

SIFTING THE DUST OF 84 POGROM FOR SOME POSITIVES

Introducing research paper by Prof. Nirmal Singh USA

This paper (about 20,000 words) by Prof. Nirmal Singh, does not invite us to forget the 1984 Delhi pogrom in which at least 3,000 Sikhs lost their lives; nor does it invite us to forgive the perpetrators; but to unite all fair minded people across communal divides by memorializing the tragedy.

Pogroms, genocides and human tragedies, should unite all right thinking, fair-minded people above communal and religio-ethnic divides so that lessons are learnt, and history does not repeat itself. In an ever shrinking world, no one can remain immune from large scale selective massacre of one community and prolonged delay in the delivery of justice.

The author believes that while we should continue to pursue for justice for the victims, we should also look at some positive pointers that give us hope for the future and reason to memorialize these. The thrust of the paper is towards a fitting memorial, outside religious or political divides, for those who lost their lives in Delhi in 1984, and, especially, for the widows, the living "satees" and their children, who, in addition to their loss in 1984, continue to suffer injustice.

Any memorial should bring out the scale of the human slaughter, and the contrived completeness of the systems failure, while remembering acts of human kindness above religio-social divides. The victims were Sikhs but the tragedy was human. Those killed, the widows, and their children who grew up without much support or succor, are the direct victims of the pogrom. The Sikh community as a whole is the second victim. It may be argued that the Indian democracy is the third "victim" of this tragedy.

This holocaust, the ruthless and organized execution of 3,000 Sikhs (some put the figure at well over 5,000), in a matter of hours, in one city in November 1984, was a blood chilling event which continues to cause deep psychological hurt to the victims and the community, due to neglect for three decades. Yet, events of the first week of November, 1984, also remind us of acts of bravery by some to protect and to shelter those fleeing from the orchestrated slaughter of one community.

In terms of human tragedy, the loss for the widows, was total. Instead of applying some healing balm, salt continues to be rubbed into the wounds of the 1984 victims by the Indian establishment, and, to some extent, by our own lax institutions.

All communities find comfort and strength by remembering their own, who made sacrifices or lost their lives because of their identity. A memorial which invites all communities to join together and remember the victims of November 1984, will be most re-assuring for the survivors and give them and the whole Sikh community, hope for the future.

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Celebrating the Resolve Of Survivors & Humanity Of Those Who Helped (Nirmal Singh USA)

Nanak, they are the true satis who die from the pangs of separation [from their departed husbands] – (Sikh Holy Scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib p. 787)

INTRODUCTORY

Next year, 2013, will usher in the 30th anniversary year of the November 1984 killings of thousands of Sikhs, mostly in the Capital city of Delhi right under the nose of the Central Government and the Delhi Administration. The orgy of violence and the manner of its execution will likely remain unparalleled as perhaps one of the most ruthless and deliberate selective killing of a minority group instigated by the ruling political elite of a country in the recent human history.

A summary review of the event and its aftermath point to some developments in the recent years that go part of the way to assuage the Sikh hurt but the expectations about delivery of justice have mostly been belied. This has brought the situation to an almost static position that is not quite easy to read or predict the future. The purpose of this Article is to explore if while the judicial and other processes wind their way through the various systems, there is any other option that may help alleviate some of the continuing hurt and improve the lay sentiment. The option considered is memorializing as a way to honor those who might have contributed to helping the distressed, blunting the momentum of violence, struggling to seek justice, helping transcend the urges for revenge and save the next generation from bitterness and apathy, and thus, through their acts promoted some level of societal peace and harmony.

THE EVENT

The event was a politically inspired pogrom let loose on Sikh men, women and children in Delhi after the killing in 1984, of Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh security guards piqued by the Indian army's assault to clear militants holed up in the Golden Temple complex. Three days of organized mayhem followed in the Indian Capital in which over 3000 Sikhs were killed mercilessly, many with their families helplessly looking on, while Police idly stood by.

Sikhs recall 1984 as the most traumatic year in their recent history. In June, on the day their fifth Guru was martyred, the Indian Army attacked the Golden Temple complex at Amritsar, using helicopters and tanks, to flush out militants holed up in the Temple complex. This was preceded by a sustained media blitz to paint the entire Sikh community as secessionists and unpatriotic militants.

