

# Genocide 1984

George Orwell's novel '1984' predicted a totalitarian state controlling its citizens and destroying human freedoms. For Sikhs in India, the actual year of 1984 represents the mechanisms of such a murderous state apparatus, which were experienced with devastating malice.

The Sikhs holiest shrine in Amritsar – Harmander Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple was attacked by the Indian Army in June 1984 - under the pre-text of alleged 'separatism' and flushing out 'extremists.' This army operation led to the loss of life for thousands of innocent pilgrims.

In October 1984 – the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated and Sikhs were then openly killed, raped and attacked, they were made to be refugees throughout India in strongholds of the Indian Congress Party.

But – what led to these events? How did this all happen, in what is 'touted' as the 'world's largest democracy'? How were Sikhs dehumanized to the extent that they could be openly killed from the 1<sup>st</sup> November to the 4<sup>th</sup> November in 1984?

From 1982 to 1984, the Sikhs in Punjab, the northern Indian state, were peacefully campaigning for more civil rights which would make Punjab a more prosperous state. They wanted fair prices for paddy, economic reforms and parity in usage of Punjab's river waters to name a few. This civil rights campaign had mass support and as reported by the New York Times, by May 1983, 100,000 people had courted arrest.

The Indian Government labelled this peaceful campaign a 'threat' & a 'separatist' movement – although there was no evidence to substantiate this claim. The leaders of the movement took refuge in the Amritsar Complex – the Sikhs Vatican and led the campaign from there. Rajiv Gandhi the son of the then Prime Minister and the next Indian Prime Minister himself made this statement in March 1984,

***"I think we should not enter the Golden Temple. The police can enter temples, but it is a question of good balance. Today as we see it, it is not as if the Sikhs are against the Hindus, and we should do nothing that separates this."*** (quoted in, Samiuddin, A. 1985:227, *The Punjab Crisis*)

Contrary to this statement, the army was called in to attack. 70,000 army personnel entered Punjab and 15,000 were used in the attack codenamed Operation Blue Star. The Christian Science Monitor described the attack on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1984 in the following way,

***"For five days the Punjab has been cut off from the rest of the world. There is a 24-hour curfew. All telephone and telex lines are cut. No foreigners are permitted entry and on Tuesday, all Indian journalists were expelled. There are no newspapers, no trains, no buses – not even a bullock cart can move. Orders to shoot on site were widely carried out. The whole of Punjab, with its 5,000 villages and 50 major cities, was turned into a concentration camp. The rules were what the Indian army and its political decision makers decided."***

An Indian Civil Rights Group – Citizens for Democracy, described the loss of life in the following way,

***"Innocent people were slaughtered like rats, first letting them enter the complex and then declaring curfew which prevented them from going out, thousands were caught unaware, finally when the survivors were asked to surrender they were shot in cold blood..."*** (Amiya Rao et al, *Oppression in Punjab*, p.10)

The attack was politically motivated and an Irish Professor, Joyce Pettigrew described the motives in the following way,

***“The army went into Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) not to eliminate a political figure or a political movement but to suppress the culture of a people, to attack their heart, to strike a blow at their spirit and self confidence.”*** (*The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 1995, p.8)

Even moderate Sikhs were horrified by this action, Kushwant Singh the famous author returned his Padma Pushan award to the Indian Government in protest of the attack, it's the third highest civilian award the Indian Government grants. Bhagat Puran Singh the founder of the charity Pingalwara also returned his Padma Sri – the fourth highest Indian civilian award.

Sikhs were heartbroken by the destruction of the army assault. On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh who were Indira Gandhi's bodyguards, assassinated her. She was rushed to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences but couldn't survive. By 2.30pm on this fateful day, crowds outside the hospital started chanting, ***'blood for blood'*** and ***'Sikhs are traitors.'*** Much was made out of the fact that the assassins were Sikhs. These slogans were continuously relayed by state TV for the next few days.

At 5.30pm, the President of India - Giani Zail Singh arrived at the hospital, his car was attacked by the crowds outside, as was his bodyguard. These two Sikhs of prominence came under attack as did other Sikhs in the vicinity.

On the night of 31<sup>st</sup> October and the early hours of the 1<sup>st</sup> November, leaders of the Congress Party met to plan the massacre of Sikhs. A Congress worker named Hem Chander distributed iron rods and bamboo sticks in Inderpuri, Delhi, for mobs to go & attack Sikhs. Congress MP Sajjan Kumar and Congress Metropolitan Councillor Lalit Maken paid 1000 Rupees to each assailant and distributed liquor. The gathered mobs were then instructed to attack Sikhs, kill them, loot and burn their properties. The mobs were transported on Delhi buses, rounded up, armed and sent on their way to cause havoc.

