

Jagmohan Singh

Why did 1984 happen? What is the genesis of the Indo-Sikh conflict? How is the Indian state a protector and promoter of Hindu nationalism? What is the ethnic character of the Indian state? Is the Indian establishment neutral? What is the status of Darbar Sahib, also known as Golden Temple in the minds of the average Sikh? What is the theo-political status of Darbar Sahib? Why Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale chose Darbar Sahib Complex as the fighting ground? Or did he chose? Why are Sikhs today unwilling to accept the martyrdom of martyrs of 1984 with the same spirit as they accept the martyrdom of Baba Deep Singh and his compatriots?

In his new book, *1984-Unchitvaya Kehar*, the political theorist and activist in the persona of Ajmer Singh analyses the entire gamut of Sikh-Hindu relations, pre and post 1984 and offers an insight into the labyrinthine lanes of contemporary political history of Punjab.

Ajmer Singh has recently donned the mantle of an author, though he did contribute extensively through monographs and newspaper articles in the domain of social equality and human rights. Without mincing words, without being apologetic and without letting the argument go off-tangent, Ajmer Singh offers in this 12 chapter book, in-depth analysis, evidence and exposition of the eternal conflict that confronts the Sikh nation, which despite losing thousands of its children to the pyre of revolution is still struggling to come to terms with the nuances of the struggle and seems undecided about the resolution of the political conflict and the destiny of its peoples.

The 432 page book, well-produced by the Amritsar-based publishers Singh Brothers, with an attractive and relevant title is essentially 1984 –past, present and future. Likely to upset many and enrage others, the book does plain speaking about the role of the government of India, the Akali leaders and those Sikhs who were entrenched in high positions in the government, but who not only failed to understand the pain of the Sikh people, but in fact colluded and conspired with the perpetrators who were fully prepared, armed and clear about “teaching Sikhs a lesson” –not in the commonly perceived sense of temporary political retribution for an adverse political act or set of acts, but to browbeat and subjugate them so that they do not raise the “ugly head” of “unique identity”, opposition, revolt and rebellion.

According to the author the rationale for the book lies in the words of scholar Howard Zinn, who says that, “When you take interest in the past, it ceases to remain the past and becomes the present, therefore to understand the present, go centuries behind or in the future, do not bother as it is required to uncover the dimensions of the whole problem in question....” This is precisely what Ajmer Singh has done. He has traveled deep into history, tracing the unique status of Darbar Sahib and the tradition of martyrdom amongst the Sikhs.

In the early chapters, Ajmer Singh comprehensively dwells on why Darbar Sahib fascinates every Sikh –believer, agnostic and the undecided. He uncovers layer after layer of Sikh history of the medieval times which though was a period of repression for the Sikhs, but is fondly recalled as the Golden period of Sikh history. He offers example after example as to how Sikhs at the time of Diwali and Baisakhi, unmindful of death that stalked them at every step, reached the sacred holy tank surrounding the sanctum sanctorum of Darbar Sahib, rejuvenating their commitment to Sikhism and if need be, to attain martyrdom to defend their faith.

In his characteristic pithy, visionary, logical and direct approach, Ajmer Singh has raised the bar of political debate on what is commonly construed as the Punjab problem, enabling the readers and activists to be critically aware than to take things for granted. Whether it is dealing with the role of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale or that of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the author does not resort to compartmentalising his thoughts in a particular mould and idiom. His stance throughout the book is uncompromising.

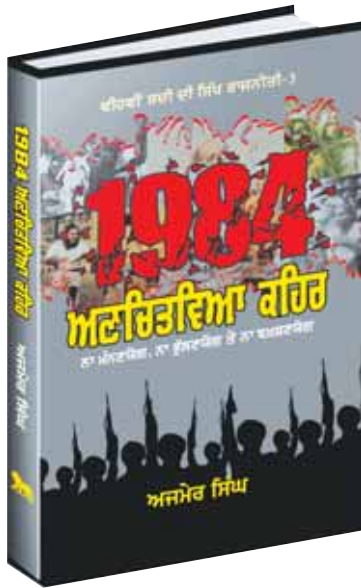
Apart from a few English historians, not many have had the courage to mention that it was only the Sikhs who did not relent anytime in history when their holiest of holies –Darbar Sahib was attacked. Ajmer Singh categorically mentions in the book that it is the unique theo-political status of Darbar Sahib, which the Hindu mind has failed to comprehensively comprehend which lies at the root of the problem. He further goes on to say that perhaps the Hindu cannot decipher the problem, and that “you have to be born Sikh to understand the Sikh psyche in so far as it relates to Darbar Sahib” It is failure to understand this and its entire ramifications which led Mrs. Indira Gandhi to storm the Golden Temple with the might of the Indian army, navy and air force says the author.

