

**1984**

**India's hidden genocide  
of the Sikhs**

**1984 Genocide Coalition**

***'Though some will find the analogy with Nazi Germany here too extreme, both the explicit targeting of Sikhs as traitors following Operation Bluestar and the clear earmarking of Sikh residence and business in the post-assassination carnage speak to an incipient genocidal campaign'***

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***'The vast majority of victims were people who shared a common religious identity, the Sikhs. When an entire group representing a particular racial or religious identity are targeted for annihilation, and in consequence, hundreds of thousands of people are killed, the word for it is Genocide'***

Inderjit Singh Jaijee  
Movement against State Repression  
Panjab

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The 1984 Genocide Coalition is a network of UK-based individuals and organisations focusing on this year's 20th anniversary. Its aim is to highlight India's hidden genocide of the Sikhs in 1984 to the wider community. The oppression of groups such as the Dalits, Kashmiris, Nagas, Assamese and Muslims will also be highlighted. It is non-sectarian and is open to people of all faiths.

Website: tbc  
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mwns kI jwq sbY eykY pcrwnbo  
"Recognise the whole of Mankind as one Race"

Guru Gobind Singh,  
the 10<sup>th</sup> Sikh teacher

Article Two of the UN Convention on Genocide defines genocide as 'any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group - Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.'

This short report, drawing upon the work of human rights activists and journalists, mainly non-Sikh, over the past 20 years. Its aim is to draw to attention India's secret war against the Sikhs, which, in our view can only be described as a crime against humanity.

### **Who are the Sikhs?**

Sikhs are a minority in India, forming just 2% of the population. Most are concentrated in the northern state of Panjab, where they form a majority. Their religion was well ahead of its time when it was founded over 500 years ago. It has a following of over 20 million people worldwide and is ranked as the world's 5th largest religion. Sikhism preaches a message of devotion and remembrance of God at all times, truthful living, equality of mankind, gender equality and denounces superstitions and blind rituals. Sikhism is open to all through the teachings of its 10 Gurus (teachers) enshrined in the Sikh Holy Book and Living Guru, Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

### **First attack : June 1984**

On June 4<sup>th</sup> 1984, India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army to invade the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, in the state of Panjab. Code named Operation Bluestar, 40 other shrines were simultaneously attacked using massive fire power. On the pretext of apprehending 'a handful of militants' lodged inside, the Indian Army unleashed a terror unprecedented in post-independence India. This was all done in the shadow of a complete news blackout.

Joyce Pettigrew described it as an attack 'not on a political figure or movement but to suppress a religion, to attack their heart, to strike a blow at their spirit and self-confidence'. 'The army which had suffered a heavy toll in the 3 days of battle went berserk and killed every Sikh man, woman and child who could be found inside the temple complex. They were hauled out of the rooms, brought to corridors on the circumference of the temple and with their hands tied behind their backs, were shot in cold blood'.<sup>1</sup>

### **Eyewitness accounts**

The Shiromoni (Temple) Committee's secretary Bhan Singh was in the temple complex at the time of Operation Bluestar. On the 1<sup>st</sup> morning of the attack he counted "at least 70 dead bodies" of old men, women and children. Soldiers, commanded by a Major, continued to line up young Sikhs along the hostel's corridor to be shot. When Bhan Singh protested, the Major flew into a rage, tore away his turban and ordered him to either flee the scene or join the "array of martyrs". Bhan Singh "turned back and fled, jumping over the bodies of the dead and injured." Hundreds of young Sikhs, innocent pilgrims from the villages, were killed in this manner.<sup>2</sup>

Ranbir Kaur, a women school teacher witnessed the shooting of another group of 150 people whose hands had been tied behind their backs with their own turbans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerrilla Violence (1995), Joyce J.M. Pettigrew, p 8.

<sup>2</sup> Operation Bluestar: The Untold Story (1984), Amiya Rao, Aubindo Ghose, Sunil Bhattacharya, Tejinder Ahuja and N. D. Pancholi, p 5.

<sup>3</sup> Reduced to Ashes - The Insurgency and Human Rights in Panjab (2003), Ram Narayan Kumar, Amrik Singh, Ashok Agrawal and Jaskaran Kaur - The Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Panjab, p 38.

