

India's Brutal 'Operation Blue Star' Revisited

By [Sajjad Shaukat](#)

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India's brutal 'Operation Blue Star' was the military operation which occurred between 3-8 June 1984, ordered by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to get control over the Golden Temple complex (Harmandir Sahib), the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, Punjab, and to arrest Sikhs' spiritual leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, including his followers from the complex buildings. Bhindranwale had earlier taken residence in the Harmandir Sahib and made it his headquarters in April 1980. Bhindranwale was the only leader who had boldly been fighting for the genuine rights of the Sikhs.

The Indian Army led by General Kuldeep Singh Brar, supported by troops and armoured vehicles, broke all records of state terrorism and extra-judicial killings through that barbaric operation.

However, at that time, there were only 251 Sikhs inside the complex to protect the Harmandir Sahib, and to resist the well-trained Indian army, equipped with sophisticated weaponry. In those days, the majority of the Sikhs were coming to the temple complex to celebrate the Martyr Day of Guru Arjun Dev.

The Indian regime used tanks and destroyed the Akaal Takht Sahib which is right in front of the Harmandir Sahib. On June 6, when all Sikh fighters were martyred along with Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Indian troops entered the temple complex with their shoes, deliberately ignoring the holiness of the place, showing utter indecency. When the Indian Army felt that only 251 men had prevented them from entering the Golden Temple for so many days, they started killing innocent Sikhs who had come there to visit the temple. The only purpose was to hide their humiliation.

In this regard, in their book, *The Sikh Struggle*, Ramnarain Kumar and George Sieberer write:

"The army killed every Sikh who could be found inside the temple-complex. They were hauled out of rooms, brought to corridors on the circumference of the temple and with their hands tied behind their back, were shot in cold blood. Among the victims were

many old men, women and children....However, all visitors were locked up in rooms for two days without any food, water, or electricity and were starved to death. Besides, the Harmandir Sahib remained under the army control for many months.”

The brutality of the ‘Operation Blue Star’ was not confined to the Harmandir Sahib. Indian armed forces simultaneously attacked 40 other historic gurdwaras all over East Punjab.

When Sikhs in other states came to know about the desecration of the Golden Temple and the massacre of their brethren, they quickly left for Punjab. New Delhi tried to stop them before they could reach Punjab. Many Sikhs were murdered on the way and many others were arrested.

According to an estimate, about 50,000 Sikhs were killed within a few days. The whole of Amritsar city was sealed and was burnt. A number of tourists either were murdered or arrested. Shops belonging to Sikhs were looted and their houses were set ablaze by Hindu mobs. In most of the cases, Sikh women were molested and some persons of their community were also burnt.

Another tragic dimension of the operation is that historical Sikh artifacts as well as all the literature written by the gurus were also set ablaze by the Indian army. But New Delhi fabricated a false story by claiming that these were burnt, while bombing the Harmandir Sahib.

In the same year of November, two dedicated Sikhs named Beant Singh and Satwant Singh, policemen who were posted at Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s residence in New Delhi, assassinated her. Then Hindu riots erupted in the capital and other cities in which more than 15,000 Sikhs were murdered in broad daylight by the supporters of Indira Gandhi, while police watched silently so as to provide the Hindus with a free hand to massacre Sikhs.

Meanwhile, after the ‘Operation Blue Star’ and the Sikh genocide, the Sikhs’ struggle for independence continued, but the Indian government made every effort to crush it with the state machinery. To maintain its control over the Harmandir Sahib, another attack was launched on the Temple in 1987, called ‘Operation Black Thunder’.

This time only Sikh resistance, which was the natural outcome of the tragedy, was the main target. In that respect, quite a number of people of the community were killed and dead bodies lay inside the sacred place for many days.

A report disclosed, many trucks were loaded with dead bodies and all were burned with kerosene oil. Afterwards, ‘Operation Woodrose’ and ‘Operation Black Thunder-II’ were conducted against the Sikh community, which also assassinated them extra-judicially.

Nevertheless, the attack on the Harmandir Sahib and genocide of Sikhs accelerated the liberation movement for Khalistan as Bhindranwale became a folk hero.

After these barbaric operations, Sikhs organised themselves into an armed power in order to fight the Indian state terrorism. Many Sikhs left India to escape further genocide. Sikhs have spread out all over the world to keep the movement of Khalistan alive. In this connection, their struggle is still going on.

In this connection, participation of almost 208,000 Sikhs in the Khalistan referendums held

in the recent years in four western countries—the huge number of Sikhs who voted in favour of an independent Khalistan reflected that their demand for an independent homeland is gradually being accepted globally.

In the meantime, India launched a strict crackdown against the Sikh community. On March 18, prior to launching crackdown by the Indian police and paramilitary forces, section-144 was imposed, and mobile phone service was suspended in Sri Muktsar Sahib and Fazilka districts of the Indian Punjab. Ever since Amritpal Singh Sandhu took over as the head of 'Waris Punjab De', Indian Police arrested a large number of Sikhs as well as members of 'Waris Punjab De' and Amritpal Singh.

The Sikh diaspora has expressed serious concerns over this crackdown harassing Sikh population in the Indian Punjab, elsewhere in India, including those living abroad. Various Sikh entities living in India and abroad have strongly condemned Indian crackdown and emphasised to stop persecution of the Sikh community.

Particularly, the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) condemned the security operations in Punjab, stating:

“Indian authorities have announced the mass suspension of internet services across Punjab citing a threat to “public order by incitement to violence. State-wide cordon and search operations are currently underway across Punjab”.

In a press release, WSO also said:

“We are also deeply concerned that the Bhai Amritpal Singh’s arrest...may be used to orchestrate a false encounter and facilitate his extrajudicial murder...This tactic was commonly used by the Punjab police through the 80’s and 90’s to eliminate Sikh activists. We call on the Canadian Government to demand accountability from India and call for the immediate restoration of civil rights and internet services in Punjab.”

Tim S. Uppal Canadian Conservative Party deputy leader, Gurratan Singh, former Member of the Provincial Parliament, Author and poet Rupi Kaur as well as renowned Sikh persons living in Canada expressed serious concern over crackdown against Sikhs in India-gross human rights violations, remarking:

“Very concerned about reports coming out of Punjab, India...We are closely following the situation...mass arrests of Sikh activists...shut down of internet and text... crackdown on public gatherings...mass censorship of media. Let the Indian Government know that we condemn this repression. The whole world is watching”.

It is mentionable that EU Sikhs held an anti-India protest demonstration in front of the Brussels Parliament in Brussels on March 27, 2023, calling on European Commission to challenge India’s massive security crackdown. The speakers on the occasion strongly denounced the Narendra Modi’s government for harassing the Sikh community in India.

Similarly, the California state assembly passed a resolution on April 10, this year, which said that the Sikh community in the US had not yet recovered from the physical and psychological trauma of the riots, urging the US Congress to formally recognise the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in India as ‘genocide’, and to condemn the violence.

Notably, participation of almost 208,000 Sikhs in the Khalistan referendums held in the

recent years in four western countries—the huge number of Sikhs who voted in favour of an independent Khalistan, have shown that Sikhs have intensified their struggle in this regard.

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Sajjad Shaukat writes on international affairs and is author of the book: US vs Islamic Militants, Invisible Balance of Power: Dangerous Shift in International Relations. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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