

## Of Pride, Prejudice and Passion

Amnesia is defined by the dictionary as a 'loss of memory'. To forget is often a relief, especially what is mentally disturbing or painful. For an agonized individual this could be a blessing. But when a whole nation forgets a collective tragedy, history has a nasty way of repeating itself.

A month ago, the Americans - indeed much of the world - solemnly remembered the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre which destroyed the twin-towers in the heart of New York's Manhattan. A whole nation prayed for some 3000 men and women who had lost their lives, and invoked the spirit of freedom.

Half a world away, in India, 1984 had witnessed a far more horrendous tragedy: first, in June, at Amritsar and across the Punjab, and next, in November, in the capital city of Delhi, Kanpur and Bokaro, where tens of thousands of unwary innocent Sikhs - men, women and children - were brutally massacred.

Eighteen years have passed. No one cares to remember that innocent blood had been shed, or that the bestial crimes of murder, rape and pillage remain unpunished. No candles are lit, no flowers laid around Harmander Sahib's *Prakarma*. Every vestige of the infamous army assault has been carefully removed, the Akal Takht rebuilt, first by the government hirelings and, then, officially, by SGPC. The *Bungas* soar into blue skies as if nothing ever happened. Government - and self-righteous Indians - dismissed the deaths of innocents in the holy precincts as "collateral damage".

Nor does Delhi observe candle-light vigils. No special prayers are held in Gurdwara Bangla Sahib. The city's Sikh Forum, under the doughty General Jagjit Singh Arurora, dutifully observes the November 1984 *pogrom* every year, even as the handful of speakers deplore the general apathy. However, the eminent jurist-analyst AG Noorani's article, reprinted in this issue, discloses the larger conspiracy leading upto the assassination of Mrs Gandhi, even as he reiterates the innocence of Kehar Singh, who was hanged in Tihar jail, along with the youthful Satwant Singh, in the chill dawn of Friday, January 6, 1989. While the Rajiv government gloated over the November 1984 carnage as a popular outburst ['a quake after giant tree collapses'] the Congress hoodlums gleefully "celebrated" the blood-bath.

Evidently, while the older people are struck with amnesia, the post-1984 generation of Sikhs - both in Punjab and Delhi - have no recollection and is untroubled by the tragedy. How foolish can we get was demonstrated last month when newspaper frontpaged pictures of a clutch of well dressed Sikhs holding a public demonstration, on behalf of Sonia Gandhi, in which the Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha's effigy was defaced in protest against the latter's statement that Italian born Sonia Maino had no moral right to prime ministership of India. Irrespective of what Indira and Rajiv had done to the Sikhs, why are some Sikhs in Delhi, and Punjab, bending over backwards to please the Congress chief? Are they being *manipulated*? Is it a coterie of sycophants looking for cheap publicity? Do they know, for instance, that Tamil Nadu is host to an enterprising - if small - Sikh population, and that one of the best chairs of Sikh Studies happens to be located in Madurai Kamaraj University?

We are obviously in dire need of a revolution both in ideas and in mass mobilisation. Sadly, the Sikhs cannot be easily mobilised and are generally shy of public demonstrations, even when their cause is righteous. Charismatic leadership is conspicuous by its absence. The city youth, whether in Chandigarh, Delhi or Ludhiana, is busy in nightly disco dances. Rural Sikhs have a hard time coping with the multifarious economic problems. Such hedonistic lifestyle, and preoccupation with fashion and fads, among the youth is the consequence - not the cause - of the politics in Punjab which is unashamedly governed by the cash nexus, administrative stagnation and rampant corruption.

Now consider the scene in another continent. It could be another planet. Washington DC's reputed George Town University witnessed, this summer, an impressive conference of young Sikh professionals where they engaged in dialogue (a) with the Bush Administration to safeguard the Sikh interests in the emerging post 9/11 scenario, and (b) to explain, on a deeper plane, the relevance of the Sikh ideology in their own lives in relation to the western civilization. In pursuance (American) Sikhs have constituted a strategic body: the Sikh Council on Religion and Education - SCORE.

The universities in Punjab too have "chairs" - at Amritsar and Patiala. They invariably hold seminars where scholars of every hue come to partake of philosophical fare, sharing tea and sympathy. Yet we discover canards being spread about the Sikh religion that go unchallenged. One example is pertinent. The Wordsworth *Encyclopedia of World Religions*,\* a 1000 page volume, devotes a single column to Sikhism that bristles with quaint and questionable statements. Sample: "While idolatry was forbidden veneration of the Granth, the Holy Book, was often idolatrous." This is not a piece of information but an insinuation. And another: Guru Nanak (is considered) "an incarnation of God with the 16 *Avatara* signs". And more: "By rejecting non-violence (mark the words) they (i.e. the Sikhs) lost scruples against killing and eating animals." All this goes unchallenged, the chairs and SGPC notwithstanding. Finally a wake-up call: a draft Bill to regulate the management of Gurdwaras seeks to hand over all powers to the government, as explained by our friend, Sr. Balwant Singh in an insightful article.

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