

36 Hours of massacre of the Sikhs

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'Fifteen years old. Round chubby face. Aching black eyes. She tumbled out of the first rescue bus. The torment she had endured for 36 hours surged out when she saw us, "*Meri izzat loot li* (they raped me)." She cried out, she pulled away the loose crumpled kurta from her shoulders to reveal a gash from her left collarbone to right breast, covered with dried blood, "*Dekho, dekho kya kiya unhone mere saath* (see, see what they did to me)," writes Sheela Barse after witnessing the horrendous plight of Sikh-victims of 1984 Delhi massacre. Within 36 hours of India's PM Indira Gandhi being murdered on 31 October 1984, 3000 Sikhs lay dead amid rape, arson, loot, rapine in what was the first genocide of independent India.

What led to this human tragedy would perhaps be better understood if the political demography of the nation is kept strictly in focus. It would help unveil what all was in store to become a prelude to the human disaster of 1984.

'Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by the forces of Sikh extremism,' writes Shashi Tharoor, Indian representative at UN High Commission for Refugees in the book, *India from Midnight to Millennium*. He writes further, 'forces she had herself primed. In 1977 the Congress party had been ousted in Punjab by the Sikh Akali Dal Party, an ally of Janta Party; Mrs Gandhi typically decided to undermine them by using opponents more Sikh than Akalis. So she encouraged (and reportedly even financed) the extremist fundamentalism of Sikh fundamentalist preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale soon tired of assassinating clean-shaven Sikhs for their apostasy and instead took up the cause of an independent Sikh State, Khalistan. As the murders mounted, Mrs. Gandhi had little choice but to destroy the monster she had herself nurtured and she finally violated a basic tenet of the Indian state by sending armed troops into a place of worship, the historic Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush out the terrorists holed up there. Bhindranwale and his immediate cohorts of gunmen were killed in Operation Bluestar, but so were a number of unarmed civilians trapped in what was after all, Sikhs' most important place of worship; great damage, not all of it repairable, was done to the temple itself, by the time she acted, Mrs. Gandhi probably had no choice.'

The assault on the Golden Temple deeply alienated many Sikhs, whose patriotism was unquestionable; the Gandhi family's staunchest ally in the independent press, the Sikh editor Khushwant Singh returned his national honours to the government, and a battalion of Sikhs, the backbone of the Indian army mutinied. Mrs. Gandhi, on her part, could not understand the extent to which so many Sikhs saw Operation Bluestar as a betrayal. She refused to draw the conclusion her security advisers did, and to her credit turned down their recommendations to remove Sikhs from her personal bodyguards. Two of them sworn to protect her with their lives, turned their guns on her instead.

Indira Gandhi was shot at 9:15 am on Oct 31, 1984. and the news spread throughout the day on radio and newspapers as crowds gathered outside All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) waiting for news. Sikhs, many of whom were Congress supporters were 'as shocked and grieved as anyone else,' (Rao, *Report to the Nation*) were without the faintest idea of the ensuing massacre.

Meanwhile, on the same day, two truckloads of men from nearby villages according to Madhu Kishwar, laced with iron rods and lathis were unloaded at the site and stood as if waiting for the signal from their masters. Soon the Congress corporator who was later to be implicated for organising riots in trans-Yamuna area beseeched the hired rowdies with a speech and sloganeering, *Khoon Ka Badla, Khoon Se Lenge* (blood for blood) and as an

instant reaction the waiting mob was geared up pulling Sikhs out of vehicles, beating them and setting their turbans on fire before dispersing to the assigned jobs towards Naorji Nagar, INA market, Yusuf Sarai, South Extension and Trilokpuri. Sikh vehicles were stoned, looting and burning of Sikhs' shops had started, two Gurdwaras went up in flames. Even the motorcade of India's President Giani Zail Singh, who was a Sikh was stoned by the angry mob while he was on his way to AIIMS.

At 5:30pm, "Rajiv Gandhi (son of Indira Gandhi) came outafter having seen his mother's ...body," followed by Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting H.K.L. Bhagat, the latter, who has been accused of master minding the riots reportedly "scolded the crowd, saying: "what is the point of assembling here?" (Rao, Report to the nation). 'This reported statement could obviously have other meanings, suggesting either that the crowd had no purpose in assembling there or that it might have a more useful purpose else where,' wrote Virginia Van Dyke in Riots and Pogroms.

