

The Assassination and the Massacre

*Pranay Gupte**

* *Noted Indian scholar working in USA. Excerpted from his book PASSAGE THROUGH INDIA, an eyewitness account of 1984.*

The bazaars near the Golden Temple were packed with people this Sunday morning. We parked outside one of the four main gates, in what seemed to me to be an extension of a bazaar: Ahuja's station wagon had to be squeezed between a vendor of oranges and a man who had set up a stall of spicy savories. Ahuja's wife and mother went in separately. He and I checked in our shoes at a booth near the entrance, and Ahuja rented for me a *patka*, or a sort of cap to cover my head - everyone's head must be covered when inside the Golden Temple. We washed our feet in a small basin and then walked down a flight of marble steps into the courtyard of the temple.

The Harimandir sparkled in the brilliant sunshine. The sacred pool in which it sat was lightly ruffled by a cool breeze. I looked around. I was the only non-Sikh male in the vast courtyard. The Temple's public address system was broadcasting hymns in the Punjabi language that were being sung inside the Harimandir by *granthis*, or acolytes. Ahuja and I walked on the marble-floored perimeter, known as the *parikrama*. We occasionally weaved through columns and under doorways.

Ahuja kept very close to me physically. I thought; this is a gesture of protection, this Sikh wants to make sure that his Hindu companion comes to no harm. If I was being bold turning up inside Sikhism's holiest shrine even as Sikhs were being butchered not far away in Delhi by non-Sikhs, then Bhagwant Singh Ahuja was even more courageous in escorting a Hindu to the Temple. Several Sikhs stared at us as we walked by. Ahuja sometimes would stop at a *ghat*, or steps that led into the sacred pool, and sip holy water; I replicated his motions. The water was cool, even sweet.

We bought a tray of flowers *from* a vendor who had parked himself not far *from* the Harimandir:

"The very fact that you are here must tell you how tolerant Sikhism is," Ahuja said, as we walked on. "You are my brother. That is why you and I are here together. Even if you were my political enemy, I would still bring you here. Why not? The Temple is one place where we must all leave our politics and social differences outside."

He paused to bow before an ancient tree in whose shadow a Sikh saint, long dead, once lived and preached.

"But there are people who brought their politics and weapons into this Temple," Ahuja said. "Look around you. Look carefully."

I was startled by what I saw. Abutting the *parikrama* were mounds of rubble. Marble flooring had caved in. Bullet holes pocked many buildings. The sunburst of shells marked several structures. Even the Akal Takht, which had been restored by the Indian Government at the cost of \$40 million since the June storming of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army, somehow looked hastily patched up.

Heavy tanks had been brought in during that military operation to counter Bhindranwale and his terrorists. More than a thousand people died, although the Delhi government insists to this day that the figure was no more than four hundred. The man in operational charge of the military assault was himself a Sikh - Lieutenant General Ranjit Singh Dayal, chief of staff of the army's prestigious Western Command. General Dayal's main adversary was not Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who had no formal military training, but another highly decorated war hero like Dayal himself, Major General Shahbeg Singh. Singh had been among those who trained the Mukti Bahini guerrillas who fought to establish the state of

Bangladesh in what was then East Pakistan. But he was later cashiered from the Indian Army on corruption charges. Singh was subsequently recruited by Bhindranwale to train his growing band of "terrorists". It was Shahbeg Singh who had planned the fortification of the Golden Temple. It was he who had trained Bhindranwale's motley band of militants in the use of highly sophisticated weapons such as antitank cannon. Those weapons were fired by the terrorists with deadly accuracy on June 5 and 6. Scores of brave Indian soldiers died. Officials in Delhi said that the army had been surprised to confront sophisticated weaponry in the Golden Temple. Obviously, the government's intelligence system had let it down. Looking at the Temple on this lovely November morning, it seemed inconceivable to me that anyone had dared to defile its serenity and sanctity - whether it be Bhindranwale or Shahbeg Singh or the Indian army. Temples are our last sanctuaries for peace and reflection. Punjab's Sikh "terrorists" had (Reportedly) infiltrated not only the Golden Temple, but also forty-two other gurdwaras across the state. Why hadn't the priests of the temples protested? The lines between the spiritual and the temporal in the Punjab had blurred.

I wept.

Inside the Harimandir, the prayers were for peace and brotherhood this morning, as they are every day of the week. Granthis played on harmoniums. Priests chanted hymns in front of the holy Granth Sahib - the collection of sayings and songs of Guru Nanak and other Sikh gurus and bhagats - which lay covered by a burgundy silk shawl. The gold - sheathed walls glistened. There was a powerful fragrance of incense. I followed Ahuja in circumambulating the inner shrine, then I knelt in front of the Granth Sahib, and applied my forehead to the floor. A hand touched my head. I looked up. It was a Sikh priest, and he was blessing me. I rose, and he handed me some marigold. He was an old man, and there was a gentle smile on his face.

