

Living in Exile



Sant & Sirdar Kapur Singh

On the occasion of the 24th anniversary of Operation Bluestar, in-exile political activist Gajinder Singh goes down memory lane reminiscing events and thoughts that touched his life in his long sojourn away from homeland Punjab

Gajinder Singh

I am in exile. For the last 27 years. Living in exile is a unique journey. Very few people hurdling through the passage of life are endowed with the privilege of living through this kind of existence. On June 4, when we all bow to the martyrdom of Sikhs who laid down their lives in the 1984 Ghallughara, I wish to share with my fellow Sikhs the experience of "living in exile".



Stepping into the footsteps of adulthood, I penned down a few lines, which set the difficult passage I was to follow. The lines were,

iek sc: scil hI iek spni il qir hI
 hK Gr bniak di, iek qhieAil Klqi hI
 hK isR kTvAak di, iek inScil Klqi hI

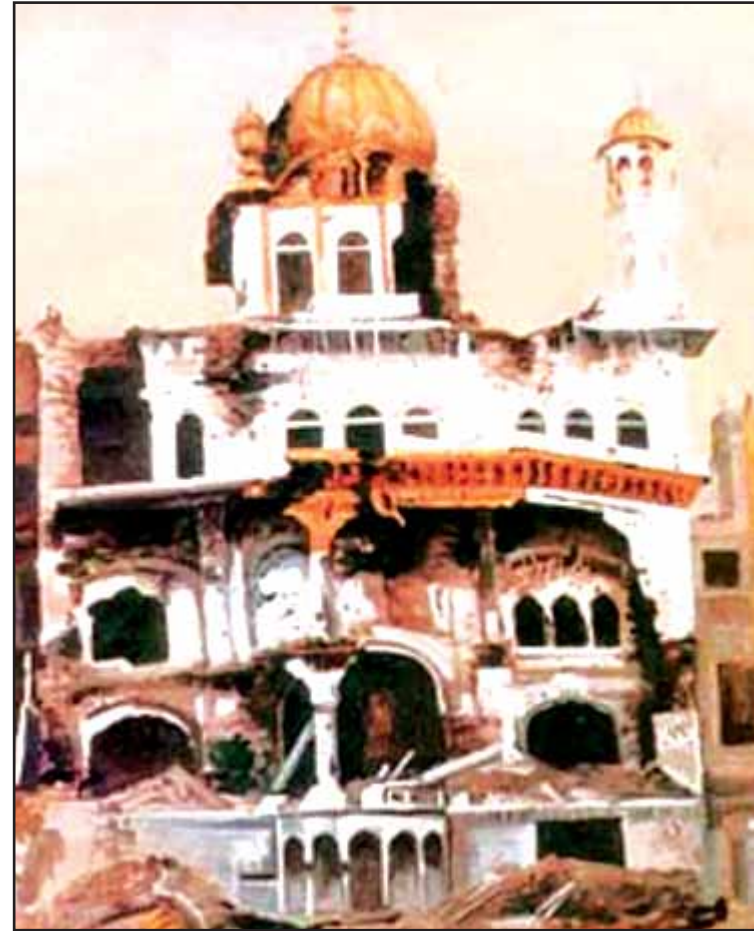
"I have a thought, a dream
 I am determined to have" my own house"
 I am convinced that I have to lay down my life."

In a sense, my exile started on that day in December 1971, when during the course of a public meeting of the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi at Dera Bassi, near Chandigarh, I openly threw leaflets on the dais and publicly declared my intentions flowing from the lines that I had penned. Soon after, giving birth to the historic movement of Dal Khalsa alongwith colleagues who thought alike further strengthened the campaign to live a life of ostracism.

When the events of June 1984 unfolded, I was within the four walls of a prison. As news trickled down through BBC radio, I was shattered. I could not do more than visualize the imagery of a destroyed Akal Takht, the devilish rulers of the Delhi Durbar and the blood-soaked bodies of Sikh martyrs. The poet in me could not but say that "the fledgling Delhi Takht had challenged the Takht of the Almighty". I also imagined the bloody days ahead.