On Nov. 1, the organised cleansing of Sikhs began with outstanding accuracy as simultaneous riots broke all over Delhi at the same time and hoodlums from nearby resettlement colonies poured into Delhi to be provided with readymade iron rods, bamboo sticks and litres of kerosene oil mixed with phosphorous. The crowds of mostly illiterate men who could not have read the names on the shops and houses and who, being from outside the neighborhood, would not have been able to identify the Sikh establishment were reportedly led by Congress Party officials carrying voter lists, ration cards and school registers pointing out the Sikh shops and houses or marking them with Nazi style symbols prior to the arrival of the crowd. There was a method in the madness. Men would be called from their homes, often by name, stunned with lathi blows to incapacitate them or hacked to pieces, then they would be burnt alive, their homes would be looted and then set on fire.

Tirlokpuri became the worst killing ground for the hapless Sikh women as around 40-50 Sikh women were kidnapped and taken to a nearby Chilla village. There was no respite as the left-behind, Sikh men pleaded with a Sub-Inspector of police to rescue the girls but the SI had inadequate force and the day passed. The SI took up the case with his senior police officers and was declined vehicles as they were most likely to be burnt. Police was more concerned about vehicles than the dignity of kidnapped women! The SI could finally rescue the women and got suspended instead! Perpetrators on the other side were liberally supplied with liquor and many of them were even paid. Sajjan Kumar, Congress MP then, and also MP in 2004 and Lalit Makan, Congress Trade Union leader were openly identified in 'Who are the Guilty?' as having paid each man involved Rs 100 and a bottle of liquor. The report was published in Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and Peoples Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) journals.

On Nov. 2, the communal orgy continued as a full day of rioting and killing went on the increase. Report of the Citizens Commission gives details as to how trains were forcibly stopped by crowds in order to murder Sikh passengers. 'From Pink City Express a Sikh was taken out and killed in Haryana' reported Times of India on Nov. 2, 1984. The spreading violence went on until the Army was called, only to attest to the countless human bodies scattered on streets, burnt remains of taxis and trucks with the corpses of their drivers at the wheels. Nov. 3 brought some signs of abatement particularly in the more central areas while violence continued in the resettlement communities. By Nov. 4, although violence continued, the trend, of a return to normalcy was in evidence.

While the dance of death was taking place the police looked the other way. There were three methods very well adopted by police. They were either conspicuous by their absence, passive observers, or acting in complicity with arsonists by encouraging or actually

participating in violence. The police were reported to have said to the mob, "We gave you 36 hours. Had we given the Sikhs that much time they would have killed every Hindu." Rajiv Gandhi who was sworn in as Prime Minister at 6:50pm on Oct 31 evaded the question of initiating any inquiry into the massacre. He would not let things move till he could see Congress winning over 90 percent seats in 1984 general elections. This would go on until once he callously declared that any inquiry, if done, would damage Sikhs more and that the issues were all really dead. However, the government ultimately designated Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission on April 26, 1985. The inquiry proved to be a farce and was a blatant cover up exercise.

This was followed by Manmohan Singh, as leader of opposition in Rajya Sabha extending support to the proposal of a fresh inquiry into the Delhi massacre and Justice Nanavati Commission was finally installed. The inquiry was finally tabled in Aug. 2005 and is still clouded with probabilities in determining the veracity of 200 First Information Report and investigate 3000 Sikhs killed in over 36 hours. Out of the total 300 cases in court 200 are for murder and there have been just nine convictions in murder cases over 19 years!

The wounds of 1984 massacre are still raw and before even an inquiry and subsequent convictions could take place India witnessed yet another genocide in Gujarat in 2002. Both the genocides were well-planned and sponsored, the former by Congress and the latter by the BJP.

But, what has diminished the hope is the belief in the ultimate rule of law for a common citizen who tends to get jittery over the stark similarities in both the macabre episodes. The previous one has been prevaricating since two decades and the consequent KG Shah Commission set up by Narendra Modi to probe the Gujrat riots had already raised eyebrows with everyone demanding replacing the same with another Commission under a Supreme Court judge way back in 2002.

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