

# Past in Perspective –Future in Focus Commemoration of 25 years of Saka Akal Takht

# Sikhs Canada and India

In the Name of God, the light of every soul,  
Honourable Canadians and Sikh-Canadian  
Brothers and Sisters,

**Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa,  
Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh!**

25 years ago, on this day, I was weeping at the wanton destruction and vandalism of my dear Akal Takht and precincts of the Golden Temple premises. Today, I share with you tributes to those living dead who laid down their lives in the line of fire fighting a battle of honour and dignity, upholding the high pedestal of the Gurus, "we die before we fall." Three days from now, 6<sup>th</sup> June will be observed as the brightest day in the history of Sikh martyrdom. For the committed Sikhs, the moment of truth had arrived to uphold the ideals dear to all Sikhs.

Elaborating on the Sikh response to the Indian army's bloody assault, Justice Choor Singh of Singapore has said, "the doctrine of Chardi Kala (a mind that never despairs, never admits defeat and refuses to be crushed by adversities), reinforces the Sikhs' glorious tradition of cheerfully offering unyielding resistance to *zulm* which is not only a religious duty but is also considered as a honourable and moral response to *zulam*."

I also take this opportunity to pay homage to those who were burnt alive on the streets of New Delhi and scores of other cities of India in the pogrom of November 1984.

I will present before you a bird's eye view of the last 25 years from a human rights perspective and attempt to suggest mechanisms and methodologies that the Sikh people and the international community needs to take up so that the history of injustice gives way to respect for human dignity, restoration of the status of the Sikhs in the annals of history with their full historical potential intact and a respectable place in the comity of nations.

We are here to observe the 25 years in the history of a nation -25 years in the history of a people.

25 years ago, the Indian army's attack was a well-planned action against the determined will of a nation to uphold its distinct identity. Scottish anthropologist Dr. Joyce J. M. Pettigrew, who spent much time in Punjab, in her book, *Sikhs of Punjab*, writes, "The initial crime (Operation Blue Star) was celebrated and indeed had been planned for a year beforehand. The *Darbar Sahib* complex, a place of beauty, the spiritual and political centre of the Sikh way

of life and of the Sikhs as a whole, their historic home through years of invasion from the west, had its sanctity shattered. The army went into Darbar Sahib Complex not to eliminate a political figure or a political movement but to suppress the culture of a people, to attack their hearts, to strike a blow at their spirit and self-confidence."

Each one of you, present here is agonised and concerned and understandably so. Let me briefly take you down memory lane.

In 1849, the Sikh face of the child-king of the Sarkar-e-Khalsa was defaced and in a move full of deceit and chicanery, the self-rule of the Sikhs was snatched away from them. In 1947, the Sikh face of the Sikh leadership itself was so weak-kneed and naive that they failed to understand their role and status in history.

In 1984, the Sikh face of the Indian establishment was so weak and impotent that when the Indian troops were ordered into the Darbar Sahib complex, under his very nose, to unfold the Saka Akal Takht, he was so dumb and morally bankrupt that he remained a mute spectator and even in his dying years did not have the courage to speak out the truth.

25 years later, in a most sinister and pernicious manner, another Sikh face of the Indian establishment wants us to forget and forgive 1984. The present Sikh face went further to call human rights defenders, "shops selling misery." The community is by and large proud of his

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achievements but cannot understand and tolerate his forsaking everything that the Sikhs stand for, at the altar of a deformed and inhuman construct of Indian secularism. So what do we do? Under the pressure of modernism, under the threat of being called and perceived as either mischief mongers on the soft-side of the scale to being dubbed as a militant on the hardest side of it, do we keep quiet and continue a life of subservience and subjugation?

