

The WSN presents the text of the speech of S. Ajmer Singh, writer and activist, at the World Sikh Organisation's Annual Parliamentary Dinner Meeting at West Block, House of Commons, Ottawa, on 4 June 2009. Ajmer Singh's work has goaded the community to

study the events leading up to 1984 and later in an informed perspective rather than jumping to quick-fix explanations. He was speaking within the confines of the broader theme of *Past in Perspective - Future in Focus; Commemoration of 25 years of Saka Akal Takht*

# DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING

## 1984 And moving beyond towards introspection to find the way forward

Distinguished assembly of Sikh-Canadians and law makers

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

At the outset, I salute Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and others who in the highest traditions of the Sikh way of life, 25 years ago, achieved martyrdom in Darbar Sahib, Amritsar.

Today, as we commemorate the event, I will define the existential crisis of the Sikhs in the context of 1984 and beyond.

1984 transformed the individual lives of the Sikhs in a major and revolutionary way, changing the build-up and dynamics of the collective consciousness of the Sikh people. An American journalist while describing 9/11, characterized it as "the event that defined this century; it was as though the plate-tectonics of history were shifting". Without drawing any parallel or analogy with the event of 9/11, I would like to say that June 1984 marked a tectonic change in Sikh thinking, Sikh understanding and all aspects of Indo-Sikh dialogue.

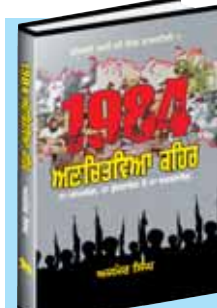
So, what was the impact of June 1984 on the Sikh mind?

Historically, Sikhs have always recognised their distinctiveness from Muslims. It is an inherent part of their psyche and consciousness. No Sikh has even an iota of doubt about how the Sikh is different from the Muslim in social, religious and political aspects. In this regard, there never was and there is no confusion.

Despite the clarity envisioned and inculcated by the Gurus, in their teachings and renditions in Guru Granth Sahib, the relationship of Sikhs and Hindus had remained muddled and unclear. History had mystified the relationship and the Hindu had carefully chosen to ensure keeping the issue lingering in the Sikh mind. Though the Sikhs proclaimed that Sikhism is a separate religion, there was no clarity as to how and why. Somehow, Sikhs considered themselves culturally akin to Hindus and overemphasized the fact that they belong to the same civilization. Sikhs themselves and the Hindus by choice diluted the political separation taking it to the logical conclusion of assimilation. Authors like Max Arthur Macauliffe recognised this decades



The Sant with the intellectual giant Sirdar Kapur Singh



Ajmer Singh's two earlier books have triggered much debate, the third is about to hit book stores

back.

1984 changed all this.

1984 arrested the progress of assimilation, forced the Sikhs to unlearn their old methods and perspectives of thinking and rekindled the spirit of distinctiveness. Sikhs revived the Sikh vision of God and the Sikh understanding of human existential situation, social justice with full focus on social transformation.

The framework of society as per Hindu norms and as seen over the centuries has been unequal, unjust and socially degrading. Bhai Sahib Sirdar Kapur Singh sums it succinctly, "For a Hindu, his religious faith does not touch the core of his being, the emotive structure of his personality." On the contrary, for the Sikh, respect for Sikhism is a life and death issue, there cannot be any compromise. Once again, this is not in the narrow sense of being orthodox and fundamentalist but as a matter of con-

viction and motivation towards social justice and equality.

To understand the historical perspective of this attitude, it may serve well to note that the hostility of the Hindu mind to the Sikhs started when the first Master, Guru Nanak at the age of nine, avowed not to toe the Hindu ritual line and then subsequently, unequivocally declared, "There is no Hindu, and there is no Musalman."

Throughout the next two centuries, this opposition continued in explicit and implicit form. In the early stages, political power was not in Hindu hands, though they had ample social influence. When power fell into their hands, the true character of the Hindu mind showed up and 1984 was the culmination of the notoriety of it, and as subsequent events have shown, it was not the termination of it.

We have seen that Hindu hostility towards Sikhism was not ephemeral, but as Sirdar Kapur Singh puts it, "it has become a permanent strain in the sub-conscious psyche of the upper caste citified crust of Hindu society." Events leading to 1984 have shown that the Hindu leadership in keeping with its conscience, aptitude and attitude, seizes every opportunity to degrade and destroy the Sikh religious ethos, as amply evidenced by recent events from Vienna to Punjab. All state and social activities are directed to undermine, dilute and destruct the potential of Sikhs as a political people and to digress them away from their traditional independent focus.



1984 changed this paradigm and established the distinctive nature of Sikhs and Sikhism. 1984 brought in its wake a plethora of newspapers, magazines and publications across the world upholding the Sikh point of view, the use of the internet in mother tongue Punjabi was advanced with new fonts, with the availability of Guru Granth Sahib in easily usable and understandable formats, the massive increase in numbers of legislators and parliamentarians in Canada and other parts of the globe are remarkable achievements brought about by identity consciousness.

While analysing the Sikh response, it may be said that in the immediate aftermath of 1984, our political response was not considered and strategic, as expected though not fully justifiable. However, to continue with the same kind of nomenclature, vocabulary, thought processes and street-campaign approach renders our debate incomplete, wayward and non-credible. In the coming years and decades, I emphasize that this is the area that needs massive overhauling and change. After 25 years, unless we are self-reflective in our approach, to expect achievements may not be possible and we will continue to be caught in a vicious circle. All our grand emotions need to be channelized to a clear-cut well-thought of and focussed direction.

Let me go beyond 1984. The mayhem, death and destruction of Sikhs and everything dear to the Sikhs for nearly a decade and a half after that, brought out the more vicious nature and face of Hindu nationalism. Across the entire spectrum, without distinction or reservation from any main quarter, the vindictive nature of Hinduism was to the fore. The Hindu mind which at some time in the past was willing to tolerate the Sikh external appearance hounded the Sikhs and made them the butt of ridicule in a typical state-sponsored and carefully orchestrated political battle across India.

The expression of Sikh nationalistic fervour, thought, idiom or ideology, in whatever form and method was perceived and it continues that way, as treason and sedition. Significantly, it was not just the state, but every section of Hindu social and political power which supported the onslaught on the Sikhs, giving birth to the neo-modern monolithic idea of India as one nation in which differences are not tolerated but systematically obliterated.

Thus we see that in pursuance of the pre-meditated goal of Indian nationalism, the Hindu follows the policy of extermination, only to pursue his goal of assimilation and this is what he did unto the Sikhs and continues to do so. This is the peculiar nature of the Sikh problem and this understanding will enable us to have a peep into the Hindu mind which very cleverly includes and excludes us at the same time.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have outlined the nature of the existential situation of the Sikhs and I hope that armed with this knowledge, it will be easier to work towards a more respectable future of the Sikh nation.

Noted psychologist Sudhir Kakar while discussing the invasion of Darbar Sahib in June 1984, characterized it as the Chosen Trauma for the Sikh people. Let me quote him for a clear exposition, "The term Chosen Trauma, refers to an event, which causes a community to feel helpless and victimized by another and whose mental representations become embedded in the group's collective identity....a chosen trauma is reactivated again and again to strengthen a group's cohesiveness through 'memories' of its persecution, victimization, and yet its eventual survival."

We as a people have to ensure that these memories do not fade away. I thank the World Sikh Organisation for this opportunity and I also thank you all.

Thank you very much.  
Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa  
Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh!