I join the entire Sikh nation in reiterating that the remembrance of June 1984 is an occasion to reaffirm our commitment to the cause for which our brethren laid down their lives. It is also an opportunity to recall the brutality of the Indian state.

Today, when I pay tribute to all those who bravely fought and attained martyrdom, I ask myself the question, "When does one be



freedom for any individual or nation has to be a long, painful and arduous one. It has been so for the Sikhs in the past and even today it is so.

Times and technologies have changed. The geo-political realities of the Indian sub-continent have also changed. A substantial portion of the Sikh nation's demands to the Indian state have become infructuous as technology has overtaken events. Substantial barriers have broken down. Still, it is not time to relinquish our search as a majority of our own people may think and want. Years of governance under colonialism may have numbed us but the facade cannot be assumed to be reality. Truth will strike the Sikh nation when they become masters of their own destiny under a dispensation which unlike the present one is free and fair. It is time that a meeting of minds takes place of all those who are "living in exile".

Have the times really changed? In 1981, Afghanistan was under Soviet rule and now it is under US domination. Soviet Russia is only Russia today and

ready for such a state -to die for a cause? My quick response is, "When one goes into exile". To go into exile is a state of mind. The number of people who undergo physical exile may be small, but there is no dearth of people, either in my nation or in any nation, for whom, living in exile is actually a way of life.

When I was very young, my father secured my *Sikhi* and my mother instilled the spirit and essence of *Sikhi*. My key inspiration was Sirdar Kapur Singh. In a sense, I went into exile the day my mother educated me about the concept of "*sikhi khaanoo tikhi- the path of Sikhi is razor-thin*" and the importance and significance of "my own home". While I was still studying in Chandigarh, I went in search of "my own home". I went "into exile." Since then, I have lived life thus. For the last two decades and more, I have had virtually no contact with my family, wife and daughter.

Though the numbers may be small, there are people - men and women, young and old in our community who are living in exile. They physically dwell where they are, but their heart and mind is somewhere else. Exigencies of life force us to bid our time in search of the "my own home". The pressures of life make us spend a lot of our time, resources and energies into directions we actually do not want to

spend. We are waiting. Still, we are dreamers, living with hope and remorse.

Do you think you are alone in this voyage? Am I alone? Was I alone? Sometimes these questions bother us. Persecution is a worldwide phenomenon. It is the privilege of the few who listen to the voice of their conscience to fight persecution. From Palestine to Kashmir, from Tibet to Sri Lanka, from Nagaland and Manipur to Burma, the search for "my own home" goes on. So, are we alone? Well, there is only one Dalai Lama in this world. There is only one Aang San Sui Kyi in Burma, one Syed Ali Shah Gilani in Kashmir, one Prabakharan in Tamil Eelam and we had only one Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in Punjab. They are all conscience keepers of their respective nations. We are all co-travellers. We all have one destination. I am not alone. You are not alone.

The journey of going "into exile" and the path from exile to



there is a huge increase in the membership. Like men, nations too have their fate. It is a fact of history that there are nations who have been struggling for centuries without result and others, whose names people do not know, are independent.

During the course of the present phase of life, many a friend has posed this to me, "Don't you feel like 'going home'?" My reply has been, "which home -the one which has rendered me stateless and forced me into 'living in exile'?"



Sacrilege Vs Sanctuary

Going beyond the domain of remembrance of events of June 1984 and to focus on the issue of sacrilege of religious places of ethnic minorities, this document from a conclave organized by the Dal Khalsa in Amritsar is very timely as Sikhs mark the 24th anniversary of Operation Bluestar.

A DOCUMENT

THE POSITION of minorities in India is peculiar and precarious. With persecution as state policy for minorities, they are forced to invent newer strategies to protect their existence and identity. The Indian state has attacked religious shrines at the slightest pretext and under a well-thought of plan. It is time to join the New Sanctuary movement worldwide and work towards building opinion for the Right to Sanctuary for political activists.

Tolerance has not been a part of the religious domain of Brahman-India. Multiculturalism has never been given a thought as a policy in Indian public and political life.

Monotheism has been the hallmark of the rulers of India. "If you are not with me you are against me" is the policy practiced without

remorse and regret. If a Dalit happens to listen to the religious doctrine of the uppercaste Brahman, then mercury was to be put into his ears so that he loses that sense and never dares to repeat his "mistake" again. Such has been the policy. Intolerance personified.