Gurdwaras in various colonies were vandalized or torched.¹ All Sikhs felt insecure – none was safe. In most localities Sikh houses and businesses were marked so that these could be

¹ The orgy was not confined to Delhi. Sikhs and their Gurdwaras were targeted in several places in the country. One of the Gurdwaras demolished was 450-year-old gurdwara Gyan Godhri set up at Har-ki-Pauri in memory of Guru Nanak who visited the place in 1504-05. The Sikh community of Uttarakhand has been demanding that the

easily identified and selectively attacked by the hoodlums. Mostly the attackers were from outside the localities though in some cases some local elements joined in. Victims identified some of them and a list of individuals is included in the report entitled 'Who are the Guilty'. It names around 200 persons including a number of politicians, police personnel and Muslims – all of them known persons. The manner of killing of Sikhs seemed to have been fairly consistent in that the victims were burnt alive by putting a tire around their necks, sprinkling kerosene mixed with a white powder, believed to be phosphorous, and lighting it with a match stick. In all this mayhem the killing was mostly carried out in some localities – it was avoided where the local people of good will came together or by timely intervention by volunteer groups and in a couple of cases where the Sikhs under attack were armed and able to offer resistance.

Sikhs in India and particularly in Delhi felt insecure for a long while following this pogrom. Delhi Sikhs recall that they did not use loud speakers in Gurdwaras or took out early morning *prabhat pheris* at festival times for several years.² Many families migrated to the safety of Punjab or to foreign lands, if they could find a way to do it. A number of families that had left the more affected localities in Delhi did not return to their houses in those areas. Sikhs mostly avoided market areas, railway stations, airports, cinemas and other public places, during evening hours. Many parents decided to get the hair of their sons cut in order to avoid bullying and risk to their lives. Sikhs were targeted for special checks by security personnel, often in rough and intrusive manners.

THE MISLEADING SEMANTIC TWIST

The political establishment and the state controlled media labeled the event as an anti Sikh **riot** implying it to be a spontaneous violent outburst against Sikhs arising out of mass anger at their co-religionists killing Indira Gandhi. It was also openly talked that Sikhs deserved 'to be taught a lesson' because of the violence Sikh militants had committed against Hindus in Punjab. Rajiv Gandhi seemed to be echoing the same line of reasoning when he matter-of-factly said that 'Some riots took place in the country following the murder of Indiraji. We know the people were very angry and for a few days it seemed that India had been shaken. But, when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little.' The media were very pliant and did their bit to play up the disturbed conditions in Punjab and widely used the press releases by the Government controlled sources regarding the Delhi happenings. Misra Commission almost took the cake in underplaying the event as a law and order problem with lower castes looting the wealthy with the complicity of police-criminals-politicians nexus.

Human rights organizations People's Union for Civil Liberties [PUCL] and the People's Union for Democratic Rights [PUDR] however opined that 'far from being spontaneous expressions of madness and grief and anger at Mrs. Gandhi's assassination as made out by authorities, [it] was rather the outcome of a well organized action marked by acts of both commissions and omissions on the part of important politicians of the Congress (I) at the top and by authorities in the administration.'³ Citizens for Democracy stated that the purpose was

shrine, which was demolished during 1984 anti-Sikh riots, should be restored at its original place. SGPC is now pursuing the matter with the state Government [16/9/12].

² Verbal testimony by some of the speakers and participating Sikhs at a memorial meeting organized by the Sikh Forum on 2 June, 2012 at IIC Annexe New Delhi.

³ Who Are Guilty? Report of a Joint Enquiry into the Causes & Impact of the Riots in Delhi from 31 October to 10 November, PUDR-PUCL, 1984

‘to arouse – Hindu chauvinism – to consolidate Hindu votes in the election held on December 27, 1984, which was indeed massively won by the Congress (I).’

Report of the Citizen’s Commission observed ‘The disturbances in Delhi did not involve clashes between any two warring factions, each inflicting whatever damage it could on the other. They were entirely one sided attacks on members of the Sikh community and their property, often accompanied by arson and murder, rapine and loot. In some localities the outrages amounted to a massacre of innocent persons.⁴’ Commenting on the role of political parties the Citizen’s Commission said ‘eye witness accounts to the Commission have specifically and repeatedly named certain political leaders belonging to the ruling party --- accused of having instigated the violence, making arrangements for the supply of kerosene and other inflammable material and of identifying houses of Sikhs ---- We have been equally disturbed by the apathy and ambivalence of other political parties --- It is a sad commentary on the political life of the Capital that at the moment of its direst need, political activists should be accused of either active instigation or inexcusable apathy.’⁵

It therefore would seem only reasonable that the notion of the event being a communal riot or an expression of mass societal anger against the Sikhs must be rejected. The evidence leaves no doubt that the violence was meticulously planned, well coordinated, directed specifically at Sikh males and executed in almost identical manner in all localities. Given this, the most lenient term that may be used to label it would be a ‘pogrom’ - an organized and officially encouraged massacre of a minority group - of Sikhs in locations where they were vulnerable.

