

# A Post Mortem on 1984: A View from America\*

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\* Being a review of "LOST IN HISTORY: 1984 RECONSTRUCTED", by Gunisha Kaur. [2nd edition] published by The Sikh Spirit Foundation, San Antonio, Texas, 2009. ISBN 978-0-9762682-1-5. xii+105 pages. Price: \$10. It may be obtained through its author at: [1984\\_reconstructed@gmail.com](mailto:1984_reconstructed@gmail.com). All proceeds from the sale of this book will be put towards charitable enterprise.

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DO YOU, (or a young person you know), wish to learn more about 1984, but, faced with a bewildering array of books and other documents often written in intimidatingly dry "legalese," are unsure of where to start? Are you seeking a clear and user-friendly introduction to this crucial period in modern Sikh history?

Gunisha Kaur's highly informative work might be just what you're looking for! ***Lost in History*** provides an excellent jumping-off point for readers who are keen to not only increase their understanding of the people and circumstances surrounding these important happenings, but also to gain a greater sense of their lasting impact today, 25 years later.

The first edition of this book was published in 2004, while Gunisha Kaur was still in university. Although five years is usually not an exceptionally long time for a publication, it is substantial for a young writer's development. While its underlying structure remains the same, the text has been revised to reflect the author's impressively maturing voice and increasingly refined grasp of pertinent issues. Currently a medical student in New York City, she plans to apply her training to human rights work in the future.

In the very engagingly-written Preface to the Second Edition, Kaur's earnest attempts to remedy her admitted 'ignorance' of the happenings of 1984 and the post-1984 period in India will resonate vividly with many readers, especially those who, like the author herself, were not yet born (or too young) at the time to fathom the significance of these events as they unfolded.

**This section cogently puts forth her chief aims of addressing the danger of this era "becoming lost in history, buried under communal politics, international relations and the government's emphatic silencing of human rights workers," as well as bringing to light "the concealed atrocities that have occurred, and continue to occur, in Punjab."**

Her conclusions are supported by a plethora of accounts and eyewitness testimonies validated by respected authorities, both in and outside of India, including Indian Prime Ministers, Justices of the High Courts and Supreme Court of India, members of the United States Congress, and representatives of eminent human rights agencies.

While the book indeed criticizes the modern *Hindutva* ideology, "which promotes divisiveness and hate through the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism," Kaur explicitly asserts that in no way should this be taken as a critique of Hindus as individuals, **stressing that countless Hindus risked their lives to save Sikhs (including her own father) during the attacks.**

Chapter 1, “**The Genesis of Genocide,**” examines the foundation of the Sikh tradition with relation to the political situation in India, in order to “begin to understand why a government would design the suffocation of an entire religious group.” The Sikh Gurus’ timeless message of universal equality has always been utterly at odds with the social stratification of India’s caste system. **Furthermore, defending the defenseless and challenging injustice, regardless of the social or religious identity of the oppressed, have been fundamentals of the Sikh faith since its very inception.**

A focus on communal instabilities and insecurities was an underlying theme of Indira Gandhi’s 1984 electoral campaign. Her platform vilified Sikh political institutions and leaders, and portrayed Sikhs as a dangerous and uncontrollable public enemy. These attitudes culminated in the government’s depicting itself as the country’s “savior” as it launched Operation Bluestar during the first week of June 1984, a full-scale assault on 40 gurdwaras — most prominently upon the Darbar Sahib in Amritsar — as well as the Akal Takht and other heritage buildings in the Darbar Sahib complex.

Following the attacks, continuation of the government’s attempts to silence the decentralization movement, aimed at crushing the spirit of the Sikh community, led to several hundreds of thousands of Sikhs being tortured and killed under various flimsy pretexts. Anyone who simply looked and behaved like a member of the Sikh faith was liable to be treated as a terrorist, and independent human rights organizations who sought to investigate the carnage were branded as “terrorist sympathizers.”

