

## WORLD SIKH NEWS

Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; enthusiasm of the free and buoyant education and free discussion are the antidotes of both.  
—Thomas Jefferson quotes

## Lessons From Amritsar to Ayodhya

The Liberhan Commission report on Babri mosque has done all things for all people, except anything for the wronged community or offering solace to the civil society. In 1984, when the Indian Government unleashed an attack by the Indian Army, complete with artillery, on the centre of Sikh religion, the Golden Temple and Sri Akal Takht, the Sikhs were let down by the Indian civil society.

Voices of protest were too few, and too feeble. To speak for the Sikh question, or to engage meaningfully with the issues raised by a community that not only had a proud history but even a geography — the Sikhs had been ruler in the not very distant past and had run a kingdom the likes of which the world has rarely seen — had become almost an anti-national thing to do. The entire body of work of that sterling fighter for the cause of human rights, Ram Narayan Kumar, as also his words reproduced elsewhere in this edition of the World Sikh News as a tribute to this friend of the Sikh community, underlines this failure of the civil society.

When the second phase of the tragedy happened in the form of pogrom of the Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere, the civil society people were able to somewhat pull themselves up, dust off their blatant prejudices and start speaking out.

By the time, India's Hindutva forces gathered more strength and blood thirsty crowds thought it better to show their allegiance towards Lord Rama by demolishing the house of another community's God, such voices had gathered more steam. But the experience of silence, the rulers' view that it was possible to bamboozle the civil society, had become entrenched. What else can explain the fact that a commission tasked with probing the causes and fixing responsibility of such a heinous crime takes 17 years before churning out a report that, as we said it earlier, is all things to all people?

The BJP has thrived on its depiction of a Hindutva party and with its latest intra party churning and its stated decision to stick to Hindutva, the Liberhan Commission's harsh words delivered in soft tones are godsend for this godless party that sees a great future in politics of hatred.

Rajiv Gandhi was the first major Congress leader that thrived on hatred when he won on a communal wave generated by Operation Bluestar, killings of Sikhs, and placing advertisements in major Indian newspapers that tended to show that all Sikhs are terrorists. L K Advani only built upon that.

It is time that the minorities saw the game clearly. Both, the Congress and the BJP, are parties of Hindutva. Congress played to the Hindutva gallery by opening the locks and carrying out shilanyas. It was this foundation of anti-Muslim hatred on which the BJP built its edifice that saw it catapulting from a party with two MPs in Lok Sabha to leading the government under AB Vajpayee. As for the attack on Golden Temple and Akal Takht, it is none other than L K Advani which has sought to take credit for pressurizing the then government of Indira Gandhi.

Clearly, the entrenched brahmanical powers are pretty well networked. That is natural too because their agendas converge and there is little scope for minorities to bloom under any dispensation that is run by these established power levers.

It is time for the Sikh community to think in terms of forging new alliances as force multipliers. There are endless numbers of marginalised communities trying and fighting to come out of the pantheon of Hinduism. The entire Dalit community is on a resurgence and if it succeeds in breaking out of the Hindutva hold and finds its true religious identity, it will be a victory for those who want a more egalitarian world. This is the time to debrahmanise our minds, our epistemological mental furniture, our pedagogy, and our polity. It is the time to think big. If the crooked can demolish the houses of God, be they in Amritsar or Ayodhya, what stops us from breaking out of the false walls of prejudices? As children if a Guru who preached nothing less than welfare of the universe, we owe it to ourselves to have no lesser ideal.

# The Ultima Ratio

The World Sikh News deeply mourns the death of Ram Narayan Kumar, a friend of the Sikh community and of all those who believed in human beings' fundamental right to a dignified life. His efforts at fighting the brutality of state suppression of armed conflicts in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Northeast India, Nepal and other parts of the subcontinent shall be remembered for ever and serve as inspiration to many. We reproduce here a piece that Kumar wrote as a Preface to his book *The Sikh Struggle*, published by Chanakya Publications, Delhi, in 1990.