A PEEP AT THE BACKGROUND

Sikhs as a community and the Indian Central Government, led mostly by the Congress Party since the Country’s independence on 15 August 1947, had a certain sub-text of tension in their relations. Sikhs nursed a sense of being victims of and the biggest losers due to partition of the Country. They not only had suffered the highest loss of life and property but they were also separated from some of the most sacred of their holy sites left in Pakistan due to the endemically adverse relations between the two Governments. Another source of Sikh anguish was their failure, during the protracted negotiations preceding the Partition, to secure any tangible gain or assurance about their future in the divided Dominions.

Having cast their lot with India and the Hindus, Sikhs soon started feeling that policies of the Central Government were not likely to answer their expectations. Article 25 of Constitution adopted in 1950 put Sikhs within the Hindu pantheon. In 1956 when most of the Indian States were reorganized on linguistic basis, Punjab was left as is because of the Punjabi Hindus disowning Punjabi as their tongue. After persistent agitations, a Punjabi state was ceded in 1966 but the division left many unresolved issues including non-inclusion of Chandigarh as its Capital town. In a climate of increasing polarization, Anandpur Sahib Resolution passed by the Shiromani Akali Dal sought a federal structure at the center with more devolution of powers to states, increase in the pace of industrial development, share of river waters and Chandigarh as the exclusive capital of Punjab along with some other minor demands. The Central Government responded by characterizing the Resolution as secessionist and went all out to stigmatize Sikhs as anti national in the state controlled media.

⁴ Report of the Citizen’s Commission, !8 Jan, 1985, p. 38

⁵ Ibid, p. 32

The ensuing tense political climate offered the opportunity for Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the head of powerful Sikh Seminary, Damdami Taksal, to tap into the Sikh discontent. He supported implementation of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution and strongly condemned the Article 25 of Indian constitution. The preacher in him challenged Sikhs to pull back from the path of declining Sikh practices. His fiery speech and rhetoric of defiance marginalized the influence of political leaders as well as the Government that allowed different interest groups to manipulate the climate of unrest into a wave of killings of civilians as well as police. This was attributed by the Indian government to Sikh militants. In a fast deteriorating environment Bhindranwale moved into the Golden Temple Complex in 1982. Allegedly planted at the behest of Giani Zail Singh to weaken the SAD, Bhindranwale now had become a challenge for Indira Gandhi who ordered the Indian Army to attack the Golden Temple Complex to capture or neutralize him.

The assault made on June 6, 1984, the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan when the complex was filled with pilgrims, caused destruction of the Akal Takht, killing of Bhindranwale and his main associates as well as an unspecified number of Sikh worshippers and Gurdwara Clerics.

Sikhs the world over were shocked by the attack on their most sacred Gurdwara and outraged by the concerted media campaign to paint the community in bad light to justify the offensive by the Army. The killing of Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984, ostensibly piqued at her ordering the army attack on the Golden Temple was tragic but not unexpected. It however was used to set off a second sequence of mass violence, this time in Delhi, the capital of India. It lasted for four days and resulted in death of nearly 3,000 Sikhs. That is the event and its aftermath that we are reminiscing about.

WHO WAS THE OFFENDER?

There is broad agreement among analysts that the pogrom was instigated by the Congress [I] politicians helped in its execution by Delhi police and a section of Hindus. Van Dike [1996] is of the view that the passive stance of Central Government indicates that the pogrom was organized for it by forces that government had created. Looking at the scale of violence that was unleashed in such a short time, Kothari [1985] speculates that the attack might have been planned possibly since Operation Blue Star. Brass [2006] suspects that an institutional riot structure had been readied to be available in Delhi.

That spontaneity is ruled out is supported by credible evidence collected by a number of voluntary agencies pointing to the conclusion that it was Congress [I] leaders who gathered the perpetrators, led the mobs, distributed weapons and identified targets. Prominent names mentioned as instigators in the affidavits filed by the witnesses are Dharam Dass Shastri, Jagdish Tytler, H.K.L Bhagat, Sajjan Kumar and Kamal Nath.