In the second chapter, “**Broken Promises,**” the Indian government’s decades of “deceit and pretenses,” which began shortly after independence was achieved in 1947, are outlined. Despite contributing greatly to India’s independence movement, and having received prior guarantees from government officials, the Sikh community’s just demands for recognition were taken as indications of a “separatist and anti-national Sikh sensibility,” and remained unaddressed, laying the foundations for ongoing political dissatisfaction and unrest.

**Punjab was initially given bilingual status, despite the fact that a vast majority of its denizens exclusively spoke Punjabi,** rather than Hindi. Sikhs, along with Jains and Buddhists, were classified as members of Hindu sects, according to the Constitution’s Article 25. **Punjab was stripped of its water rights, with its most valuable sources of river water distributed to neighboring states.** It was also dissected into three parts, leaving it a small fraction of its original size and, thereby, substantially divesting it of its economic potential.

Chapter 3, “**Building of Tensions,**” shows how the National Emergency declared in 1975 by Indira Gandhi (despite her having been found guilty of election fraud and ordered to resign) allowed her to rule by decree, postpone elections indefinitely, and suspend civil liberties.

As officially instigated and endorsed communal tensions escalated in the early 1980s, a religious leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, launched a campaign founded on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, demanding minority rights and decentralization of power from the Indian government. He subsequently acquired many fervent followers, especially rural youth adversely affected by the government’s discriminatory policies against Punjab.

In response, Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party employed national and international media to misrepresent and malign both Bhindranwale and the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as dangerous symbols of extremism and secessionism. Between 1981 and 1984, as the

government stepped up its acts of violence against innocent Sikhs, Indian security forces liquidated hundreds of Sikhs in fake “encounters” (a euphemism for extra-judicial execution). Peaceful protests were treated as sedition; **even the wearing of the five articles of faith by Amritdhari Sikhs was construed as evidence of armed insurrection.**

“**Oppression Bluestar,**” the fourth chapter, focuses on the heinous attacks of June 1984, “a massive, deliberate and planned onslaught on the life, property and honor of a comparatively small, but easily identifiable, minority community.”

This section strongly condemns the White Paper, the official version of the accounts of Operation Bluestar published by the Indian government, as cover-up propaganda that censured and obscured the extent of the atrocities. Quoting documented accounts of survivors, the government’s justification that Operation Bluestar was “simply an effort to flush out Bhindranwale and other alleged terrorists from the Darbar Sahib” is soundly repudiated.

**Chapter 5, “The True Colors of Bluestar,”** refutes government estimates of the magnitude and other key aspects of the attack, further debunks the White Paper’s fraudulent accusations (including the charge that large stockpiles of weapons were purportedly amassed inside the Darbar Sahib), and asserts that Operation Bluestar was likely responsible for the taking of more than 100,000 lives.

Gruesome atrocities perpetrated by the military, their sacrilegious infringements of gurdwara protocol, their gross neglect in recording the names of the murdered victims, and their frantic attempts to destroy evidence of the attack (including mass cremations held before the families of the dead were informed), are all convincingly shown to point to the immense brutality and mercilessness of the genocide, as well as the White Paper’s discrepancies and inconsistencies.

The sixth chapter, “The Nameless Operation,” deals with the horrific anti-Sikh pogroms of November, 1984, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, when the Congress Party organized, armed and incited violent mobs to murder innocent Sikhs and destroy their homes, businesses and gurdwaras. **Rather than attempting to defuse the situation, the government circulated a series of scurrilous rumors designed to escalate the violence, and videos televised by the government-run channel “Doordarshan” further inflamed the bloodthirsty frenzy of the mobs.**

Reports from various Supreme Court Justices and human rights organizations are presented in this section as persuasive evidence to demonstrate not only that Congress Party leaders were integrally involved in the killings of innocent Sikhs, but also that the police “remained absent from, passively observed, or actively participated in the pogroms.” Every security force that might have come to the defense of the Sikhs was purposely immobilized by the government, pointing to the sanctioning of the pogroms at the highest levels.

