

1984: Massacre of Sikhs

Some Case Histories

From *Report of the Citizens' Commission*, consisting of (the Late) Justice S. M. Sikri, Badrud-Din Tyabji, ICS, Rajeshwar Dayal, IFS, Govind Narain, ICS and TCA Srinivasavardan, IAS one time home secretary and a colleague of Editor, SR.

Case-1

This widow, a former resident of Kartarnagar (trans-Yamuna area), related that their house was looted and burnt by a mob on 2 November, 1984. Her husband and two sons, one married only four months ago, were dragged out of the house and mercilessly beaten. **Thereafter, kerosene was poured over the three men and they were set alight.** No police or army was in evidence at the time. She could, she said, identify the person who killed her husband. Though she did not know his name, she was definite about the name of his father : a weaver of the area. She had originally come from Rawalpindi at the time of Partition. This was her second nightmarish experience of mob fury during which she had lost everything, including three male members of her family.

She was accompanied by a completely dazed girl, hardly 16 years old, widow of her recently-married and recently-butchered son. This young girl sat through her mother-in-law's harrowing testimony shedding silent tears of grief and despair.

Case-2

According to this widow, mobs came to her neighborhood at about 9 a.m. on 1 November and began stoning Sikh houses in the vicinity. Sikhs who happened to be out were advised by the police to return home and stay indoors. They followed this advice and locked themselves inside their homes. Soon after, the crowds returned and started breaking into individual Sikh homes. The men were dragged out, beaten badly and burnt alive. Then the houses were systematically looted and most of them set on fire.

The Sikh residents of the area owned their homes. According to this women's estimate there were approximately 35 to 40 Sikh homes in the area, almost all of which had been destroyed and 55 men brutally murdered. Only five men from the area survived, owing their escape to their absence from home for one reason or another.

Case-3: Burning of Khalsa Middle School, Sarojini Nagar:

On the afternoon of 1 November, at about 3.30 or 4 p.m., a mob of about 250-300 men came to the school which has 525 pupils of whom 65% are non-Sikhs. The mob first set fire to the tents and the school desks. Thereafter, they demolished the boundary wall of the school. They then entered the building and broke open the steel cupboards and looted them. They stole the school typewriter, instruments belonging to the school band, utensils, etc. Two desks and seven steel cupboards were seen being taken away. They destroyed the library and scientific equipment in the laboratory. The school building was burnt as also the Headmaster's scooter.

There were seven or eight policemen standing by who witnessed the mob's activities but did nothing to stop them. When asked to prevent the mob from damaging the school, they said that they could do nothing. No arrests are reported to have been made nor has any other action been taken. The FIR was lodged on 7 or 8 November.

The Sikh SHO of the police station, located within sight of the school, in understood to be a relative of a Congress-I leader. He is said to have been beaten up on 31 October while in uniform, and was not to be seen (he was either in hiding or under orders - the witness could not say) from 31 October to 2 November.

It was further conveyed to the Commission that even though the school imparts free education and is in receipt of a Government grant, no repairs of any nature had begun as on 18 December 1984. Neither was any furniture nor other equipment - not even books and stationery - provided.

Case -4

A social worker informed the Commission that he had been associated with the Shakkarpur Camp as a voluntary relief worker since 6 November. The camp had been set up on 3 November and the administration had forcibly closed it on 13 November. When asked how it had been 'forcibly closed' down, he replied that the water supply had been cut off. He then asked the authorities how they would assist the inmates to return to their original homes and was told that they would be returned in the same way by which they had been brought to the camp!

Case - 5

A survivor from Mangolpuri, who had been operating his own scooter-rickshaw in shifts jointly with his brother, had been brought to a relief camp on 3 November by the army or CRP, he was not sure which.

He related that there was increasing tension on 31 October after the news of the attack became known. **He went to his neighbour for shelter and was given protection but told to cut his hair, which he refused to do. The following morning when a crowd came around, his neighbours asked him to leave their house.** Sikhs emerging on the street were seized and their hair and beards were forcibly cut. The mob, who, he said, was from the same locality, thereafter indulged in violence and looted individual homes. However, the damage done was mainly to the woodwork. Some movable property was stolen.

Very early on the following morning, at about 4 a.m, the crowd returned, dragged the men out of their homes and beat them up. The neighbours pleaded for their lives and they were thus saved but only for the time being. In the evening the neighbours were also threatened with violence and that silenced them. Then five persons of his family - his brother, brother-in-law, uncle and two cousins - were belaboured with sticks and rods and burnt alive. Attempts to rape some of the women were, however, thwarted. The witness himself managed to escape by obtaining refuge in the house of a Harijan woman.

On 3 November he was removed along with other survivors to a refugee camp. He named seven persons amongst the perpetrators of the crimes, one of whom was a local Congress-I worker identified as a supporter of a former MP.

Case-6

A woman from Trilokpuri described her harrowing experience. She and her husband, a Lobana Sikh, originally from Sind, had migrated to Rajasthan in 1947. About fifteen years ago they had moved to Delhi in search of better prospects. During the slum clearance drive of 1974-75, they had been resettled in Trilokpuri.

She and her husband and three of their children survive, but the eldest son aged 18 was killed on 1 November.