The Jain and Buddhist faiths were able to breakaway from the shackles of religious domination, but unfortunately were ultimately subsumed by the hegemonistic Brahmins, so much so that Jainism is not perceived as a separate religion. Buddhism was able to retain a semblance of identity because of the exported form of Buddhism adopted by the Tibetans, Japanese and other regions of the Far-east.

Over the centuries, the mindset of the rulers of India has not changed. In the name of secularism, Indian political parties of all hues and

shades, follow a clear anti-minority and anti-minority religion policy. There is no difference between precept and practice. The precept is monotheism and the practice is intolerance of the minorities and subjugation and annihilation of religious ethos of minorities.

The attack on a Gurdwara, Masjid or Church is perceived as the attack on a Temple. The political rulers, the bureaucracy and the security forces have been briefed accordingly and they behave and act without questioning such diktats.

The attacks on the Sikhs have followed a plan. The Indian state has not been able to digest the concept of Shabad Guru. This unique institution has been shouldering various attacks. From the last five decades, the state has sponsored and nurtured numerous schismatic cults (like the neo-Nirankaris and the Sauda Dera in Sirsa) to undermine this concept of the Sikh religion. In June 1984, there was an attack on Harmandir Sahib. Recently the minority status of the Sikhs has been questioned in courts. On the ground, Sikhs are likely to actually become a minority in their own homeland Punjab.

Similar has been the case of Muslims. They too have suffered official excesses and their religious places have been attacked -the Babri Masjid in 1992, Hazratbal mosque in 1993 and Charar-e-Sharif in 1995. The Indian state, media and judiciary has made unnecessary forays into Muslim personal law and other Muslim traditions, which the rulers perceived as not matching with Indianism.

The Right to Sanctuary has a unique place in the Sikh religion. The Gurus of the Sikhs have clearly prepared the Sikhs to fight the anti-people system -first by thought and then by the arms to defend one's rights, as and when the need arises. The Sixth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Hargobind Sahib tutored his followers to bring the best weaponry and horses as offerings at the highest temporal seat of the Sikh nation, the Akal Takht Sahib.

Even those wedded to democracy and peaceful resolution of conflicts, resort to weapons of all kinds when the need is felt. As for minorities, the fact remains that in situations where the opponent starts perceiving you as an enemy and treats you

as such, when the state fails to engage in dialogue to resolve legitimate demands and when the state consistently pursues anti-people policies, then any people and more so minorities are left with no choice but to fight back and launch a resistance movement.

Communities and ethnic peoples and nations which are small in number tend to rally around places where they feel more comfortable. The Right to sanctuary was a right to be safe from arrest in the sanctuary of a church or temple and was recognized by English law from the fourteenth century. Under this law, a person running away from law had to right to take refuge in a place of worship. As late as 1987, the United States had declared "sanctuary cities" for migrants from the civil wars in Central America.

The United Nations should initiate a study for the Right to Sanctuary for political activists who face persecution from the state. This right should also recognize the safety of the Sanctuary in case of a war-like situation.

The Indian state has attacked us all, undermining our pride and honour, killing and incarcerating thousands, but the irony of it all is that "India is a great secular nation" and Sikhs and Muslims are "terrorists".

If the destruction of the Bahmian Buddhas by the Taliban is vandalism and a crime then how would one label the demolition of the Babri Masjid by the neo-Hindu leadership of India in January 1992? How does India propose to explain the deliberate and pre-meditated destruction of the Sikh Reference Library in June 1984 during the attack on Harmandir Sahib by the Indian Armed Forces? Why was June 2-3 chosen as the target dates for an operation whose planning and training had been meticulously carried out for nearly a year at the Chakrata airbase near Dehradun? Why was the Hazratbal mosque set on fire? Why are the individual and collective attacks on Christians and Dalits continuing unabated in various parts of the country? To expect the Indian state to answer these questions and learn a lesson or two is expecting the moon.

One of the primary needs today is to stop sacrilege of religious places. Let all minorities come on one platform and enforce the state to enact a law to protect religious shrines.

