

This year will, hopefully mark the publication of many a book and film to commemorate the 25 years of the attack on Darbar Sahib in June 1984 and the mass killings of Sikhs on the streets of Delhi in November 1984. World Sikh News presents Bhupinder Singh Mahal's new book on the universally misunderstood Punjab tragedy, which is perhaps the first to come out this year and should regenerate interest amongst Sikhs, non-Sikhs, academics and the lay Sikh alike.

The book is dedicated to the victims and saviours of November 1984 and the author avows that the proceeds of the book will be used for the welfare of the victims of the ghastly tragedy of that time.

Bhupinder Singh Mahal surveys the coalescing of the Sikhs into a *Quam*, albeit for a brief period, post-1984 and "how that shining instant wasted away with the changing contours of political landscape, Sikh identity, didactic approach and doctrinal ambiguities."

Widely traveled Bhupinder Singh Mahal's work as member of the Canadian Multiculturalism Advisory Committee brought out his best talent in the spirit of *Sarbat da Bhala* –welfare of all transcending social, religious and cultural barriers for all Canadians. His work in the arena of health earned him the Queen's Gold Medal in 2003. Known to call a spade a spade, Bhupinder Singh has made a clear analysis of the misuse of Internet by pseudo-scholars and super-enthusiastic young activists.

Shinder S. Thandi

The last quarter of a century has been a pretty tumultuous period for the Sikhs in India and in the Diaspora. A series of events—growth in militancy in the late 1970s which culminated in Operation Bluestar in June 1984, assassination of Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi by Sikh bodyguards and the frenzied anti-Sikh violence which followed, Air India tragedy, rise and crushing of the Khalistan movement, murder of editors of the two leading Punjabi vernacular newspapers in the Diaspora and finally acquittal of all alleged Sikh "terrorists" responsible for the Air India bombing after one of the most longest and costliest trials in Canadian history—revived fundamental questions about the changing nature of Sikh identity both in India and in Diaspora, the changing nature of Sikh and non-Sikh relations, place of Sikhs in the new post-independent Indian state and the latter's project of nation building.

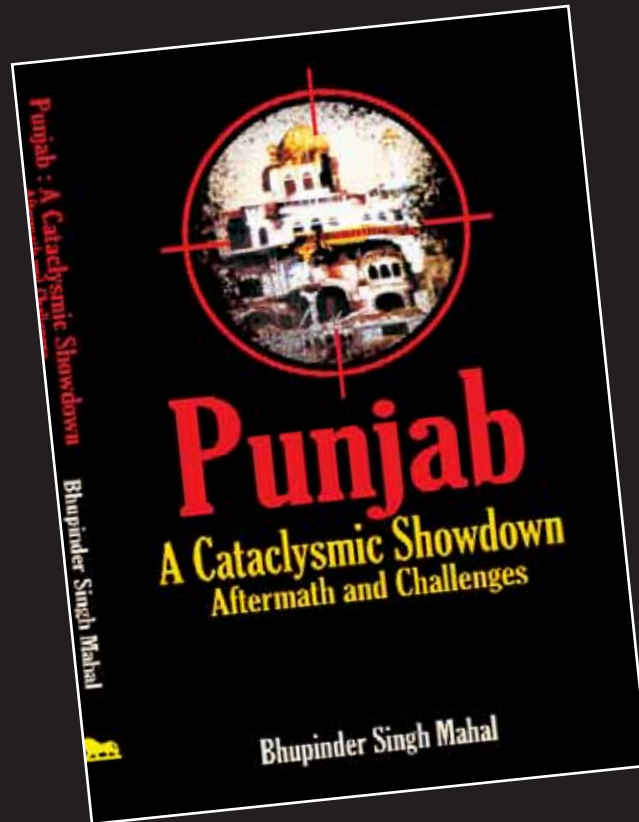
One would have thought that many of the preceding issues had been well and truly settled with publication of Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha's *Hum Hindu Nahin* during the Sikh Sabha movement, the success of Gurdwara Reform Movement and due to assurances given to Sikhs at the time of partition. But this perception could not be further from the truth in the mind of many Sikhs. As a minority community in a Hindu-dominated country, Sikhs continue to be ever fearful of being absorbed by the boa-constrictor of Hinduism.

They also feel betrayed as a result of broken promises made by Congress leaders at the time of independence and due to non-addressal of long-standing grievances relating of language, water-sharing, territory, non-industrialisation and absence of a separate capital city for the state. The fearful events of 1984—first, the unwarranted attack on Darbar Sahib, the very core of Sikh faith and then state connivance in the 'genocidal' slaughter of innocent Sikhs in the Delhi—were critical factors that unsettled many of the earlier assumptions.