A singer at the Golden Temple, Harcharan Singh Ragi, his wife and their young daughter came out of their quarters near the information office on the afternoon of June 6. They witnessed the killings of hundreds of people, including women, and would themselves have been shot if a commander had not taken pity on their young daughter who fell at his feet begging him to spare her parents' lives.<sup>4</sup>

Associated Press correspondent Brahma Chellaney had managed to dodge the authorities to remain in Amritsar during the Operation Blue Star. Later, he reported that dead bodies were taken in municipal garbage trucks round the clock and burnt in heaps of 20 or more. One attendant at the city's crematorium told him that there was not "enough wood to burn the dead" individually. He also saw "an estimated 50 corpses" in a large garbage lorry which included women and children. He talked to a doctor who had been forced to sign post-mortem reports of some people killed inside the temple. The doctor corroborated the reports that their hands had been tied before the soldiers shot them.<sup>5</sup>

G.K.C Reddy has commented that 'Operation Blue Star will go down in history as one of the biggest massacres of unarmed civilians by the organised military force of a nation'. Further, he added that 'the word unarmed is used deliberately as the disparity in arms on the two sides was so great that those resisting army invasion of the temple could hardly be termed armed.'<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to destroy a crucial part of Sikh heritage, the army deliberately set fire to the Sikh Reference Library within the complex, after it had been secured. Irreplaceable copies of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book, archives of documents from every period of Sikh history and even artifacts from the lives of the Gurus were reduced to ash. The Toshakhana, treasure house of the Golden Temple was systematically looted.

It took the use of Vijayanta tanks to win the fight for the army. These let loose a barrage of high explosive shells, which tore off the entire front of the Akal Takht, the temporal seat of the Sikhs, setting off fires in many of its internal rooms (some of which housed precious historical relics), and badly damaged its dome.

Citizens for Democracy, a respected Indian civil liberties group headed by the distinguished jurist V.M. Tarkunde noted that the actual number of alleged militants was quite small relative to the number of innocent worshippers who had gathered at the Golden Temple to commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev. 'It was indeed a mass massacre mostly of innocents'.<sup>7</sup>

Subramaniam Swami published an article soon after the massacre inside the Golden Temple to say that the government had been master-minding a disinformation campaign to create legitimacy for the action. The goal of this disinformation campaign, according to Swami, was to 'make out that the Golden Temple was the haven of criminals, a store of armory and a citadel of the nation's dismemberment conspiracy'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Operation Blue Star Operation Blue Star: The Untold Story (1984), Amiya Rao, Aubindo Ghose, Sunil Bhattacharya, Tejinder Ahuja and N. D. Pancholi, p 13.

<sup>5</sup> The Sikh Struggle, Ram Narayan Kumar & Georg Sieberer (1991), p 265.

<sup>6</sup> Army Action in Punjab: Prelude and Aftermath (1984), G.K.C. Reddy, p 49.

<sup>7</sup> Oppression in Punjab (1985), Citizens for Democracy, p 76.

<sup>8</sup> Creating a Martyr – Imprint (1984), Subramaniam Swami, p 7.

## Second attack : November 1984

What followed after Mrs Gandhi's assassination on Oct 31<sup>st</sup> begged belief. 20,000 Sikhs were massacred in the most barbaric method of burning. Encouraged by central government ministers and MPs with the connivance of the police, mobs were assembled to carry out a four day orgy of killings and plunder.

Early next morning, hordes of people from the suburbs of Delhi were transported to various localities in the city where the Sikh population was concentrated. The mobilisation suggested the backing of an organisation with vast resources. The criminal hordes descending on the city carried crude weapons like iron rods, knives, clubs and combustible material, including kerosene, for arson. They were also supplied with lists of houses and business establishments belonging to the Sikhs in various localities.

The government controlled television Doordarshan, and the All India Radio began broadcasting provocative slogans seeking bloody vengeance, "*khoon ka badla khoon se lenge* (Blood for blood!)".

Murderous gangs of 200 or 300 people led by the leaders, with policemen looking on, began to swarm into Sikh houses, hacking the occupants to pieces, chopping off the heads of children, raping women, tying Sikh men to tires set aflame with kerosene, burning down the houses and shops after ransacking them. Mobs stopped buses and trains, in and out of Delhi, pulling out Sikh passengers to be lynched to death or doused with kerosene and burnt alive.