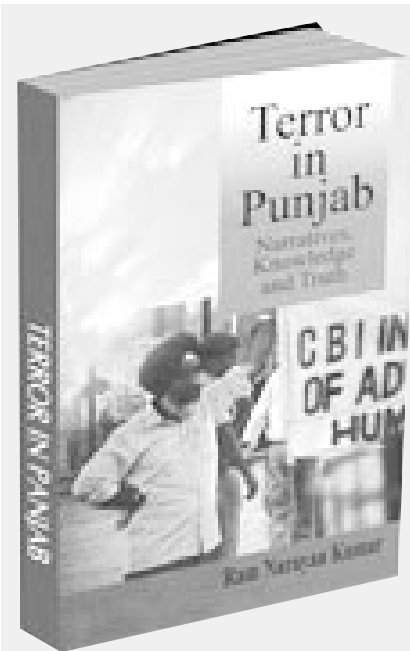
**Ram Narayan Kumar**

Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination by two of her Sikh body guards on 31 Oct. 1984 gave me the first traumatic insight into the bane which Hindu India could become to its religious minorities. The assassination itself was a riposte to the army assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar in June 1984, ordered by Mrs. Gandhi to wipe out the Sikh rebels ensconced inside, under the leadership of Bhindranwale, the apostle of Sikh separatism. Besides taking — according to Sikh estimates — around four thousand lives, the assault had reduced to rubble the Akal Takht, the symbolic seat of Sikh temporal authority inside the temple complex, built by Guru Hargobind during Mughal days in defiance of the Delhi Takht.

The Delhi riots after the assassination were not so much spontaneous as systematically orchestrated. Getting involved with a group formed in Delhi immediately after the outbreak of the mayhem to rescue and rehabilitate the victims, I became acquainted with the organization of the violence which claimed three thousand innocent Sikh lives in six days.

I heard eyewitness accounts of how the rioters in gangs of two hundred or three hundred led by Congress bosses, with policemen looking on, had swarmed into Sikh houses, hacking the occupants to pieces, chopping off the heads of children, tying Sikh men to tires set aflame with kerosene, burning down the houses after sacking them. The "rehabilitation camp" that I had helped set up in Shakkarpur, a trans-Yamuna locality of Delhi, housed two thousand refugees, among them a large number of widows and children with nightmarish memories.

The Delhi violence has been documented by the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties and the Peoples Union of Democratic Rights in their joint report — Who are the Guilty? — which mentions the names of sixteen Congress politicians, thirteen police officers and one hundred and ninety eight others, accused by survivors and eyewitnesses of responsibility for the carnage. Early in January 1985, journalist Rahul Bedi of the Indian Express and Smitu Kothari of the PUCL moved the High Court of Delhi demanding a judicial inquiry on the strength of this documentation. Justice Yogeshwar Dayal kept the petition dangling for a few weeks and finally dismissed it with a comment about "those busybodies out



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for publicity, who poke their nose into all matters and waste the valuable time of the judiciary!"

When shortly after the pogrom, the Congress party, riding on the wave of Hindu sentiments against Sikhs, had secured an unprecedented popular mandate, the Sikhs understood that the Hindu democratic sanction of the genocide would ensure that the instigators and participants would not be called to account. As if to confirm the point, the new Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi inducted into his cabinet several of the main suspects of the organization of the slaughter.

The behaviour of the government added moral verve to the Sikh separatist ambitions. The police took to an extra-judicial approach by torturing and killing suspected separatists in their custody, with courts refusing to take action against the guilty officials. The mainstream press too toed the line of the establishment. Anti-terrorist campaigns in Punjab received imprimatur as cover stories, with officials being quoted: "For one innocent person killed by terrorists, the police will kill ten of them." News on the situation in Punjab consisted of little more than the reproduction of official statements on terrorists killing and alternatively being killed: Investigative journalism conveying critical background information would have been "unpatri-

otic".

Knowing from my earlier experiences as a social activist of the chasm that separates Indian reality from Indian make-believe, of the callous disregard of those who count for those who don't, I decided to document violation of human rights in Punjab, traveling in the state from March 1985 when I became free from other compulsions. The picture of atrocities that emerged before my eyes was so distressing that I found myself overwhelmed to the exclusion of interest in other aspects of the Sikh problem. However, through my personal contact with knowledgeable Sikhs, I came to realize that a report on official atrocities alone would leave little scope for a rational understanding of the roots of the turmoil in Punjab. Pressed by these considerations, I decided to extend the scope of my intended report by (focusing) on the history of the Sikhs in the perspective of their present struggle. For what at first sight might appear as haphazard, irrational and unjustified in Sikh aspirations and behaviour, acquired new meaning if one read it in terms of the birth and evolution of their community, the distinct features of their religion, and most of all their earlier attempts and ordeals of national self-assertion.

The demand for an independent Sikh state as the ultima ratio of their frustrated desire for greater autonomy within a genuinely federalistic Indian State will impress us as less unfeasible if we remember that the present array of states in the Indian subcontinent is an artefact whose ephemeral validity is suggested by great fluidity of lines on the political map of the subcontinent in the past. If there is a recurring pattern in pan-Indian history, it is the cyclic emergence of ultimately self-serving imperial structures again broken by the political self-assertion of vigorous minority-nations. I hope that (my) attempt(s) would promote better understanding of the Sikh aspirations and their struggle among peoples of India and abroad.