



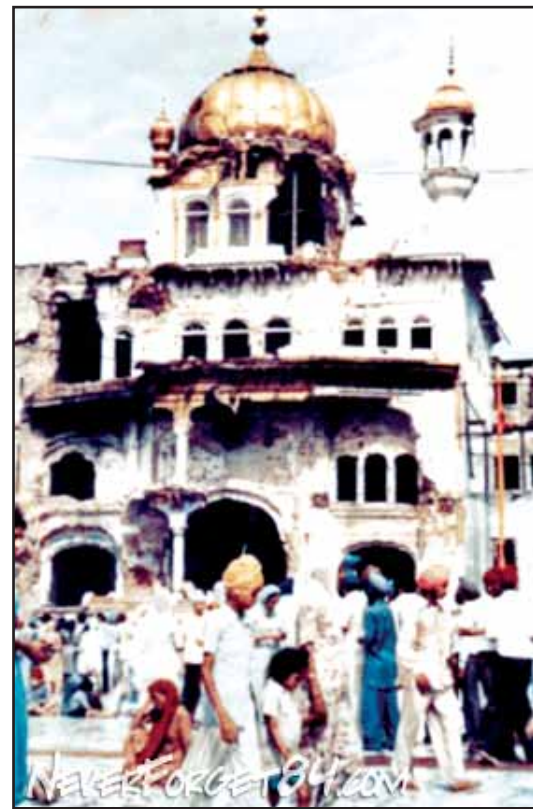
PHOTO BY SACH KANWAL SINGH

Former Akal Takht jathedar, Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, has chosen to tell his personal experience and an eye witness account of the dastardly attack on the Akal Takht, Darbar Sahib and Sikh heritage by the Indian Army. This account was written and

published in Punjabi, and has been translated into English by Sach Kanwal Singh for the readers of World Sikh News. In the accompanying shorter piece, Sach Kanwal Singh has a few posers for the Jathedar.

On June 4, 1984 I got up at 3 a.m. Exactly at 4 a.m., I along with my wife Harbhajan Kaur, reached Sri Harmandir Sahib for my duty as Ardasia Singh. Dr. Amrik Singh Huzuri Ragi's jatha was performing kirtan of Sri Asa Ji Di Var. At 4:30 when the Palki Sahib arrived from Sri Akal Takht Sahib (Kotha Sahib), the hukumnama was taken.

Around 4:45 a.m., when kirtan of Sri Asa Ji Di Var was on, a cannon ball struck into the Sindhi Dharamshala. This Dharamshala was towards the north of Sri Akal Takht Sahib and was between the Takht Sahib and the Tharra Sahib. (This dharamshala was later on demolished.) The cannon ball seemed to have come from the Jallianwala Bagh side. Three or four minutes after that, massive indiscriminate firing started which went on till 8:30 p.m.



Off and on, the cannon balls kept falling at various places, but till this day, no bullet struck inside Sri Harmandir Sahib. As a matter of precaution, we had shut the doors and windows of Sri Harmandir Sahib. I and Singh Sahib Giani Sohan Singh ji came out of Sri Harmandir Sahib at 9:30 in the morning after our duty and reached our respective residences inside the complex.

On the evening of June 4, the Nitnem was concluded at 8 p.m. That day the holy saroop of Sri Guru Granth Sahibji was not taken to Kotha Sahib. Rather the Sukh Asan was performed at Har Ki Pauri itself. At around 10 p.m., power supply to Sri Darbar Sahib and buildings around was cut off and army had organized positions on the tall buildings around Darbar Sahib.

From 10 p.m. till 5 a.m. of June 5, the firing was very subdued. When I reached Sri Harmandir Sahib at 4 a.m. on June 5 for my duty, Bhai Amrik Singh was performing kirtan of Asa Ji Di Var and Giani Sohan Singh with the help of some sevadars was bringing down the Saroop of Sri Guru Granth Sahib from Har Ki Pauri. Hukumnama was taken after prakash.