In some areas, the Sikh families grouped together for self-defence. The police officials then arrived to disperse them, by force when persuasion did not work. In other areas, the police searched the houses for weapons including ceremonial daggers, and confiscated them before the mobs came.

Khushwant Singh, the writer and MP realised "what Jews must have felt like in Nazi Germany". He concluded: "The killing assumed the proportion of a genocide of the Sikh community."<sup>9</sup>

The Delhi pogrom has been documented by several organizations. The People's Union for Civil Liberties and the People's Union of Democratic Rights published a joint report, called *Who are the Guilty?* The report says that "the attacks on the members of the Sikh community in Delhi... far from being spontaneous expressions of 'madness' and of 'grief and anger' at Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, as made out by the authorities, were the outcome of a well organised plan marked by acts of both deliberate commission and omission by important politicians of the Congress and by authorities in the administration..." The report mentions the names of 16 important Congress politicians, 13 police officers and 198 others, accused by survivors and eye-witnesses.<sup>10</sup>

The report by the Citizens for Democracy, led by former High Court Justice V. M. Tarkunde, concluded that the "carnage was orchestrated by the ruling party".<sup>11</sup> Yet another investigative report compiled by a team of prominent citizens including retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, S. M. Sikri, former civil servants Badruddin Tyabji, Rajeshwar Dayal and others, came to the same conclusions.

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<sup>9</sup> My Bleeding Punjab (1992), Khushwant Singh, p 88.

<sup>10</sup> Who are the Guilty? (1984), People's Union for Democratic Rights and People's Union for Civil Liberties - 31 October to 4 November 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Truth about Delhi Violence Citizens' Commission (1985), Citizens for Democracy.

### **Eyewitness 1 - Gurcharan Singh Babbar**

'Every time the mob spotted a Sikh, it burst into joy: "Here comes a Sardar, we have found one here". The killers were combing the residential colonies and markets for Sikhs, a majority of whom were killed right in their homes. After killing the men, the mob raped their wives and daughters. There was nobody to rescue Sikh men from the massacre and Sikh women from gang rape. Some Delhi policemen were also among those involved in the carnage.'

'Sikh women begged the killers to spare their men and children. The more they begged, the more savage did the killers become. Sikhs were killed with knives, iron rods, petrol and kerosene and a strange, white chemical which did not need a match to burn. Dragged out of their homes, pulled out of public and private transport, Sikh men were killed savagely and then abandoned to be eaten by dogs, cats, pigs and crows. The lucky ones got a mass funeral. Truckloads of corpses were unloaded and burnt with kerosene oil. Thousands did not need cremation because they were burnt alive.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Eyewitness 2 - Amitav Ghosh**

'It was still and quite, eerily so. The usual sounds of rush-hour traffic were absent. But every so often we heard a speeding car or a motorcycle on the main street. Later, we discovered that these mysterious speeding vehicles were instrumental in directing the carnage that was taking place. Protected by certain politicians, "organisers" were zooming around the city, assembling the mobs and transporting them to Sikh-owned houses and shops.'

'Apparently, the transportation was provided free. A civil-rights report published shortly afterward stated that this phase of violence "began with the arrival of groups of armed people in tempo vans, scooters, motorcycles or trucks," and went on to say.'

'With cans of petrol they went around the localities and systematically set fire to Sikh-houses, shops and Gurdwaras...the targets were primarily young Sikhs. They were dragged out, beaten up and then burned alive...In all the affected spots, a calculated attempt to terrorise the people was evident in the common tendency among the assailants to burn alive Sikhs on public roads. Fire was everywhere; it was the day's motif. Throughout the city, Sikh houses were being looted and then set on fire, often with their occupants still inside.'

'A survivor – a woman who lost her husband and three sons – offered the following account to Veena Das, a Delhi sociologist: Some people, neighbours, said it would be better if we hid in an abandoned house nearby. So my husband took our three sons and hid there. We locked the house from outside, but there was treachery in people's hearts. Someone must have told the crowd. They baited him to come out. Then they poured kerosene on that house. They burnt them alive. When I went there that night, the bodies of my sons were on the loft – huddled together.'