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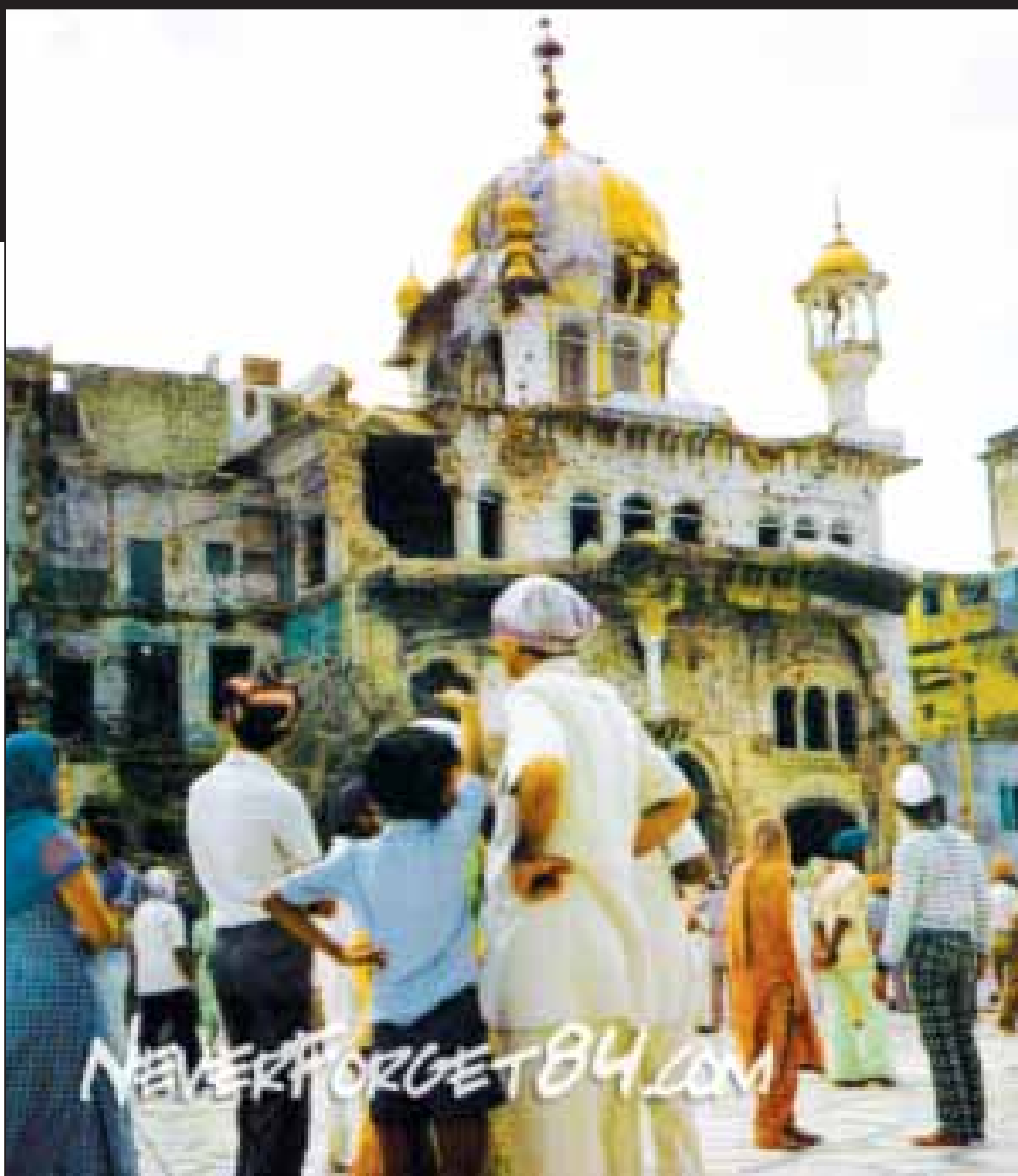
Sirdar Kapur Singh during his visit to Vancouver in 1974 said, "The mosaic pattern of Canadian society comes nearest to the Sikh ideal of a world-society, though in every respect and in essence, it is not its replica or prototype." The visibility of the Sikhs and the religio-political

forces used land mines in Punjab or the setting up of a Consulate office in Punjab, Canada has played an exemplary role. There is more to do. Today, most countries make stirring postures but ultimately succumb and subscribe to their respective country's geopolitical understanding and priorities, sacrificing their commitment to upholding human rights and humanitarian rights. I believe that Canada needs to exercise stringent scrutiny over what Indian diplomats say and get away at forums like the United Nations and its various bodies. The Sikhs in India, the Diaspora and particularly the young and dynamic human rights organisations need to follow suit in an even more diligent and systematic way.