Chapter 7, “Torture in India,” demonstrates the heavy responsibility of the Punjab Police, with government support, for the “basic blueprint of torture in post-1984 Punjab” and discusses how Sikhs were explicitly targeted by their distinct beliefs and identity.

Much testimony is given in this section regarding “the agonizing, sadistic and inhumane persecution of prisoners in the custody of the Punjab Police” from those who survived their

ruthlessness, proving how these revolting practices had the overt and explicit approval of leading politicians and police officials.

All *Amritdhari* Sikhs were to be officially considered and treated as terrorists. They, as well as non-initiated Sikhs, were liable to be arrested and taken to interrogation centers, where they were physically and psychologically tortured using the most extreme methods. The police would then raid and loot the prisoners' houses repeatedly, beating and raping their family members. Even children and the elderly were not exempted from horrendous brutality.

"Disappearances in Punjab," the eighth chapter, covers the late 1980s through the 1990s, "an era of unlawful and systematic murders of civilians." Although the Indian government denied all allegations and attempted to ban investigative agencies from entering significant parts of Punjab, independent research teams and leading human rights organizations have demonstrated that "illegal abductions, extra-judicial killings and mass cremations occurred on an immense scale."

Young Sikh men between the ages of 15 and 35 were specifically targeted and accused by the police of being threats to 'national security.' Many cases of disappearances resulted in death, with the police fraudulently claiming that the deceased was shot while trying to escape or that he died in an "encounter." Families of victims often had nowhere to turn for justice, as the police "purposefully neglected to record the abduction and detention of individuals, making it nearly impossible to establish the involvement of security forces in these extra-judicial disappearances."

Chapter 9, "Lawlessness of the Administration," gives examples of how Congress Party officials blatantly ignored the Indian Constitution, the judiciary conveniently overlooked legislation, and the police force egregiously violated the law. Pervasive censorship and inflammatory propaganda by the national media, aimed at "convincing the public to approve of illegitimate action against the alleged militants," abetted the cover-up of these abuses.

This section shows how government legislation — including the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the Punjab Disturbed Areas Act — allowed for the suspension of most laws protecting Sikhs' legal rights. For example, the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act **explicitly declared an individual guilty until proven innocent**, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act allowed the police to detain any citizen for up to 180 days without even the filing of a charge sheet.

**In the tenth and final chapter, "The Struggle for Justice,"** the author reiterates how the economy of Punjab has been adversely affected by the central government's unlawful stripping of its river water rights, decries how propaganda campaigns portraying the Sikh Gurus as Hindu deities and the Sikh scriptural canon as part of the Hindu textual tradition have directly challenged the unique Sikh identity, and bemoans the fact that the desecration and destruction of human life and dignity by the Indian government and the Punjab Police have received insufficient response from the international community.

The book ends on a stirring call to action: "Decades after the events of 1984, the Punjab issues have become a moral imperative, commanding us to take part in the movement to restore justice, freedom and human rights.... Only by acknowledging and correcting past atrocities can we expect that our children and future generations will not fall prey to such grave abuses."

Various concluding sections follow the text, such as the detailed “Notes” and well-chosen “Further Readings.” All of them are ample evidence of the author’s assiduous, wide-ranging research in the creation of this work. Unfortunately, however, **an Index, which would have greatly increased this book’s usefulness, has - inexplicably - not been included.**

**While the breadth of *Lost in History* is indeed noteworthy, its depth is sometimes less impressive.** In several places, the reader is left wanting much more. The overly brief treatment given to a key personage, like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, is one major example of this.

However, it must be said that intensive coverage of any particular sub-topic is not the purpose of this book. Rather, its strength lies in giving, as its subtitle implies, a clear overview of the events of 1984 and their ongoing repercussions in Punjab, in a compelling and sensitive manner.

**Jargon-free and presupposing little prior familiarity with its subject matter, the book is especially well suited for young people seeking to acquaint themselves with fundamental knowledge of this period,** and provides a fine springboard for further exploration. Moreover, its unstuffy, down-to-earth perspective is particularly conducive to evoking feelings of personal connection to this pivotal time in Sikh history.