At 4:55, there was a hail of cannon balls, and eight of them continuously struck the Sindhi Dharamshala since they were trying to target Sri Akal Takht Sahib. Firing struck all around the Parikarma and inside Sri Harmandir Sahib. The doors of Sri Harmandir Sahib were shut. Some 4-5 Akhand Pathi Singhs, 15-20 sevadars and a few devotees were present inside Sri Harmandir Sahib. Among them were S. Harcharan



Singh Hudiyaara, Shahid Bhai Fauja Singh's wife Bibi Amarjit Kaur and sister Bibi Paramjit Kaur.

This Bibi Paramjit Kaur was martyred near Baba Sawiya Singh's chabeel. Around 11:30, five of us, including myself, Singh Sahib Giani Sohan Singh ji and three sevadars reached our quarters negotiating our way through the firing.

Near Baba Sawaye Singh's chabeel from where steps led to my residence, many corpses of the martyred Singhs were lying. My residence was also not safe because some Singhs had already organized positions there. Among them were a few Singhs who had come from Nanded. We saw that these Singhs were bravely countering the firing by tanks, which was coming from Shaheed Baba Deep Singh Bunga side.

These Singhs blew up an artillery group along with the soldiers which was trying to enter from the rear Papran Bazaar side.

Around 12:30 p.m. of June 5, I came along with my family to the store where wet garments are stored. There was already a big crowd of Singhs in this store. We thought it better to go back to our resi-

dence after more than an hour spent in the store.

Around 1:30 that day, the water tank opposite Guru Ram Das serai was blown up. Some 200 shots were fired at the water tank. Around 8 p.m., the army tried to surround Sri Akal Takht Sahib by trying to enter from the Papran Bazaar side.

The Singhs from our side threw something on those soldiers and we heard loud cries of "Mar diya, Mar diya." Perhaps all the soldiers down below were killed. Then the army men brought a heavy gun mounted on a jeep. But the Singhs did not allow this jeep to move much. These Singhs exhibited exemplary bravery till the very end. Around 9:45 in the night, a small tank entered the parikarma. A cannon ball fired by this tank struck our corner room. One of the Singhs who was left downstairs by his associates was injured in this room.

Around midnight, the army was able to take control of this side. Before that, around 10:30 in the night, a few tanks had entered the parikarma from the Langar hall side. Next day, one tank passed by the chabeel at Baba Deep Singh ji and then the Shaheed Bunga spot. These tanks then fired poison gas balls at Sri Akal Takht Sahib. This gas affected even our side. These tanks kept

the firing on all through the night. The bullets kept coming inside our house.

Around 8:45 on the morning of June 6 took place the massive battle in front of Sri Akal Takht Sahib. The army had taken control on all sides except Sri Akal Takht Sahib and the corner on our side where the Bungas were located.

On June 6, at 4:05 p.m., the army made an announcement using mega phones asking everyone in the complex to come out within 30 minutes. Initially we were in a dilemma, but when we saw Bhai Gurdip Singh Ardasiya and other sevadars coming out of Sri Harmandir Sahib, we also came down from our quarters. We had only locked the outer gate and had merely bolted the room. A bit of cash, a couple of watches and some other costly stuff that we had put in a bag, was immediately snatched away by the army men.

Near the Deodhi towards the south, they tied my hands behind my back using the small dastar tied on my head. At this time, my wife Harbhajan Kaur, mother-in-law Pritam Kaur, sister-in-law Kashmir Kaur and nephew Sukhwinder Singh were with me. When we were arrested, we saw a nearly 20-day old child also lying dead near the chabeel. All around the parikarma and the rooms, there were many children and elderly devotees who had been martyred. The arrested men and women were

divided into groups of 40 and were handed over to different units of the army. Members of my family and I were in the same group. At this time, Akal Takht Sahib and Darshini Deodhi were both on fire. The 40 of us arrested were brought out alongside the Dukh Bhanjani Beri and then out of the Clock Tower deodhi and made to sit on the debris of the building that had gathered after so much firing. Women and children were then separated from the men.

Stuck in the heavy firing ever since the major battle of the morning of June 6, Huzuri Ragi Bhai Amrik Singh and Bhai Balwant Singh, both blind, alongside Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh were killed near the Laachi Beri by the soldiers. The ish-nangharas (bathing places) both for males and females were full of corpses. The army men to whom our custody was given were either Madraasi or Bihari. If anyone asked for water or wanted to go to the urinals, he would immediately be kicked or beaten with rifle butts.