Given the sullen mood of Sikhs post Blue Star, the killing of Indira Gandhi could not have been ruled out and when it did happen, the response that was orchestrated bore the stamp of meticulous planning, with the pogrom as its centre piece. The message was clear: Blood shall flow as recompense for blood. Sikhs are separatists and a danger to the unity of India and must be taught a lesson.

The attacks everywhere started simultaneously and Gurdwaras were the first targets. Modus operandi was to grab and pull Sikh men out, tear off their turbans, beat them with iron rods or knives, neck-lace them with a tire and set it on fire [Grewal, 2007]. Women and children

were spared though some women were killed and many gang-raped, often in front of their relatives. The properties were looted and set on fire. The Congress leaders were assisted by gang leaders from the resettlement colonies that had been set up to relocate slum dwellers during the Emergency. Some Jats, Gujjars and Bhangis also participated in looting the well-off Sikhs.

The Delhi police was conspicuous by absence or if there, in encouraging and even indulging in violence. The police disarmed Sikhs who tried to protect themselves by force and did not record FIRs after the pogrom. Nanavati Commission noted that there was ample material to show that no proper investigation was done by the police even in cases which were registered by them. Police vans went around announcing that Sikhs had poisoned the city water supply and that a train had arrived from Punjab full of dead Hindus. Active acts of rumor mongering by Police only aggravated the situation.⁶

The title of the first citizen group enquiry into the pogrom soon after its occurrence by Justice Sikri and his volunteer team was 'who is guilty?' This enquiry clearly holds the Government agencies, the Police and Congress Party political leaders as the guilty.

WHO WAS THE VICTIM?

Let us recall that the pogrom did not target any specific Sikh activists or community leaders who may have had something to do with causing the sense of disaffection to grow among the lay Sikhs and thus could have been the object of ire of the authorities in the same manner as some specific persons have been targeted by the Israelis in Palestine and Americans in Iraq or Af-Pak region in the course of recent and ongoing conflicts there. The target was the Sikh community and the objective was to teach them a lesson – an abridged version of the doctrine of 'Shock and Awe'⁷ that determined the American strategy at the start of their War Against Terror and that draws on experiences of massive, benumbing destruction like at Hiroshima and Nagasaki intended to break the will of those identified as enemy.

A recognition that often eludes even well meaning and thinking Sikhs is their inability to see through the risks that such policy would entail even for Sikhs who may have been opposed to the approach that the militants among them had chosen. The fact is that even if persons like Dr Manmohan Singh who had been staunch Congressites all along had been seen walking the streets by the marauders they would have had no hesitation in hacking him to pieces as they did to other Sikhs. Thus those who actually suffered harm were not specifically picked targets – any other Sikh would have equally merited being the target just for being a Sikh.

In October 1984, 500,000 Sikhs made up 7.5% of Delhi population. The victims were mainly Sikh males in the 20-50 age group. Women were spared though some suffered violence, mainly rape showing the incapacity of Sikh males to protect their women. The official death toll was 2,733, leaving over 1,300 widows and 4,000 orphans [Kaur, 2006]. Besides, more than 50,000 Sikhs left Delhi after the pogrom. The worst affected were the poor Sikhs in the resettlement colonies who had actually been close supporters of Congress - the middle class

⁶ This summary is based on a large number of books, and articles including the books, reports, web resources etc. variously mentioned in the text of this paper.

⁷ Shock and Awe is a military doctrine based on the use of overwhelming power, dominance over awareness and spectacular display of force to paralyze the adversary and destroy its will. Written by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade in 1996, it is a product of the National Defense University of the United States.

neighborhoods saw more looting than killing. The survivors, mainly widows, orphans and old people, went to relief camps, Gurudwaras and relatives' houses.

Interestingly when we talk of victims our thoughts always go to those directly affected by the pogrom and suffered loss of life and property. The face of victims is the group of widows that survived their husbands and were burdened with responsibilities for their families. They form the core of victims but do not constitute the totality of them. This realization is important not because it fits into the shared Sikh hurt but also because the character of the pogrom was more akin to genocide even though the Commissions of Enquiry have been more about seeking simple justice for those killed, compensation issues for their families etc. If the identity of victims is recognized at two levels i.e. at the level of community as Sikhs without reference to their affiliation or location and as those whose near and dear ones came in the way of harm, it would help us in better understanding of the complexities this community wide spread of those who feel aggrieved about the pogrom adds to the resolution of issues.