Sikh men were singled out to be killed. Madhu Kishwar a famous female Indian writer and academic describes what occurred in the magazine Manushi which ran a number of stories about the violence,

***“The nature of the attacks confirms that there was a deliberate plan to kill as many Sikh men as possible, hence nothing was left to chance. That also explains why in almost all cases, after hitting or stabbing, the victims were doused with kerosene or petrol and burnt, so as to leave no possibility of their surviving... There have been very few cases of women being killed except when they got trapped in houses which were set on fire. Almost all of the women interviewed described how men and young boys were special targets. They were dragged out of the houses, attacked with stones and rods, and set on fire.”***

Owners of oil depots such as Brahmanand Gupta distributed kerosene alongside MP Sajjan Kumar to mobs in Delhi – the oil was used to roast Sikhs alive. Elsewhere, across India, similar patterns of co-ordinated massacres occurred in areas of power of the Congress Party. In Bokaro, Bihar, the President of the local Congress unit who also owned a petrol pump, distributed kerosene to death squads. 70 affidavits of witnesses of the massacres also cite the use of a highly flammable chemical substance.

Congress Party members provided the death squads with lists to identify Sikh homes, such as voter lists, school registration information and ration lists. Sikh properties were marked out and targeted. Mobs also repeatedly returned to certain properties and could be seen asking for specific residents and stating that there were still Sikhs alive from such and such a property. They were ticking off names from lists and returning to ensure all Sikh males were dead.

Sikhs are a martial race and they keep arms, so in nearly all instances of violence where Sikhs were attacked they tried to defend themselves. The police then intervened, disarmed the Sikhs after ensuring their safety and gave the mobs a free-hand to murder, rape and loot the Sikhs.

Sikhs of all status's were attacked, for example a relief camp on Palam Road in Delhi served survivors who worked for defense services. Captain Manmohan Singh a decorated retired Indian Air Force officer defended his property against a mob and fired shots in self-defense, he was disarmed by the police and charged with 3 murders. The police took no action against the mob.

To add to the vilification of Sikhs and increase complicity in the carnage – a number of false rumours were circulated. In Delhi police vans made announcements in neighbourhoods telling residents not to drink water as it had been poisoned by the Sikhs. Rumours of Hindus arriving dead in Delhi bound trains were spread. But, in actual fact the water was never contaminated and Sikhs were the ones being murdered on trains. In Delhi alone, trains were halted at least 46 times by mobs searching for Sikhs and the Railway Protection Force did nothing to intervene. In 1985 the Indian Governments Home Ministry had to admit that at least 179 corpses were recovered from trains.

Sikh Gurdwaras – the focal point of Sikh communities, their places of worship were purposely targeted. Gurdwaras are open to all and offer free meals to all that enter them. Thus, the Gurdwara is a unique community asset and non discriminatory in its functioning – yet, these were the first buildings to be attacked by the mobs. In Delhi alone, at least 180 Gurdwaras were attacked. The Sikh Scriptures which are revered as a living prophet were defiled, being urinated upon and set alight with cigarettes in some cases – tobacco is prohibited in the Sikh Faith.

Women and girls were singled out for sexual molestation and rape. The worst affected area was Tirlokpuri in Delhi, where a widows colony developed, after at least 400 people were savagely murdered. Swami Agnivesh a peace campaigner and leader of the Arya Samaj toured Tirlokpuri on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1984, this is how he described the scene he witnessed in an affidavit,

***“The carnage was mind boggling. Half burnt bodies were still lying scattered. Some had been mutilated by gorging their eyes. Some had smouldering tyres around their necks. The houses had been completely destroyed and burnt.”***

On the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984, 150 to 200 women from Tirlokpuri took refuge in a park after their homes were made killing grounds, gutted and burnt. The women were approached by assailants at night, who flashed lights in their faces and took them away to shanties – many would have suffered rape throughout the day, but now they were also taken away for further depraved acts.

Due to the hatred fuelled by misinformation and the organised manner of the genocide – Sikhs were refused medical treatment in many hospitals in Delhi & Kanpur, this led to further harm and deaths. The fire services of Delhi and Bokaro in Bihar, both refused to intervene, even though blazing fires could be witnessed throughout these two cities for four days. Where they did intervene it was never at Sikh properties.