'Over the next few days, thousands of people died in Delhi alone. Thousands more died in other cities. The total death toll will never be known. The dead were overwhelmingly Sikh men. Entire neighbourhoods were gutted; tens of thousands of people were left homeless.'<sup>13</sup>

Khushwant Singh, who had been lucky enough to escape the mobs in November 1984 wrote: 'For the first time I understood what words like pogrom, holocaust and genocide really meant'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Government Organised Carnage (1998), Gurcharan Singh Babbar. The book was later banned by the government.

<sup>13</sup> The Ghost of Indira Gandhi (1995), Amitav Ghosh, Distinguished Professor at Queens College, New York.

<sup>14</sup> My Bleeding Punjab (1992), Khushwant Singh, p 93.

### Third attack 1984-present

In the Panjab, where the majority of Sikhs live, the government initiated a sweeping crackdown on Sikhs across the state under the code name Operation Woodrose. Amritdhari (baptised) Sikhs were particular targets as the following Indian Army publication illustrates:

'Any knowledge of the *'Amritdharis' (baptised Sikhs)* who are dangerous people and pledged to commit murders, arson and acts of terrorism should immediately be brought to the notice of the authorities. These people may appear harmless from outside but they are basically committed to terrorism. In the interest of all of us their identity and whereabouts must always be disclosed.'<sup>15</sup>

These instructions constituted unmistakably clear orders by the government of India for genocide of all Sikhs formally initiated into their faith.

### Black Laws

The Terrorism & Destructive Activities (Prevention) Act allowed for the detention of a person on mere suspicion. Special courts were held in secret by executive magistrates who were appointed centrally. Tens of thousands of Sikhs were detained, tortured and disappeared. Only one percent of people were ever convicted of a crime under the act. Retired Supreme Court Justice Krishna Iyer noted that 'justice in Panjab had been crucified on the cross of the law'.<sup>16</sup>

Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code allowed a person to be presumed guilty if she were found at the scene of a crime and to be held without charge for a year. The state could close down a newspaper or seize a book or any other material considered prejudicial to national integration.

Under the National Security Act an individual could be preventively detained for a year if judged to be likely to behave in a manner inimical to the interests of the country. Human right activists, lawyers, teachers and journalists were also targeted, harassed, detained and even murdered. The rape of women began to be used more and more as a form of torture.

The right to life of citizens is at the heart of India's Constitution Article 21. But in 1988, the Indian Parliament passed a 59<sup>th</sup> Amendment which enabled the suspension of Article 21 on the grounds of 'internal disturbances'. Panjab was then declared a 'Disturbed Area' under the Disturbed Areas Act of 1991. This astonishing move meant that India was legally suspending protection of the right to life against arbitrary violation in the state where the majority of Sikhs lived.

Panjab became a police state far exceeding what George Orwell envisaged in his book named chillingly 1984. After 1987 the army and security forces' death squads penetrated into the heart of many rural homes in search of the young. Third degree methods were employed by the police. The UK-based Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture documented Sikh torture victims who had fled India.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Baat Cheet Serial No. 153 (July 1984), Department of Defence, Government of India.

<sup>16</sup> Seige of the Sikhs - Violations of Human Rights in Punjab (1988), Ajit Singh Bains, p 27.

<sup>17</sup> Lives Under Threat - Sikhs coming to the UK from Punjab (1999), Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.

## Mass Cremations

Human rights activist, Jaswant Singh Khalra, set about uncovering a dark secret in the Panjab. He discovered that missing Sikhs in their thousands had been executed without trial by police and security forces and that most of the bodies had been secretly disposed of through mass cremations. Just by examining three of these, Durgiana Mandir, Patti and Tarn Taran, records showed that police cremated three thousand bodies. It is generally believed that there were a total of fifty such cremation grounds used by police across Panjab. Khalra was later abducted by the police and murdered.

Many bodies were dumped in the rivers and canals of the Panjab and neighbouring states. The Rajasthan state government went on record in complaining to the then Chief Secretary of Panjab about the large number of bodies being carried into their state through the canals. Eyewitnesses often spoke of bodies of young men with hands tied behind their backs. Similarly in 1988, when serious floods struck the Panjab, bodies were washed into neighbouring Pakistan. Radio Pakistan referred to 1,700 bodies being carried by the flood waters coming from India.

