Joginder Singh, a special police officer, said when he disclosed his identity to what he believed were soldiers they looked unimpressed. A retired army officer was told by them: "*Hum aap ko hi dhoond rahe hain* (We are looking for you only)" when he revealed his identity to them. He too was ordered to join the others for an identification parade.

Two Sikh residents somehow managed to reach nearby Mattan to report the incident. The police and Army threw a cordon around the area and launched a hunt for the culprits. The bullet-riddled corpses of the slain men, each covered with white cloth were lying in the Gurdwara compound. There were bloodstains everywhere and the whole village was in mourning 15 hours after the massacre.

The protesters were asking for arms. "We are not cowards. Give us weapons. We will fight them. Some in the crowd suggested mass migration out of the Valley, but others questioned the wisdom of doing so. "Why should we leave," retorted an elderly Sikh. When have we acted as informers? Why should we leave?" said another.

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Butchers Stain Clinton Visit

New Delhi, March 21: The Anantnag massacre brought Kashmir out of the "private" agenda into the public domain with the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee rejecting "the notion that *jihad* can be a part of any civilised country's foreign policy."

In an obvious reference to Pakistan Chief Executive General Pervez Mushrraf's statement drawing a difference between *jihad* and terrorism, Mr Vajpayee said, "The attempt at cloaking acts of terrorism in the guise of *jihad* carries no conviction." He was speaking to the press after a meeting with US President Bill Clinton at Hyderabad House on March 21,2000. "We have the means and the will to eliminate this menace," Mr Vajpayee added.

The brutal massacre of Sikhs in Anantnag district put the Kashmir Valley into sharp focus on the first day of US President Bill Clinton's visit to India. Both sides had decided to underplay the issue of Jammu and Kashmir publicly, with general references to violence and terrorism. Instead, as President Bill Clinton admitted to reporters at Hyderabad House, the issue was "discussed at great length" by the two leaders. And the largely "private" talks on the Kashmir issue became "public" as a result.

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