Ahuja and I walked up to the balcony of the Harmandir. I looked out at the Golden Temple's courtyard, and beyond it toward an entire residential block that had been razed during the June military operation. So much history there, I thought, so much violence, and now what? Will Sikhs and Hindus ever again worship here without mutual suspicion? Will they intermarry with the same zest and enthusiasm? Will the Punjabi Hindu families, those who had traditionally converted their eldest sons to Sikhism, continue the practice? Or will Sikhs now be a besieged minority in a country for which so many had shed their blood and perished in battle over the years? Ahuja and I looked at each other as if the same thoughts rushed through our minds, but we said nothing to each other. What was there to say?

We started toward the *parikrama* again. On the way, Ahuja lingered near a blackboard on which was written in chalk the daily quotation from the Granth Sahib, which serves as Sikhism's bible. The script was Gurmukhi, which had been devised by Guru Nanak's successor, Guru Angad. It was one of the very first steps toward establishing a separate Sikh identity.

"This world is a transitory place," the quotation read. "Some of our compatriots have already gone, and some day the rest of us also have to go. This world is only a temporary abode."

It was an astonishing quotation to have been put up at a time of such crisis, I thought. It was freighted with humility and fatalism. I wished I could have broadcast it to those Hindus in Delhi; the quotation would have put them to shame. We climbed the stairs that led away from the *Parikrama*. A fresh hymn was being broadcast now, sung in Punjabi by a Granthi. He sang softly at first, then his voice rose clear and sharp.

"If God is with me," came the granthi's words, "What do we have to fear? - Nothing."

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I returned to the Punjab in December 1984 more than a month after my first trip, to see for

myself what changes had taken place in the state. The assassination of Indira Gandhi was no longer the main item for discussion in most people's homes. One of her assassins, Beant Singh, was killed within an hour of the shooting. Satwant Singh, the surviving assassin, was now being questioned by the authorities. All sorts of theories were being advanced about conspiracies. The American Central Intelligence Agency - always a convenient scapegoat in most of the third world, but particularly in India - was said to be behind the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, whose political alignment with the Soviet Union had long been resented by Washington. Pakistan, which was said to support the separatists who wanted to establish Khalistan, was also believed to have been behind the plot. Relatives of Beant and Satwant were arrested in their Punjab villages, then freed, then re-arrested, and let go again. The investigators appeared to be making little progress.

Many Indians were coming around to the view that rather than being a major international conspiracy, the murder of Indira Gandhi had been a case of vengeance by a handful of Sikhs who were maddened by the invasion of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Beant and Satwant were reported to have taken vows of revenge at the Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in New Delhi. By mid-December, few Indians I encountered bothered to speculate much about conspiracies and the motives of the killers. Their attention, instead, seemed focused on the political future of India.

A national election campaign was in full swing in India - but the Punjab had been excluded from the parliamentary poll because of the political instability here. The army was still out in force around the state, but places like Amritsar were no longer under curfew. Rajiv Gandhi, the new prime minister, was going around the country saying that Sikhs would have no reason to fear for their safety under his administration; but few Sikhs had been compensated for the frightful loss to their property during the riots after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. And not one rioter had been brought to justice.

The Hindus and the Sikhs of the Punjab continued their dangerous drift away from one another. Few civic leaders in this troubled state dared to openly call for *rapprochement*. No one issue calls for national unity; there already were two countries within this one state. More than 8,000 men and women, suspected of being terrorists or of sympathizing with Sikh terrorists; were in the Punjab's jails; few of them had been allowed to see lawyers. Among those behind bars were said to be boys and girls under eleven years of age.

"It is very difficult now to go to the Punjab and talk to the masses about any reconciliation," Manmohan Singh, one of India's most respected Sikh industrialists, said to me. "There are thousands of Sikh students now in jail on what are at the best vague charges. Their parents won't even hear of reconciliation.

"So what does one do? You bide your time."

I found that Hindus were even more angry that Sikhs had not, as a community, formally condemned the assassination of Indira Gandhi. And Sikhs were bitter that few of those who had murdered their brethren across north India and looted their homes had been arrested or punished.

"This is justice?" asked Mickey Singh, Bhagwant Singh Ahuja's son. "You call this a free, civilized society?" He was echoing outrage that was being expressed around the country by people who were shocked at the breakdown of law and order in the wake of the Gandhi assassination, I asked Mickey, a tall, sturdy Sikh who is only twenty-three but who appears much older, what he thought Mrs. Gandhi's legacy was for the Punjab.