For Sikhs, 1984 heralded a nightmare that was to last for more than a decade and its effects are still being felt in present day Panjab. Amnesty International's 2003 report revealed that torture and other forms of human rights violations were still widespread. It was also alarmed that an amnesty had been declared for police officers preventing them from being prosecuted for human rights violations. This was supported by both the government and opposition parties.<sup>18</sup> Over the period, 60,000 awards were given to police officers for killing both 'listed' and 'unlisted' militants. Bounty killing had become big business.

Political scientist Paul Brass, writing in the prestigious Cambridge History of India Series, noted that the mood in India 'bore an ominous resemblance to that of the 1930's Germany, likening the orchestrated urban pogroms against Sikhs and Muslims to so many Kristallnachts.'<sup>19</sup>

## The demonisation of the Sikhs

The question arises, how did all this take place without any international outcry? The answer to this lies in the way Sikhs were stigmatised, as Jews had been similarly been in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. All Sikhs were labelled anti-national and terrorists, especially if they raised any voice against their treatment. But the Indian authorities went one step further in order that this voice remained unheard, especially to the outside world.

In the recently released report, *Reduced to Ashes - The Insurgency and Human Rights in Punjab*, Ram Narayan Kumar noted: 'My own research on Panjab in that period suggested that the state agencies were creating vigilante outfits in order to infiltrate the Sikh radical movement and generate a climate of moral revulsion by engineering heinous crimes which they then attributed to armed Sikh groups.'<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the 80s and 90s, the Panjab police were reported to have carried out 'clandestine operations, including orchestration of sensational terrorist crimes, to manipulate public opinion in favour of repressive measures at home and to undermine international attention on reports of human right abuses in Panjab.'

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<sup>18</sup> Break the cycle of impunity and torture in Punjab (2003), Amnesty International.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in *A Sea of Orange - writings on the Sikhs & India* (2001), Cynthia Mahmood, p 146

<sup>20</sup> *Reduced to Ashes - The Insurgency and Human Rights in Punjab* (2003), Ram Narayan Kumar, Amrik Singh, Ashok Agrwaal and Jaskaran Kaur - The Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Punjab, p104.



Dhiren Bhagat of the Indian Post reported on custom officers at New Delhi airport intercepting a consignment of arms, including rocket launchers and ammunition on an Indian Airlines flight from Kabul. Sometime later, the arms were used by so-called militants in the Panjab. The Indian media sensationally reported the use of rocket launchers and this helped the government rush through emergency powers in the Panjab curtailing life and liberty rights. Dhiren Bhagat's story suggested that the rockets had been fired by the government-sponsored agent provocateurs with the intention of whipping up anti-Sikh hysteria in the country".<sup>21</sup> Bhagat was killed under suspicious circumstances shortly after his article was published.

Rajinder Puri, a well-known columnist, made similar allegations and suggested that Indian intelligence organisations like RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) were 'themselves patronizing rabid elements to discredit the Sikh movement'.<sup>22</sup>

A Canadian newspaper, the Globe and Mail, carried an investigation report claiming that Indian government agents were responsible for the bombing of an Air India jet in June 1985 that killed 329 people aboard (2 Sikhs were arrested and charged for this, at present, their court case is taking place in Canada). The objective of the bombing was to discredit the separatist movement in Panjab as a terrorist movement, and to destroy the basis of sympathy for its protagonists in the western countries.<sup>23</sup>

As Joyce Pettigrew observed: 'The consensus view, from a wide range of people to whom I talked, was that the strategy of these massacres and killings (of Hindus taken off buses and shot) were planned elsewhere. It was also a general view that they were carried out with a view to discrediting groups that appeared to have roots among the population.'<sup>24</sup>

There is also evidence to show that people who committed crimes attributed to militant separatists were putting on the Sikh attire including the turban, to give the Sikhs a bad image. Successive governments manipulated the media to attribute all crimes to separatist militants. This generated a public reaction, helpful in denying justice to the Sikhs.

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<sup>21</sup> Rajiv's spies smuggle arms (24 April 1988) The Observer.

<sup>22</sup> The enemy within (16 Nov 1986), The Sunday Observer.

<sup>23</sup> Soft Target (1999), Brian McAndrew, Toronto Star and Zuhair Kashmeri, Toronto Globe and Mail.

<sup>24</sup> The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerrilla Violence (1995), Joyce J.M. Pettigrew, p 123.