



# The truth behind the Amritsar massacre

Thursday, 16 January 2014 10:21 AM | 7



AFP/Getty Images

*A Sikh takes a dip in the holy sarovar at the Golden Temple in Amritsar last Tuesday. The massacre was a defining moment for many Sikhs around the world.*

*As reports emerge that the UK may have colluded in a merciless 1984 raid on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, we look back at one of the most painful and important moments in Sikh history.*

**By Dabinderjit Singh**

Code-named Operation Bluestar began on June 1st 1984. Up to 150,000 Indian army troops were sent to the northern Indian state of Punjab, the Sikh homeland, equipped with helicopter gunships and tanks.

Over 125 other Sikh shrines were simultaneously attacked. On the false pretext of apprehending 'a handful of militants' lodged inside the Golden Temple, the Indian army unleashed a terror unprecedented in post-independence India. It took the use

of Vijayanta tanks to win the fight for the army. These let loose a barrage of highly explosive shells, which destroyed the Akal Takht, the temporal seat of the Sikhs.

The Shiromani (Temple) Committee secretary Bhan Singh was in the temple complex at the time of Operation Bluestar. He witnessed soldiers, commanded by a major, lining 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.

Ranbir Kaur, a female school teacher, witnessed the shooting of another group of 150 people whose hands had been tied behind their backs with their own turbans.

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 6th. 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.

Associated Press correspondent Brahma Chellaney had managed to dodge the authorities to remain in Amritsar during the Operation Bluestar. One attendant at the city's crematorium told him that there was not 'enough wood to burn the dead individually'.

News of the attack on the Golden Temple quickly spread despite the curfew. Thousands of people in the surrounding villages gathered to march to Amritsar to defend the Golden Temple. At Golwand village in Jhubal, a crowd of several thousands gathered, under the leadership of Baba Bidhi Chand, and began to march the 25 kilometres to Amritsar. Helicopter patrols spotted them and sprayed them with bullets without warning. Within minutes hundreds were dead or wounded.

*"It was a virtual massacre. A large number of women, children and pilgrims were gunned down."*

### ***The Guardian, June 13th 1984***

*"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."*

**Christian Science Monitor, June 8th 1984**

*"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."*

**Joyce J.M. Pettigrew**

*"Thousands of people have disappeared from the Punjab since the siege of the Sikh's Golden Temple here seven weeks ago. In some villages men between 15-35 have been bound, blindfolded and taken away. Their fate is unknown"*

**Mary Anne Weaver's report in the Sunday Times**

*"A Sikh doctor drafted from the Government hospital to Jullunder to conduct post mortem examinations said that he had seen the bodies of two Sikhs who had been shot at point blank range, their hands tied behind their backs with their turbans. His colleagues had reported others, some of whom had been machine-gunned. This doctor headed a team that conducted 400 examinations. He said that most bodies were riddled with bullets and bore bomb wounds."*

**The Guardian**

*"The same doctor told journalists that bodies of victims were brought to the mortuary by police in municipal refuse lorries and reported that of the 400 bodies, 100 were women and between 15-20 were children under five. One was a two month old baby. The doctor said that one 'extremist' in the pile of bodies was found to be alive; a soldier shot and killed him."*

**The Times**

*"Another police official told reporters that a lorry load of elderly Sikhs who surrendered on the first day of the military operation, were brought to the main city police station and tortured there by the army. The old men shrieked, but I helplessly watched all this from my office window."*

**The Guardian**

*"On the night of the 5th, the aged and chronically ill father of the couple next door finally expired and on the morning of the 6th the army gave our neighbours special permission to take him to the crematorium. Even before reaching this site, they could smell the stench of putrid and burning flesh. On entering the crematorium grounds they saw a sight that literally made them sick with horror. Grotesque piles of dozens of bodies were being burnt in the open without dignity or religious rites like so many*

*carcasses. The bodies had all been brought there by dust carts and from the number of carts; the attendant estimated some 3,300 had so far been cremated."*

***A resident of Amritsar's eyewitness account to the editor of a British Sikh publication***

With dead bodies lying all around, the vast lake of the Golden Temple Complex was transformed into a thick red of profuse blood. No attempts were made to provide assistance to the injured or dying.

According to the Christian Science Monitor:

"On Saturday, medical workers in Amritsar said soldiers had threatened to shoot them if they gave food or water to Sikh pilgrims wounded in the attack and lying in the hospital."