SOME BITS OF AFTERMATH & MY SEARCH

In the immediate aftermath of the November pogrom while the Government seemed implicit in the killings, media stood silent and the Nation apathetic, it was some groups of concerned citizens across the religious boundaries who took the courage to launch initial relief efforts and independent investigations into what had transpired. The Government appointed a Commission of Enquiry, followed by other commissions and till to-date in spite of several Commissions of Enquiry and investigations by the CBI neither has justice been delivered nor **are** the Sikhs closer to any sense of closure to the traumatic event.

No doubt the long and laborious process of helping the widows and thousands of kids to cope with their loss and get on with life was the most important humanitarian task. After the initial help of interfaith groups, mostly the Sikh communities, Sikh volunteer groups and Gurudwaras undertook this onerous and long term commitment. The stories of those directly affected are a testimony of the resolve of the widows who drew on their inner strength and religious beliefs while trying desperately to raise the kids to be able to cope with a world that could not have been crueler.

They succeeded only partly – many kids could not cope – they became school drop outs, took to drugs, some committed suicide. Some widows also resorted to suicide to end their misery. While still struggling with their grief and grinding poverty, the widows have grown into old and tired women and the children have grown into men and women still living in poverty and consciously aware of their grief and grievances. In spite of almost three decades of suffering, no one from among the victims' families is known to have indulged in any act of revenge, rioting, violent crime, hate incident, terrorism or any other socially disruptive or anti social behavior. That it happened is a fact. That it happened in a world that continues to revel in tit for tat, eye for an eye kind of spiraling hate crimes and terrorist acts is also true.

How did it come about? What happened? Could there be something to learn here for the rest of the deeply divided world consumed by un-diminishing passion for revenge and hate? My initial search was driven by questions as above with a view to understand this unrecognized and unexplored fallout from a gruesome happening. I also was curious to find out how some Sikh pockets had survived during those days in villages from where some of the hoodlums could have been recruited by the organizers of the pogrom.

In this pursuit, I spent time with the leadership and activists engaged with Nishkam and the Sikh Forum who had a wealth of information and were willing to share it. Nishkam had been involved with the relief and resettlement of the victim families from the beginning and many of the widows were still in almost day to day contact with them. They were helpful in organizing meetings with several members of victim families and a full day town hall type interaction with a group of widows and two of the kids, now grown men.

Nishkam also facilitated a visit for me to four/five Sikligar sites in Western UP along with the Chairman of Meerut based Mata Gujri Seva Society who were actively engaged with these communities. These villages possibly were the type of communities from where the ring leaders of the pogrom had been able to muster the men to form their marauding gangs. The Sikligar populations in these communities were left untouched possibly because the dominant Tyagi zamindars and Sikligars had a relationship built on mutuality of respective needs – Sikligars needed place to live and the zamindars needed their muscle to control their interests.

As I proceeded with my search, I found in my conversations with the widows that neither had they forgotten nor did they want their children to forget what had happened to them. So while they wanted the memories to survive they did not want their children to be consumed by hate, animosity or a burning impulse for revenge but instead to learn to live with their trauma and remake their lives. They were deeply resentful that neither had any of the prominent organizers been found guilty nor had they received the compensatory help that they had been promised from time to time by the Government. Peaceful response by them therefore was a deliberate choice, not the result of amends being made by the organizers of the pogrom. The Sikh community seemed to have moved on by putting the problem on the back burner – not forgotten but not just now – kind of attitude.

This led me to attempt an analysis of factors that were complicating this issue and inhibiting new initiatives or fresh thinking to move it out of its static state. This paper is an attempt in that direction. In this endeavor Nishkam who have been closely involved with rehabilitation work of the victims were kind to arrange an extended conversation with a group of widows that helped me to explore their inner feelings and motivations as they worked their way through their lives. The Sikh Forum, especially Wing Commander R S Chhatwal, was most helpful in giving me not only access to the mass of information they had gathered, but also sharing his memories and insights. He also arranged for an interview with Surjit Kaur, one of the surviving widows. Her story, that follows, is a saga of cool courage and perseverance in the face of severe adversity and is offered as an example of the experience that the widows of this pogrom went through. That hopefully may help us as we delve further into our analysis.