We were brought here around 4:30 in the evening. Around 7 p.m., a few commandos came with a bunch of photographs and scanned our faces to see if any matched with the mugs they had. The one question we were being asked throughout was - "Where Bhinder has gone?" Till 10 p.m., we were off on a kicked



EYE WITNESS

Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti's personal account from the tragic days of the June of 1984



and beaten with rifle butts. When the children and the elderly started crying badly because of thirst, the soldiers gave us each a glass of water. As our hands were tied behind our backs, the soldiers put the glasses to our lips. That's how we had water.

Later, four young men from our group were pulled out and they were beaten very badly. In the evening when we were brought there, there were four corpses in front of the Punjab and Sind Bank. But by the time it was morning, these had become 13 corpses. Whosoever they wanted to kill, they would first call him out and take him outside.

Till midnight, we kept sitting there, heads down and our hands tied behind our backs. After midnight, we were ordered to lie down. But with our hands tied it was not possible to lie down properly and we lay sideways, between life and death.

Around 7 in the morning of June 7, some army men standing nearby were sending messages on the wireless that Sant Bhindranwala has been killed and "we are fully in control of the Golden Temple."

Around 8 a.m., cars of senior army officers started arriving. Three army trucks rolled in full of ammunition, including rifles, swords and even spears. All these weapons were taken to Akal Takht Sahib. These were the weapons that were later shown to the people during various photo ops.

Corpses of two senior army officers who were shot dead by the fighting Sikhs inside the Golden Temple complex were brought out covered in white sheets. Then a corpse was brought out which was said to be that of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala. This was covered with a yellow cloth and was placed on a slab of ice in the Deodhi of the Clock Tower side.

The information officer of the Golden Temple, Narinderjit Singh Nanda, was also with us. He was tortured very badly during the night. Now the army men took Narinderjit Singh Nanda and Bhai Harcharan Singh Huzuri Ragi to identify Sant Jarnail Singh's body. When they came back, I asked Bhai Harcharan Singh Ragi if it was indeed the body of the Sant. He said that the face was beyond identification. A bullet had gone through the neck and a sure identification was not possible but it did seem that of Sant Bhindranwala.

Between 8 and 9 a.m. of June 7, some army men dragged the wife of Ragi Bhai Jagir Singh, brother of the well known late Ragi Bhai Gopal Singh, from their residence towards the Clock Tower. She was crying very



Sant Ji with Baba Tharra Singh and Bhai Amrik Singh

loudly and kept on shouting that these army men pulled out her husband from the room and have shot him dead. Then she fell unconscious and was taken to the hospital where she could not survive the shock and died.

Similarly a large number of sevadars at Sri Darbar Sahib along with their families were shot at point blank range by the army men.

Around noon of June 7, our hands were untied so that we can have food. It is necessary to tell here where the food came from. This food was prepared and distributed by a group of shopkeepers who were celebrating the army attack on Golden Temple and were openly happy at the killing of the Sant. The tea, chapatis, puris, curries and lentils were in good supply. We were sent this same food. You can well imagine how we partook of this food.

After we had eaten, our hands were tied again. Around 3 p.m., we were asked to board the army trucks. It was difficult to climb in because of our tied hands but the soldiers would badly beat up anyone who slackened his pace.

Sardar Singh, the sevadar of Baba Sham Singh dera who used to bring a deg every day during the chowki at dawn, found it difficult to climb into the trucks and was beaten so badly that he died by the time he reached the camp jail set up inside a school. Similarly, the sevadar of Gathri Ghar (where belongings of devotees are deposited for safe custody), Bhai Kikar Singh alias Kulwant Singh, whose legs were deformed also could not survive the torture from the army men and died on June 9 inside the

army camp. Some 50 of us were locked in a single small room on the first floor of the school. People were crying because of thirst and hunger. Women and children were taken away. There was a single tap inside a bathroom from where all of us used to drink water of take bath. Only stale chapatis were given to us twice a day.