People were killed like that. No medicine was provided, in fact no medical aid was administered at all. Many people died in the camps. Neither water nor medicine aid was provided and you could not even donate blood for the injured in hospitals as it was stated that they were prisoners of war and hence no blood transfusions were permitted. The army detained volunteers of the Red Cross who wanted to help the injured at the nearby Jallianwala Bagh.

G.K.C Reddy 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".

Indian MP and president of the Janata party 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. This did not go unnoticed by informed foreign correspondents. "The government is now energetically insisting that the Sikh insurrection in the Panjab was a deep-seated conspiracy of a certain foreign power or when pressed, claims that some of the terrorists were trained in Pakistan," he wrote. "This is the first time that such a claim has been made, and it smacks of Mrs Gandhi's playing the familiar old Pakistan card for all it is worth."

Citizens for Democracy, a respected Indian civil liberties group headed by the distinguished former supreme court judge V.M.Tarkunde, published a report called *Oppression in Punjab* (1985). According to its findings on the police and army atrocities, "it was a terrible tale of sadistic torture, ruthless killings, fake encounters, calculated ill-treatment of women and children, and corruption and graft on a large

scale." It also noted that "despite all the oppression of the Sikh community there was no incident of a communal riot even in villages where the Hindus were in a hopeless minority".

In the November 16th edition of the New Statesman, Amrit Wilson described the scene:

"On June 4th, a day of pilgrimage for Sikhs when thousands had gathered at the Golden Temple, army tanks moved into the Temple Complex, smashing into the sanctum and shooting everyone in sight. Those left alive were then prevented from leaving the building, many wounded were left to bleed to death and when they begged for water, army Jawans told them to drink the mixture of blood and urine on the floor. Four months later no list of casualties or missing persons had yet been issued. Then came the army occupation of Punjab with frequent humiliations, arrests and killings of Sikhs by soldiers."

In an effort to destroy a crucial part of Sikh heritage, the army, set fire to the Sikh Reference Library after it had been secured. Irreplaceable copies of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikhs' holy scriptures; archives of documents from periods of Sikh history and even artefacts from the lives of the Gurus were reduced to ash. The Toshakhana, treasure house of the Golden Temple was systematically looted.

The government of India has always maintained that the army action was a 'last resort' necessary to flush out terrorists. But according to Retired Lt-General S.K. Sinha of the Indian army the army action was not the 'last resort' prime minister Indira Gandhi would have us believe. It had been in her mind for more than 18 months. Shortly after the Akali agitation of 1982, the army began rehearsals of a commando raid near Chakrata Cantonment in the Doon Valley, where a complete replica of the Golden Temple complex had been built. Another training involving Aviation Research Centre Commandos, was given in the Sarsawa area and Yamuna bed in helicopters converted into gunships." This was long before any "militants" were inside the complex.

A soldier serving in Arnitsar wrote:

"On the morning of June 6th, the Golden Temple complex was like a graveyard. Bodies lay all around in buildings, on the Parikarma and in the Sarovar. The sun was shining and the stench from the bodies was becoming unbearable. The civilians who died, about 1,500 of them, were piled in trollies and carried away. A lot of them were thrown into the rivers. The battle was a tragic one. I couldn't eat anything. Food made me sick. I used to just drink lots of rum and go to sleep. I am glad now to be relieved of my duty in Arnritsar."

R.H. Greenfield of the Sunday Telegraph, (June 10th, 1984) wrote:

"Mughal emperors and British governors alike tried military solutions to the Sikh problems and succeeded only in adding to the roll of martyrs cherished by the proud and prickly people. Sikhs also have long memories. They have never forgotten or forgiven the day in 1919 when General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire in the sacred city of Amritsar and Mrs. Gandhi may well have cause to rue the day she did the same."

Less than 5 months later, his words became reality.

**Dabinderjit Singh is a leading figure in the British Sikh community. He became one of the youngest civilians to receive an OBE in 2000 for his work on equal opportunities and representing the Sikh community. He is an adviser to the [Sikh Federation](#) (UK) and a regular spokesman on mainstream media on Sikh issues.**



*The Akal Takht (the highest seat of temporal authority of the Sikhs) pre and post, the aftermath of the Indian Army bombardment and attack in June 1984.*