STORY WITHIN THE STORY

Garhi is a small basti just off of the East of Kailash development in the affluent South Delhi. This small basti, unbeknown to most people living in this neighborhood has a piece of history associated with it. It has been home to about thirty widows of the pogrom against Sikhs in 1984. These women were resettled in small tenements in early 1985 and it was in this neighborhood that they reconstructed their lives. Surjit Kaur and survivors from her extended family moved to Garhi from Gurdwara Nanaksar when they were allotted a tenement there in 1985/6.

Her parents had escaped from Rawalpindi during the riots following partition of India in 1947 and ended up in Gorakhpur, where she grew up and was married in late 60's when she moved

to Nand Nagri to live with her husband Joginder Singh. Her husband had four brothers and they were all together in garment export business. Four of the brothers lived close to the shed where they had installed the machinery required for their business and the fifth brother lived in Ashok Vihar with his family. They employed about 15 persons in their factory and were pretty busy with their growing enterprise.

Surjit Kaur and Joginder Singh had two sons. The four brothers lived together with their families and their old mother in a traditional joint family setting. Between the brothers they had eleven kids, five boys and six girls. Two of the girls were married and lived away from Nand Nagri. The marauders killed all the four brothers and two boys, both in their mid teens. Four widowed mothers were left with four girl children and three male kids – age from 3 to 15 years.

Their experience, as they faced the hostile gangs is hair-raising. Surjit Kaur remembers calls ‘sardar nikalau’ being made as the hooligans approached. The rumors were already rife that they are coming after Sikhs. Her husband and one son had gone to the Gurdwara to find out what was happening and if they could collect there, if needed. The Gurdwara was set on fire at about nine in the morning and possibly her husband and son were killed then. She only saw the fire and smoke rising from the Gurdwara from atop her house.

As she heard the loud voices getting closer, she also saw flames arising from a Sikh house nearby. As she looked on she saw a little boy, two or three year old, son of one of their Sikh neighbor running in panic. She ran out and picked him up and ran back home. She saw her eldest brother in law and her other son and asked them to hide in a steel almirah and shut the doors. But she had to keep opening the doors to get them fresh air to breathe in the air tight container in which they were hidden. Soon the menacing group was at their doors. The calls for ‘sardar nikalau’ were loud and shrill now. She stood clutching the little boy to her bosom. As she stood transfixed, she heard muffled thumps from within the almirah and some smoke and flames rising from around her. She ran and opened the door of the almirah and shouted to her brother in law ‘*veer ji, tussi apni jaan bachaao* – respected brother, you now run and save your life.’ The gang grabbed hold of the elder, dragged him to the street as she followed him with the little boy. She saw her nephew also in the mix and ran and grabbed hold of him. Then one steel rod hit her brother in law on the head. He fell and more blows started following as if to break each of his limbs. As she looked on frozen in helplessness, she saw her younger brother in law receiving blows the same way. Then one of the gang poured kerosene oil on the shrieking man with broken limbs writhing in pain on the ground and another one sprinkled some white powder and set him ablaze. The last that their eyes met, her brother in law and she seemed to have intuitively realized the inevitability of their total helplessness – there was nothing to say, no signs to make, just endure what came to be done while the two little lives clung on to her - scared, bewildered, traumatized.

To Surjit Kaur and her three sisters in law as also the other women who went through similar ordeals of being witness to such cruelties to their husbands and sons these orgies of inhuman violence seemed to be tearing their insides but that did not matter anymore – nothing did. There was pain. There were deafening shrieks and loud noises of ‘*marau, marau*’ – kill, kill - by the killer gang. As the flames started to leap, numbness overcame every other feeling. Drained of emotions, she only stood as if watching a scene play out to its grim end – relived millions of times since in its nightmarish fidelity of the ghastly images.

She felt a man with a cut on his face tugging at her sleeve and he took her with the two boys to his home. She does not remember much except cut on his face and his kindness – what she did there or how long she was there. She instinctively headed back to her home and spotted her younger son forlorn standing on the roof. She got hold of him and just held on to the three boys as the day wore on. Later when it had turned quiet a Brahmin living nearby came over and took her and the boys to his home.

They never got the dead bodies of their six scorched dear ones; nor did anyone else. Remains of those killed were dumped in trucks and taken away. No tending, no words spoken, no feel or touch of their remains or even placing a little rag to cover their half burnt bodies, no rituals or prayers or last rites – all feelings suppressed within, never really vented, no closure of any kind - only dimly dawning sense of struggles ahead and the ponderousness of vulnerabilities of the little lives that so tightly clutched to her – a frightening specter of the vividly daunting human bondage!