Another question which has baffled

Activist-writer Ajmer Singh answers many questions agitating the Sikhs and raises several more for Sikhs and others to answer in his third book of what is transforming into an anthology of contemporary history of Punjab. The latest book, *1984-Unimagined*

Catastrophe, in Punjabi and soon to be translated into English, explores the genesis of the Indo-Sikh conflict and offers a deep insight into the Hindu mind and the Sikh during the turbulent times of the eighties and nineties of the last century.

1984 –Who, What, How and Why



that “the Hindu has not been able to understand what the genesis of the conflict is.”

Was the code-named Operation Bluestar a war of revenge by Indira Gandhi on the basis of anger against Sikhs for their role in the emergency? In a micro sense it was personal but in the perspective of the situation, it was a sum-total of systemic crisis of the Indian state, the crisis of the Indian state and the crises of Indira’s legitimacy and political leadership.....it was the perception of the rulers of the time that the attack on Darbar Sahib is part of the mission to create a monolithic Indian state.

After 1947, the target was the building of a single Indian nation, where on the face of it, there is diversity but in actuality it was a continuing trend of assimilation. The activities of the political party Shiromani Akali Dal and the religious propagation of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale resulting in the revivalism of the Khalsa spirit was construed as a threat to the above stated mission and the events of 1984 were launched only and precisely to rebut this challenge.

Enumerating event after event of the period which has been described as “loaded with history”, Ajmer Singh says that all spheres of Indian society –the media, all political parties without exception, the man on the streets of cities, the people in the hinterlands of India and all components of the state...judiciary, armed forces, bureaucracy rallied behind the Indian state with full force and in unison. To continue to get support of all sections, the bogey of “a foreign hand” was extensively used. This aspect has been extensively dealt in the book with examples, facts and citations.

How did the judiciary collude? There are many examples, but let us take just one of them. Salwa Judum, the vigilante of the Chattisgarh government has been declared illegal by the respective High Court but in the case of Punjab, even though

then police chief KPS Gill had openly declared that they had vigilante groups to act extrajudicially, the judiciary was a mute spectator.....silently allowing things to happen and even delivering a suspended sentence to the police chief who was convicted of moral turpitude.

In the middle of the book, the author questions the competency of the Akali leadership and the sincerity of the Sikh intelligentsia to meet the onslaught of the state. While the nincompoop attitude of Akali leadership has been stressed in great detail, the author is particularly disturbed by the silence, lack of interest and abject failure of the so called Sikh intelligentsia and intellectuals to comprehend the dimensions of the problem and offer solace and solutions. He attributes the lack of clarity, confusion and negativity of the Sikh response to this lacuna and rues the fact that the apathy still continues.

Unforgivingly, the author, who throughout his years of political activism was able to understand the nature of this section of Punjab society from close quarters, provides a thorough analysis of why the Sikh intelligentsia failed, what were their priorities and how they continued to be swayed with the wind of Indian nationalism overriding peoples’ basic and fundamental rights and distinct religious identity. So, according to the author, it was understandable that under such circumstances, the Sikh response was spontaneous, emotional, purely confrontationalist and at times, directionless.

The catastrophic times continued for the Sikhs till November 1984 and beyond. Ajmer Singh says that November 1984 was not the culmination of events started in June 1984; it was part of a continuum. He says in the book, “This has been studied in relationship to the holocaust of the Jews ...this incident was not an aberration....it is the tendency of the Hindu to dwarf, undermine and dilute the distinct identity of the Sikhs, so when you assert that, he

reacts.” Vis-à-vis the Sikhs, his goal is assimilation and he reacts violently....it started from the rejection of *Janeu* by Guru Nanak at the age of 9....the Hindu’s objective is assimilation, so we need to understand the Hindu mind....his strategies....we have to neutralise his methods of persuasion, pressure and persecution.

November 1984 should be viewed in this perspective...it was not an aberration, but a premeditated plan, executed with finesse, with full support and coordination of all sections of Hindu society.

The book also deals with how the December 1984 elections were unprecedentedhow the entire electoral campaign was focused on the Sikhs, even in areas where Sikhs were in insignificant numbers and how the verdict was an endorsement of the pogrom against the Sikhs in Delhi and eighty other places which had happened barely four weeks ago.

The volume concludes with the *Hola Mohalla* in March 1985 at Anandpur Sahib where a sea of humanity from all parts of Punjab descended in an unprecedented manner to raise the banner of defiance against the Indian state. Kesri turbans and dupattas dotted every inch of the White city of Anandpur Sahib upholding the true spirit of the Khalsa to fight back in the event of an onslaught.

The author has acclaimed the role played by Ragis and Dhadis of the Sikhs, who in this period of acute and extreme crisis and fear, virtually took to the streets and bolstered the morale of the community through references to Gurbani and Sikh history. Their contribution, according to the author has not been adequately acknowledged.

Summing up all aspects of the catastrophe that struck the Sikhs, Ajmer Singh says that “whatever happened was unbelievable, unimaginable, unforgettable and unforgivable.”

The author is editor of *World Sikh News*. He may be contacted at jsbigideas@gmail.com