"Legacy?" Mickey Singh said. "You ask about legacy? Just look around you. Look at the army, and the unhappiness. You want to find out about her legacy?"

In the weeks since my first to Amritsar, the arithmetic of population in the Punjab had

started to change. More than 75,000 Sikhs emigrated to the state from other parts of India. They came here from Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, even as far away as Bihar and Orissa. They fled their homes to escape further harassment. Many of the emigres are widows and orphaned children. There are still some seven million Sikhs spread across states other than the Punjab - but the 75,000 men, women, and children who poured into this already troubled state brought with them tales of horror.

These tales were narrated every day, and the narrations exacerbated tensions.

One evening near Amritsar, I listened to Amrik Singh, a young carpenter who had transplanted himself from his home in Delhi. He spoke before a small gathering of friends and relatives in a *dhaaba*, a roadside restaurant. People squatted on the floor, huddled in blankets to keep out the December cold. Singh was a tall man, with a moustache and narrow eyes that looked at you with pain. His voice was so low that the slightest rustling of someone's blanket would smother a sentence. But everyone's attention was riveted on him. He said he lost his father, five brothers, and two sons during the riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination. They were hacked to death, he said. His wife was gang-raped while he was made to watch; his seven year old daughter was molested. He himself was repeatedly stabbed, almost castrated, and left for dead. Now he and his wife must start all over in the Punjab.

His audience seemed stunned as he spoke. It is not often that a Sikh male will volunteer information that his wife's honour was violated. Women started weeping. Men began to shout in anger.

I thought these tales will be told and retold until they become part of the Punjab's mythology. How many young men like Amrik Singh will swear revenge? How can Sikhs ever forgive Hindus? How will the bitterness and anguish ever disappear from this land? We need the healing touch, Bhagwant Singh Ahuja had said to me that November evening not long after the murder of Mrs. Gandhi. But who will bring a healing hand to these proud and wounded people of the Punjab?

"Rajiv Gandhi? Will he be able to forget -and forgive - the fact that his mother was murdered by two Sikhs? His December election campaign was not especially heroic; his ruling Congress Party appealed shamelessly to the India's overwhelming Hindu majority by charging that the Sikh leadership had balked at resolving the Punjab problem. He charged that opposition leaders were in collusion with anti - national elements in the Punjab. A "foreign hand" was working actively to destabilize the Punjab, Gandhi said. He did not elaborate. This was not the sort of rhetoric that would reassure Punjab's Sikhs. But then, the Punjab was not voting in the 1984 election.

In Delhi I came across posters put up by Congress Party candidates that said; "would you trust a taxi driver from another state? For better security, vote Congress." Since a large number of Delhi's taxi drivers were Sikhs, the message was clear.

Even clearer, and more sickening, were billboards commissioned by Congress candidates in states like Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. These depicted a slain Indira Gandhi, blood gushing from her body, being held by her son Rajiv. Two Sikhs crouched at one side, their guns smoking. Indians rewarded Rajiv Gandhi's Congress Party with 401 out of 508 seats contested for the national Parliament.

Healing hands?

During my travels around India, I was astonished how many non-Sikhs, particularly educated and affluent Indians, voiced the view that the Sikhs "had it coming" to them.

On a very cold January evening in Delhi, I sat in the drawing room of my brother-in-law, Ajai Lal, a successful producer of audio visuals and television commercials. The mood in Lal's home was one of general jubilation over Rajiv Gandhi's unprecedented victory in the December 1984 national elections. Gandhi and some of his top aides, such as Arun Singh, had studied at the exclusive Doon School in north India - and most of the males present this evening also were Doon graduates (they called themselves *Doscoes*). In fact, thirty-two newly elected parliamentarians had attended the Doon school in Dehra Dun.

One particular guest did not, however, dwell too much on the Old-Boy angle. He was a young local businessman, and he consumed several glasses of whiskey and kept up a harangue about the Punjab. He himself was Punjabi Hindu.

"We will fix them now," he said. "They thought they were God's gift to India, eh? They thought they were the only strong, virile ones around, eh? Well, they sure showed themselves to be cowards recently, didn't they? How many faced the mobs with courage, eh?"

"Would you have faced a mob like that?" I asked.

The businessman shrugged. He helped himself to another peg of whisky.

"Those bastards," he said, presently, "those Sikh bastards. If I had my way, I would rip their bowels out. I would slaughter every last one of them. I would decimate them. Those arrogant, filthy bastards. Who do they think they are? They have destroyed India."

I shivered, and it was not because of the cold.

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