I am greatly encouraged by the role of Canada in the United Nations Human Rights Council convened on 28 May 2009 in Geneva, wherein during the discussion on Sri Lanka, Canada made specific demands to the Sri Lankan government seeking to emphasize international scrutiny and the need to strengthen key national protection mechanisms in the island nation. With regard to the Sikhs, we have a

dynamic of their polity in their homeland Punjab impacts Sikhs in Canada and throughout the world. In that sense and in the interest of peace in South Asia, it is imperative for governments of Canada and of the world to maintain a permanent liaison and understanding of the developments in Punjab.

The intervention of Canada in the events of Punjab over the last few decades has been enriching for the community on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether it is the need to investigate human rights abuses at the level of parliamentarians, intervention with India when the security



This is the text of the speech by Jagmohan Singh, Editor, World Sikh News and human rights activist, at the World Sikh Organisation's Annual Parliamentary Dinner Meeting at West Block, House of Commons, Ottawa, Canada, on June 4, 2009

long way to go. Our human rights defenders from Jagwinder Singh to Jaswant Singh Khaira and many others have done exemplary work in documenting human rights violations. World Sikh Organisation and other bodies in the UK, Europe and US have highlighted concerns from time to time and taken them up in a pretty consistent manner.

The last 25 years have been years of pain, agony and activism. I envisage that the next 25 years should see the Sikhs, particularly the Young Khalsa –transcending political boundaries and engaging the world community, the powerful governments of Canada, US, UK and Europe in a more informed way, learning the skill-sets of hard diplomacy and negotiations. All our organisations need to first learn and then effectively use UN mechanisms and methods not with the sole purpose of embarrassing India, but using them as a tool to furnish the true side of events suppressed behind the iron curtain.

The new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Navenathem Pillai during her recent visit to India categorically pointed out for India to refurbish its National Human Rights Commission, allow Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to officially visit India. She sought the annulment of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and other proposed anti-terror laws. Sikh-Canadians and others from the Diaspora need to force this point home in a systematic and determined manner through activism and political lobbying.

We need to tell ourselves that there is a long way to go in regard to ensuring human rights protection even though we are conscious of the fact that most countries sacrifice them at the next easy opportunity for their pecuniary benefits.

The typical balderdash and fiddlesticks logic of India through its standard "non-interference in the internal affairs" plea needs to be countered by studying and using national mechanisms in respective countries that can try violations of human rights and humanitarian rights. Devinder Pal Singh Bhullar, repatriated from Germany, alongside others, continues to be on the death row.

As India's official Human Rights commission has refused to look into the case of extrajudicial killings of Sikhs, post-Saka Akal Takht in other districts except Amritsar, I strongly endorse the taking up of the issue of the working of India's Human Rights Commission to the International Coordinating Committee of National Human Rights Institutions, as suggested by Voices for Freedom which has done monumental documentation of abuses in all parts of Punjab. Due to such intervention, the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission has been downgraded from 'member' to 'observer' status. We need to continue the campaign against death penalty worldwide. We need to work with organisations like the US based United States Commission for International Religious Freedom which monitors religious freedoms in all countries and then uses US diplomatic pressure to ensure it.

As my friend and executive director of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, Ravi Nair has said in his recent scathing analysis of the European Union intervention in Sri Lanka, and I quote, "the principle of territoriality apparently does not apply to Sudan. Why must it

apply to Sri Lanka? To which I add, why must it apply to any place which sees a struggle for the right to self-determination? After all, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has to be universal, isn't it? Ravi Nair went on to add, "caution, meticulous legal work, and collaborations with credible human rights organisations is what will win the day and eventually win the peace." This is also my plea and message to all young Sikh activists in Canada and across the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you are disturbed at the developments from Vienna to Punjab, I exhort you to read Bhai Sahib Kapur Singh's Fish Justice, to understand the true nuances of what is happening and why and what we need to do. Suffice it would be to say that, it is a well-planned orchestrated event, not off the cuff, aimed at and I quote Sirdar Kapur Singh, whose hundredth birth anniversary was celebrated this year, who said, "the aim is to



**This distortion of minority rights needs urgent engagement. This is the latest attack and Sikh Canadians deeply rooted in the tradition of multiculturalism in Canada need to take this up as strongly as possible and exhaust all human rights, diplomatic and lobbying means to ensure that the latest Sikh face, who happens to be a member of the minority community does not get away with murder of a community en masse, so easily.**

degrade and demoralising the Sikh people, permanently to deprive them of the control of their own history and their spiritual potential, thus reducing them into secondary citizens and camp-followers so as to eventually divest them of their living separateness, shrinking them into a footnote in history."