For four days the genocide continued. The Congress Party then successfully termed the genocide – as ‘riots’ and fought their defence of what occurred from this position. Even to this day we commonly hear ‘Delhi Riots’ or the ‘Anti-Sikh Riots’, suggesting a communal problem between those of non-Sikh backgrounds and Sikhs, when in actual fact this wasn’t a communal problem but a political one – one of a politically co-ordinated genocide. It was not a break out of spontaneous violence. All the traits of genocide as per the UN definition are present in India for the 1<sup>st</sup> November to the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1984.

The police aided and abetted the genocide, where upstanding officers did try to intervene they were silenced by their superiors. The army was called in, but was not given the correct directives to allow it to intervene, so it was only after the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1984 – that a strict curfew was implemented in Delhi by the army. In Kolkatta, violence against the Sikhs had erupted after Indira Gandhi’s assassination but here the Congress Party were not in power and the civil administration brought it all under control by the 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1984 – proving this could have happened elsewhere.

Where the Congress Party were influential – Sikhs were massacred, raped and their properties looted and burnt, this occurred across India, with Delhi, Kanpur & Bokaro being the worst hit. Official government estimates of the dead in Delhi are 2733, but we will never know the real numbers of the dead – estimates range from 5,000 to 10,000 actually fatalities in Delhi alone. The real death toll across India will never be known.

So what has happened in the 30 years since 1984 to seek justice for the victims, widows and families affected. The Congress governments and Congress party and all those guilty of these crimes, including the whole gambit of the administrations of the time, have all colluded to avoid arrest and deny any wrong doing. This has included witness intimidation, withholding evidence, destroying records and has led to the following things:

- 1) The President of India in 1984, was a man called Giani Zail Singh – a Sikh. After his demise his memoirs were released, which confirm all the facts recorded in this document. In the memoirs he called it a holocaust and dedicated 3 chapters relating to it. Unfortunately, he was too weak, to state this whilst alive, or do anything to protect Sikhs in 1984, or subsequently get them any sort of redress or justice against the perpetrators.
- 2) 10 Government Commissions have been held to investigate the atrocities – as leading figures of civil liberties in India, did stand up and fight for justice, in attempts to force successive governments to enforce the rule of law on those guilty of genocide crimes. Unfortunately, the commissions were more like omissions, leading to little justice or redress. What they did do each time, though, were to force the victims to provide affidavits, take the stand and undergo emotional distress through cross examination – thus causing further pain. But this has not deterred the brave victims who did participate.
- 3) There have never been any convictions for the rapes and molestation, and now never will be. Some women never recovered and some girls have been mentally disturbed ever since.

4) Justice JB Goel convicted 2 people in murder cases in 1993. He was then immediately transferred out, as the Congress Government were alarmed by this development in the cases that he was adjudicating in.

Justice Shiv Narayan Dhingra convicted 150 people in carnage cases. He sentenced 93 people to 5 years imprisonment.

Overall only 13 people in total have been charged in murder cases out of the official 2733 dead.

5) Compensation started off at 10,000 Rupees per death for families of the victims by the Rajiv Gandhi administration, which was raised to 350,000 Rupees in 1993 and 700,000 Rupees in 2005.

Some people think we should move on and forget these fateful events, but a survivor of the Jewish holocaust Elie Wiesel writes in his novel, *Night*,

***“For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear his duty is to bear witness for the dead and the living.... To forget would not only be dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time”.***

So we cannot forget and to this effect – a number of individuals and organisations continue to remember and campaign for justice. HS Phoolka has been the bastion of seeking justice via legal means and continues to fight the cases of victims, that still continue in the Indian legal system. Sikhs for Justice, a human rights advocacy group, is leading a very successful campaign called ‘1984 Yes it’s Genocide’ in which they have submitted a petition signed by 100,000 people to the UN, in the hope that the events of 1984 in India will be recognised as a genocide. Gaining this recognition will allow the pursuit of perpetrators through international law. In Derby, UK a Sikh Holocaust museum has been opened in order to preserve this history and educate people of what really went on. In Delhi, a memorial is under construction at Rakab Ganj Gurdwara.

1984 is now recognised by Sikhs all over the globe as their 3<sup>rd</sup> holocaust. Sikhs prosper and their spirit is undeterred. They continue to live and spread goodwill to all mankind as their faith teaches. No one can halt their progress.

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[www.akaalpublishers.com](http://www.akaalpublishers.com)

#### Further Reading

*‘When a Tree Shook Delhi’* (2007) HS Phoolka & Manoj Mitta, Roli Books

*‘Twenty Years of Impunity’* (2005) Jaskaran Kaur, Ensaaf

*‘1984 Sikhs Kristallnacht’* (2009) Parvinder Singh

