

On the occasion of Remembrance Day of Saka Akal Takht, the author, in an Open Letter to an Unknown warrior, vents his feelings for those who have died unsung. He recounts the tales of heroism of Sikh martyrs and avows to contest the attempts to erase memory



Tribute to an UNKNOWN Saint-Soldier

Dear Bahadur Singh

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa,
Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh!

Tears rolled down my cheeks when I heard and read the news about the attack on Darbar Sahib in June 1984. I was in far away Bombay at that time. My only contact with Punjab was through radio and newspapers.

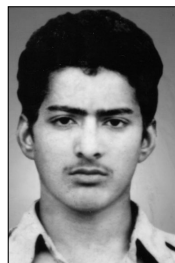
I actively participated in the wave of protests that were held in the city. I distinctly remember how the leaders of the Sikh community there were engaged in smothering the anger of the youth, in full collaboration with the state security agencies and political leaders with whom they had constant contact. Later on in life I learnt that this was the case in most parts of India and the world. Like me, there were many who were seething with anger.

During the protest demonstration, everyone was full of admiration for all the Sikh fighters who had protected their rights till their last breath. Your bravery was well respected. Even those who opposed the forces led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the Nihang and Kar Sewa Dals, the Sikh Students Federation and the Babbar Khalsa, held you in awe for taking on the might of the Indian state.

Twenty four years down the line, I recollect your courage and gallantry. Just two hundred odd people, with basic armoury and ammu-



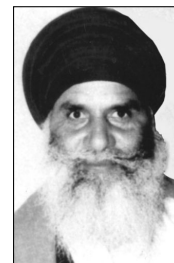
Jangir Singh



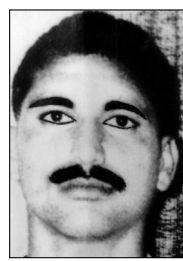
Dula Singh



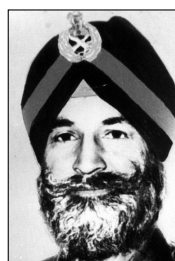
Upkar Kaur



Thara Singh



Hardev Singh
Bholi Pandit



Subeg Singh



Sujan Singh



Paramjit Kaur

Reliving the times that you spent during that sweltering June summer of 1984, facing bullets and cannon fire, I cannot hold back myself but say, "I wish I too was there."

munition, with very little or no training in warfare, held the second largest armed forces in the world—the Indian armed forces, at bay for more than 100 hours.

Most of you died in the fight, which was the last battle of Indira Gandhi, but while doing so, you added an indelible and incredible chapter in the annals of Sikh history and Sikh-Indian relationship. The battle of Amritsar was not about "flushing out militants or terrorists" as the Indian state would want us to believe, it was a battle to "bring the Sikhs down on their knees" so that the desire to dissent, the characteristic rebellion of the Sikhs and the yearning for freedom is crushed forever. After the last bullet had been fired, there was a blast on the Sikh Reference Library in violation of all Geneva conventions. You fought in style and vindicated the martial tradition of the Sikhs.

Very few pictures of fighters like you were shown to the world. Even your bodies were not given to your heirs for last rites. The photographs and video taken and shown by the then only official television channel -Doordarshan is part of the archives (hopefully it is still there) and it would be interesting to ask the government to put it into public domain. I doubt whether one can use the Right to Information or any other provision of any other law to do that as hard evidence is very difficult to obtain in India. India's propaganda machinery is so well oiled that it is well-nigh impossible to penetrate it.

There are many people who have described the events, but the last word is still to be written. Sikh leaders ensconced in the Golden Temple premises, who escaped unscathed while you were all dying, did not tell us the truth before they passed away.

Almost all of them either resorted to lies or handed over the task of replying to the government's propaganda, including the official White Paper, to footloose intellectuals who had no courage nor diligence nor the skill to respond appropriately. They could not match your courage even in their words. Today, there are some leaders around but they do not have the courage of conviction to speak the truth. Sketchy eye-witness accounts have surfaced but they are insufficient.