Let me take up the last contention I wish to emphasize. Those of you have been closely following the developments in Punjab, would be somewhat pleased with the latest judgment of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, which inter alia says, "retaining unshorn hair is one of the most important and fundamental tenets of the Sikh religion" My paper, the World Sikh News, while welcoming the decision, would like you all to beware of the next danger looming large on the horizon for the Sikhs in India.

This judgement on unshorn hair would mean little relief if the Government of India succeeds in passing a law whose draft has already been cleared by the Council of Ministers. The 103rd Constitution Amendment Bill that seeks to define a "Minority" on the basis of state-level demographic data will effec-

tively snatch away the status of a minority from the Sikhs. This will end the SGPC's right to reserve any seats for the Sikhs in the institutions it runs in Punjab. In May last year, the amendment draft was cleared by a Cabinet presided over by the Indian Prime Minister. Acting on this, quiet some time ago, the Reserve Bank of India has already stopped sanctioning loans and other facilities to poor Sikhs in Punjab on grounds that they are not a minority there. As always and as expected, the Akali Dal-Bharatiya Janta Party government of Punjab has merely reacted in a knee-jerk manner without any follow-up.

Since 1980, the National Minorities Commission has been treating Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians as religious minorities at the national level. The communities were notified when the National Commission for Minorities Act came into force in 1993. In February last year, India's

I am grateful to our hosts the World Sikh Organisation, which has afforded me this opportunity to share my views with you and I propose that it may take lead in building an international campaign to thwart the proposed bill for annulling the minority status of Sikhs in India.

On a tour of Punjab in 1997, when they were on a visit to investigate human rights abuses in Punjab, I accompanied Members of Parliament from Canada, Mr. Derek Lee, Mr. Svend Robinson and Ms. Colleen Baumier to the Sikh National Museum at the entrance of the Darbar Sahib Complex in Amritsar. Having spent a good hour there, glancing at the pictures of martyr after martyr, Mr. Lee softly and politely asked me, "how long will this continue? Do you see an end to this?"

I had no answer then. I still do not have an easy answer, except the reiterate what in 1974, the Sikh nation's National Professor of Sikhism and member parliament, Kapur Singh said in a speech he delivered in Canada and I quote, "Sikhs want to live, as all living things do; they do not want to die."

Looking at the next hundred years, I strongly believe that an education and empowerment mission needs to be undertaken in Punjab. Illiteracy needs to be wiped out, the youth to be prepared to meet challenges –internal and external and trained to participate in international organisations and institutions. We also need to work for the poorest of poor Sikhs in Punjab.

Sikhs want to exercise their right to self-determination, whenever the United Nations and history will provide them an opportunity to do so, and also that Sikhs are conscious of their role as they recollect and repeat, *Kabul de Rehm walia nu nit muhima...* the life of a Sikh is a relentless campaign for justice and dignity for self, for his nation and for all humankind as exemplified in his daily prayer for *Sarbat da Bhala*. May peace and prosperity come to all. As a people, to quote Sirdar Kapur Singh again, "The Khalsa shall uphold the banner of Dharma, the banner of freedom for everybody, the banner of establishing tolerant, plural societies and the banner of peace and mutual understanding among men, so that entire mankind may progress and prosper."

Thank you very much for your kind patience and indulgence. **Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh!**

Supreme Court refused any immediate relief to the Sikh community by refusing to suspend the Punjab and Haryana High Court judgement that had declared Sikhs a majority community in Punjab and had thus deprived them of the benefits that accrued from that status.

**These grabs from the Special Reports carried in the World Sikh News show a relentless crusade on the Human Rights front.**

