

## Phoolka: The Fearless Advocate Harvinder Singh's Lone Fight for Civil Liberties



THE YEAR 1984 SHALL ALWAYS BE a watershed in Sikh history. The trauma of Operation Bluestar and the monstrous state-sponsored pogrom that followed, have left permanent scars on the psyche of the Sikhs. Those events altered and redefined the dynamics of Sikh relationship not only with the political entity that is India, but also Indian society at large. A quarter of a century later, perpetrators of 1984 remain unpunished, and the issues around it unresolved.

Violation of human rights of the Sikhs were horrendous enough, but they became infinitely worse when seen in the light of government collusion, if not very active participation. Since 1984, justice has remained both illusive and elusive. Justice delayed is justice denied. A string of Government appointed Inquiry Commissions have only served to rub salt into the wounds of the Sikhs. The guilty remain free.

Sikhs have not given up their demand for justice. Today, we can sense an iota of change, a small shift in prevailing attitudes in India that gives us renewed hope. We owe this glimmer of optimism in large part to the steadfast and unwavering dedication of Sikhs like Advocate Harvinder Singh Phoolka.

As a young lawyer starting out in Delhi 1984, S. Harvinder Singh found himself squarely in the middle of the 'genocide': on that fateful day in November, he had to whisk his pregnant wife on a motorcycle, skirting the main roads to get home. Although he initially chose to retreat to the safety of Chandigarh, the plight of Sikhs, especially those widowed and orphaned or left homeless, moved him to action.

Advocate Phoolka launched the Citizens for Justice Committee in 1984 and has, for 25 years, single handedly led the legal battle for the victims of 1984 - Sikh Genocide. In the true spirit of the Sikh practice of tithing, this work has been done gratis – with no charge to the victims he represents.

While 25 years may have put his career on hold and aged him, the years have not slowed his relentless intensity in the pursuit of all and every avenue of justice. As the co-author of the much acclaimed *When a Tree Shook Delhi*, he continues to be a major force in documenting human rights abuses. If India is to live to its label as the largest democratic nation in the world, it owes a debt to heroic activists like Harvinder Singh Phoolka for institutionalizing the voice for freedom, justice and equal rights.

For a public activist to be threatened again and again with his life, by some of the very powerful defendants and to remain steadfast in the pursuit of justice is remarkable in itself. He is a Sikh in the true sense who has carried out 'selfless seva'. We salute and celebrate Harvinder Singh Phoolka.