Every person was separately interrogated and we were repeatedly photographed. After intensive interrogation and investigation, I, alongside 83 other employees of the SGPC was released on June 17, but other members of my family and other visitors to the Darbar Sahib were not released and were rather sent to jail. On June 28, I was able to get bail for them.

After being released on June 17, on June 18 I went straight to the Sikh Reference library, to which I was closely associated as a researcher. I found the holy handwritten Saroops of Guru Granth Sahib and many ancient manuscripts, historical documents, etc missing.

Till date, the government of the country says that all of this was lost in a fire at the library but the truth is that all this stuff was taken away by the army because at that time there was no sign of a fire.

I was perhaps not so saddened by all that my family and I went through, than by the realization that the historical heritage of the Sikh quom has been lost.

I went to my residence where the lock was broken and the army men had taken away every single thing including utensils and clothes. Sitting in front of the Clock Tower, we had given up all hope for life but I am eternally grateful to the Akal Purakh who gave me the opportunity to continue an association with Sadh Sangat for some more time.

Sach Kanwal Singh

Former Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti deserves gratitude for finding the time and the inclination for writing this eyewitness account. It is not clear why the account from the terrible days from an authority as high as a former top cleric is so sketchy, but that is not the main point here. It is not clear why Jathedar Vedanti should provide such an account to one newspaper, Ajit, only for exclusive publishing rights. There could be several views on his choice of the vehicle to let the world know what he went through, but that is not the main point here.

The main point is rather simple, and one which can only be responded to by Jathedar Vedanti. The Sikh nation is well aware of the circumstances in which Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti came to be installed as the Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib, the supreme seat of temporal authority for the Sikhs. It is also only too well aware of the circumstances in which Jathedar Vedanti was removed by the SGPC top brass in keeping with the whims and fancies of Prakash Singh Badal-Sukhbir Singh Badal.

All that we feel tempted to ask is

Vedanti Sahib, Why?



Was there no better way of handling this? Why did you remain silent about their silence? When the Quom was ready, you deflated the spirit. Why? You failed to stand up, so they trampled over you.

The fact that the very next day after his release he rushed to the Sikh Library instead of running about to get his family freed shows how deeply he was moved and how concerned he was to find out about the invaluable Sikh heritage of manuscripts, historical documents and objects at the Library.

What surprises is what made a man like Joginder Singh Vedanti, first hand eye witness to an event of such momentous proportions, kowtow to the likes of Prakash Singh Badal and Sukhbir Singh Badal, claymen like Avtar Singh Makkar or

sundry messengers of the Akali ruling family of Lambi? He saw the Singhs fighting, he knew what it means to safeguard the maryada of the gurghar, yet he suffered in silence when he was ordered about on every issue. Right from his conduct in the Dera Baba Dhanwant Singh case to his muted opposition to the Noormehlias to his wavering on the issue of Dera Sirsa to his actions of accepting/not accepting apologies from Sirsa to his cancellation of the Ratiya rally, Jathedar Vedanti seemed to have lost the script. He had seen simple men and women, inspired by

the high ideals, writing a glorious script with their blood, but he himself demurred when it came to simply standing by his principles and put in a resignation that would have brought some embarrassment to those out to sell the soul of the Sikh nation to brahmanical powers.

"I only want that I should leave when the mela is in full swing," Jathedar Vedanti once told a Sikhism scholar. Alas, he was not allowed to even fulfill that minimal demand. He saw men of destiny leaving this world at the edge of the sword because they believed in what they preached. His account of Operation Bluestar is a testimony to that. He himself could not even find a graceful exit as Badal's minion limpets stood at his door asking for his resignation. His exit is a testimony of that. It is high time, Jathedar Joginder Singh Vedanti ji, for you to write the entire truth, the complete truth, of your leadership at the Takht too. The Takht for whose sanctity you saw brave men and women choosing to be blown to smithereens but refusing to buckle. You are already retired. Choose to stand up and be counted. Take up a pen, and say the truth. Rest assured, the Sikh Nation will ensure that you exit this world when the mela is in full swing all around you.