She described the mob led by the Congress-I block *pradhan* as consisting of some people from the same block and others from neighbouring blocks and nearby villages. While the block *pradhan* identified Sikh houses and urged the mobs to loot, burn and kill, the women were herded together into one room. Some of them ran away but were pursued to the nearby *nallah* where they were raped. Their shrieks and cries for help fell on deaf ears. From among the women held in the room, the hoodlums asked each other to select whomsoever they chose. All the women were stripped and many dishonoured. She herself

was raped by ten men. Their lust satisfied, they told the women to get out, naked as they were. For fear of their lives they did so, hiding their shame as best as possible. Each begged or borrowed a garment from relenting neighbours and sought shelter wherever they could.

Case-7

The Commission gathered the following facts at the Sadar Bazar Gurdwara (Delhi Cantonment).

Having heard of the news of the assassination, one witness feared trouble and brought his family to the gurdwara. He found that some other families had already collected there. Leaving the women and children downstairs, the men went up to the roof from where they saw a crowd collecting at the local Congress-I office about 200 yards away. They had come by truck at 8.30 on morning of 1 November.

The mob then advanced towards the gurdwara and started stoning the people they saw on the roof. The Sikhs had also collected some bricks which they threw at the crowd. When their supply was exhausted, the mob became emboldened and set fire to a shop which the gurdwara had rented out. The group of Sikhs, about twelve in number, collected all the swords available with them in the gurdwara and came out. The mob retreated in the face of this puny show of force. The police, who had been informed, came at about 3.30 p.m. By that time, the fire had been put out. **The police surprisingly expressed their inability to do anything further to help them.** Consequently the Sikhs went back inside and locked the iron gates of the gurdwara.

On 2 November, the army brought refugees from other colonies in the area surrounding Palam until there were 2,000 refugees in the gurdwara. **They were housed, clothed and fed entirely by voluntary effort.** The gurdwara itself fortunately escaped damage.

Case-8

This victim's family consisted of his father, four brothers, mother, two sisters-in-law, his wife and children. The family owned a bakery, a confectionery, a *kirana* shop and a small chemical industry.

On 1 November at about 11 a.m., a mob of some four hundred attacked the shop and the factory. The father and the four brothers came out and pleaded with them. Some local Congress-I workers arranged a compromise and asked them all to go back. Eight persons from the mob, who were looting inside the shops, also came out and went away.

Fifteen minutes later, a bigger mob of about two thousand came and burnt the shops and the factory.

One of the local Congress-I workers had a fair price shop in his name which, because of the complaints of the residents, had been canceled and allotted to this family. That seemed to be the bone of contention.

The victim's house had the symbol 'Om' on the front and could not be identified as Sikh house **unless it had been pointed out as such by a local person.**

The victim's father, three brothers and sister-in-law were beaten and set on fire. Some liquid chemical and a powder were used as incendiary material.

The victim himself escaped by hiding in the neighbouring house of a Jat friend. He cut his hair and went to Palam airport from where he returned to the gurdwara on the 4th. There was no help from the police. There was no electricity in the locality (Sadh Nagar) for 72 hours. Army rescue work started on 3 November.

The victim, who is a young man, is left with his widowed mother, widowed sister-in-law, brother's children and his own family to look after. He is not prepared to go back to his original home, which he considers unsafe, but is ready to settle down in Delhi in a safe area

and to re-establish his bakery. The mob leader has been identified as a local Congress-I worker, who is said to be the right hand man of a former M.P.

Case-9

What follows is a summary of an eye-witness account sent to the Commission by a practicing Chartered Accountant (a non-Sikh) living in New Friends' Colony. His account beings:

"Delhi had been considered by us to be a civilized city. The news of rioting coming from different parts of the country from time to time had always carried an aura of remoteness - something which could not happen in Delhi. Or so it seemed up to 30 October recently."

He continues to relate that, after the announcement of Smt. Gandhi's death over the AIR, they began receiving telephone calls from friends informing them of incidents in various parts of the city - from Jorbagh, from Ring Road, from Safdarjung Enclave - of Sikhs being badly beaten up and otherwise harassed. In view of the trouble, he and a friend decided to go to the airport later that night to receive a Sikh friend arriving in Delhi. On their way back they saw a car burning near the IIT on outer Ring Road. Then they saw a bus on fire. A little further on, they saw five taxis ablaze at a taxi stand. It was about midnight by now and, after dropping their friend at Panchsheel Enclave, **they saw only two policemen on the way home. Both of them were unarmed. One of them was hurling stones at the Sikhs along with the crowd. The other was urging people in the crowd to join in the attacks.** The crowd was armed with lathis, crow-bars and iron rods. **In New Friends' Colony, they saw several Sikh-owned shops which had been set on fire. Intervening shops belonging to Hindus had not been touched.**

Two trucks parked nearby were set on fire. The crowd then invaded the gurdwara opposite the shops. They ransacked the rooms in the gurdwara compound and set fire to the buildings.

Efforts to contact the police on the telephone were infructuous. He saw no signs of a police presence, much less intervention. The absence of the police, according to him, emboldened the mob. He felt that the 'scenes of wild mourning and mass popular anger on the television were not helping in calming the fury of the mob'.

That afternoon he saw another mob looting a house in a cool and unhurried manner, without any dispute or competition among the looters. Within half-an-hour, the house had been completely ransacked and then set on fire. □