I have only three images embedded in my mind of Saka Akal Takht. One is that of the nearly-demolished Akal Takht Sahib with gaping holes caused by tanks, the other is that of the body of Sant Jarnail Singh (published by Surya magazine) and the third is that of a Sikh fighter like you, body soaked in blood, published by Time magazine. While talking of photographs and video recordings, I often wonder whether there exist some satellite pictures taken by a foreign power or by NASA of the conflict. If Google Earth can map remote military installations in secluded places around the world including India, surely the possibility of the existence of such material cannot be ruled out.

I have yet to come across a vivid description of the tale of combatants like you, though some interesting facts have trickled down the years from eyewitness accounts and some empirical research. Significantly and not known to many people, there were two Hindu young men, namely Bhai Hardev Singh (Bholi Pandat) and Bhai Dula Singh amongst your ranks who fought the Indian army.

Their parents are proud of their sons. There were many who were less than 25 years of age, with their beards sprouting out, but who had "mastered" the art of defence under training from Bhai Subeg Singh—a former decorated soldier of the

Indian army.

Not to be left behind, the Budha Dal—that is the elderly too were there. Baba Thara Singh was 60 years old and was a close confidante of Sant Jarnail Singh. Bhai Jangir Singh, the elder brother of Sant Jarnail Singh was 64 years old. As you know, both were towering personalities and lived up to the commitment made to the Guru.

It should make Sikh women proud that amongst the valiant warriors were two young women, Upkar Kaur and Paramjit Kaur, who too attained martyrdom during the Operation Bluestar.

Members of the SGPC are known for their cowardice and insincerity to the cause of propagation of Sikh ideals. It is a tribute to Bhai Sujan Singh who was an SGPC member from Sarbala constituency that he lived true to the oath of protecting and preserving the holiest of the holy shrines of the Sikh faith.

A few years back, during the course of a political conference I met a middle-aged Jaswant Singh at Fatehgarh Sahib. Introducing himself, he told me that like me, he too had lived in Bombay. He further said that when Damdami Taksal chief, Sant Jarnail Singh had visited Bombay, his family had "gifted" their ten-year old son to the Jatha. That ten-year old, Surjit Singh was 18 years when he attained martyrdom fighting in the precincts of Darbar Sahib. Whenever I have met Jaswant Singh, he has never regretted his decision. It should be of worthwhile to learn and understand, "how does one gift a son?"

It would not be fair to compartmentalize or compare martyrdom of one with the other. The tale of each one of you is a legend still to be fully told. During the last decade, some Punjabi magazines have chronicled stories of young martyrs and they deserve compliments for doing so.

While I salute you for your deed and role, I am conscious of the life led by your family members. While some have had recognition from the Sikh nation, there are many whose contribution has been left on the wayside, not deliberately but because of negligence and an inconsiderate sense of history.

Like every year, this year too, a small segment of the Sikh nation would recount and retell the tales of your heroism—in Punjab and elsewhere. To every Sikh, a martyr is a hero beyond doubt. The established leaders of the community have done everything possible to assassinate memory—from empty promises of putting up a memorial to white-washing all tell-tale signs of the massacre from Harmandir Sahib. The Akali political leaders, members of the SGPC, the SGPC bureaucracy and the religious leadership are guilty of this crime, carried out under covert directions of the Indian state.

Nevertheless, next year, we would be observing 25 years of your martyrdom. No book on the life of Indira Gandhi can be complete without reference to June 1984 and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. No history book of our times can be considered comprehensive without mention of the events of June 1984 and what went before that and what happened after that.

Reliving the times that you spent during that sweltering June summer of 1984, facing bullets and cannon fire, I cannot hold back myself but say, "I wish I too was there."

May you enjoy the privilege of "being with the Guru".

Yours in-faith
Jagmohan Singh
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