Bhupinder Singh Mahal, a keen observer of the period and a community insider, has reflected on some of these issues in this collection of essays. Although the chapters in this book may seem an eclectic collection, there is a strong under current: Mahal's highly insightful engagement with the changing contours, representations and misrepresentations of Sikh identity by both Sikhs and non Sikhs alike binds them together. Collectively they are useful in demonstrating Mahal's astute observations on major dilemmas and issues confronting the Sikh transnational community—whether in India, Canada, Britain or elsewhere in the Diaspora. Mahal has also rightly identified new powerful forums for discussing Sikh identity in a de-territorialised space—the internet and how these supposedly liberating cyber forums allow individuals, often speaking as representatives of the community in their locality, to mould, reconstruct or misrepresent Sikh history and tradition. Interestingly, as Mahal observes,



Cataclysmic Showdown



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the cushion of anonymity also allows mischievous masqueraders and outside infiltrators to dictate the terms and content of debate.

Chapter I of the book examines the deeply entrenched Sikh and Punjabi-Hindu divide of the past hundred years or so largely sparked by the twin religious revivalist movements of the late 19th century – Sikh Sabha movement and its drive to rid Sikh religion of creeping Brahminical practice and its promotion of Punjabi language and Swami Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Smaj movement championing the return to Vedic way of life. The legacies of these movements still continue to define, albeit in a largely urban setting, Sikh-Hindu relationships making Punjabi-Hindus suspicious about any political concessions made to Sikhs in their governance of Punjab.

Mahal absolves no one from blame in his explanation of events leading up to Operation Bluestar and the political and military management of the militancy movement that followed. If the attack on the Darbar Sahib was not enough, the state indif-

ference to the suffering of victims and survivors of the anti-Sikh violence made many Sikhs even more alienated and untrusting of state intentions towards the Sikhs. The rather belated apology to the Sikhs by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Parliament and the recent but long-awaited payment of compensation to victims and survivors may have been too late, too little to act as a 'healing touch'.

In chapter 2, Mahal provides very informative and telling insights into the inner workings of Yahoo Sikh discussion groups. As a past active participant he explains how he became increasingly frustrated by censoring of debates, re-directing of discussions and moulding them towards a particular conclusion. In such discourses, he argues, difficult and sensitive issues relating to Sikh identity are glossed over or compromised for fear of loss of support amongst certain individual and interests.

Chapter 3 takes issue with the Nobel laureate VS Naipaul's biased representation of Sikh religion and Sikh identity. Naipaul unfortunately is not alone in denying the originality

of the Sikh faith and in portraying the community as largely the 'sword-arm of Hinduism'. Mahal is astute in exposing his perspective as those of an outsider, both to India and Sikhism but more importantly as someone who demonstrated his own political and cultural biases by warmly embracing the rise of the Hindutva movement.

Chapter 4 offers critical reflections on Hindu-Sikh relations and especially on the vexed question of whether Sikhs, wittingly or unwittingly, are adopting Hindu rituals and practices and their long-term implication for Sikh society. Mahal provides some forceful and convincing arguments against those Sikhs who perceive sharing of cultural and religious practice—Karva Chauth, Diwali, Havan, Raksha Bandhan and reciting of Mantra—as dissolution of their unique identity and of their growing re-absorption into Brahminical culture.

In chapter 6, Mahal provides us with his own take on the Behzti affair, an episode which in many ways mimics the earlier Salmon Rushdie affair for Muslims after the publication of *Satanic Verses*. For many Sikhs, the rather ambitious play *Behzti* (written by a British-born Sikh Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti) provides yet another example from successive writers and novelists who seek to defame or hurt the sensibilities of faith communities under the veil of freedom of expression enshrined in a secular society but without caring much for the responsibilities expected on their part.

It was as if the inappropriate and colourful language used, the content and especially the setting were chosen deliberately – under the garb of black comedy designed to expose human failing, institutionalized hypocrisy and injustice to cause maximum harm. No wonder then that it provoked a violent reaction from some British Sikhs. Bhatti, sadly, is not alone amongst second and third generation Diaspora-born Sikhs who have become increasingly estranged and disconnected from their cultural roots.

In chapter 7, Mahal uses the July 7, 2005 London bombings as the setting to examine the power of prayer when a multicultural society embracing different faiths come face to face with a common tragedy. He goes on to explore the complex and knotty question of a universally held notion of God. He delves deeply into the differently held image of God and the uniquely disparate narratives on creation, revelation and evil as professed by most of the major religions of the world. He delineates philosophical differences among the leading religions that he believes are an impediment to the acceptance of a notion of God that is one and the same for all the peoples. Sadly, these philosophical differences allow them to condone or condemn acts of human behaviour invoking the name of their God.

This collection of essays represents the views, perspectives and prejudices of Mahal but the themes and issues chosen have a wider relevance and they are of immense importance in understanding societal behaviour as a whole. Some readers may feel uncomfortable with them or only partially agree. All said, it is an interesting and compelling read.

The author, who is founder-editor of *Journal of Punjab Studies*, delineates the new book, *Punjab –Cataclysmic Showdown –Aftermath and Challenges* by Bhupinder Singh Mahal.