LOCATING THESE WIDOWS USING HISTORY & THEOLOGY

Let us try to explore where the experience of women like Surjit Kaur could best be located in Gurbani and Sikh historical experience. As is known, Sikh scriptures are replete with verses that speak of women, address women and use feminine metaphors. Sikh history and tradition also memorialize some experiences relating to women. Let us look at some of these visions in our search.

Pandered, Loved, Enslaved, Violated, Collateral Victims

Guru Nanak in two compositions in Asa has poured his heart out on the tragic suffering of women who were the object of loving pandering by their husbands but whose charmed lives were rudely changed following the invasion of Babur. Witness:

They lived in palatial mansions, but now, they cannot even sit near the palaces --- When they were married, their husbands looked so handsome beside them. They were brought riding in palanquins, decorated with ivory; water was sprinkled over their heads, and glittering fans were waved above them. They were given hundreds of thousands of coins when they sat, and hundreds of thousands of coins when they stood. They ate coconuts and dates, and rested comfortably upon their beds⁸ - *loved, pandered* but all gone.

Those pretty heads adorned with braided hair, with their parts painted with vermilion were shaved with scissors, and their throats were choked with dust. Ropes were put around their necks, and their strings of pearls were broken. Their wealth and youthful beauty, which gave them so much pleasure, became their enemies. Orders were given to soldiers, who dishonored them, and carried them away⁹ - *enslaved, violated*

Men whose letters were torn in the Lord's Court were destined to die, O brother. The women - Hindus, Muslims, Bhattis and Rajputs - some had their robes torn away, from head to foot,

⁸ - *jin mehalaa a(n) dhar hodheea hun behan n milanih hadhoor --- jadhahu seeaa veeaaheea laarrae sohan paas heeddolee charr aaeaa dha(n) dh kha(n) dd keethae raas ouparahu paanee vaareeai jhalae jhimakan paas eik lakh lehanih behit(h)eeaa lakh lehanih kharreeaa garee shhuhaarae khaa(n) dheea maananih saejarreeaa – Asa M I, p. 417-11*

⁹ *sir sohan patteeaa maa(n) gee paae sa(n) dhhoor sae sir kaathee mu(n) neeanih gal vich aavai dhhoorr --- think gal silakaa paeaa thuttanih mothasareea dhhan joban dhue vairee hoeae jinhee rakhae ra(n) g laae dhoothaa no furamaeaa lai chala path gavaae – Asa M I, p. 417-11*

while others came to dwell in the cremation ground. Their husbands did not return home - how did they pass their night¹⁰ - *collateral victims*.

Resistance, Torture, Martyrdom

Another vision of suffering women from Sikh history recalls that the keepers of captive Sikh women held in prison during the tumultuous eighteenth century were each given about 50 KG of grain to grind in a day under the direction of Mughal Satraps. While women plied the stone-mills as they sang the Guru's hymns, their children were sometimes hacked to pieces in their presence and garlands made of bits of flesh hung on strings were thrown around their necks. Gurdwara Shahid Ganj Singhania [Singh women] in Lahore memorializes these women martyrs.

The episode is also remembered in some Ardas texts – *jinaan sighnian nai mir mannu di jail vich chakian chalaayaan, bachiaan de haar galai wich pawaai, khoaan vich chhaalaan mariaan, sikhi sidak naheen haaryaa* – [recall] Sikh women who as captives in Mir Mannu's jail, labored grinding mill stones, suffered the agony of bearing the strung remains of their children around their necks, chose to jump into the well but did not let their Sikhi beliefs get compromised. It harks back to the heyday of Sikh resistance when men and women were guided alike by gurbani texts like – *purzaa purzaa kut marai kabh-hoon neh chhodai khet*.¹¹ The clear response of these women was of choosing the path of *shahidi* over any other that may have been indicative of capitulation to evil. We can also speculate with a fair degree of certainty that the progeny of Sikhs in those times stayed the course of armed resistance till their success in dismembering the oppressive structures was assured.

Burden of being a mother

The *Mother Metaphor* in Gurbani expectedly is reflective of the mother's nurturing role, unbounded love and forgiving fondness for the child and the child's leaning on the mother in all states of doubt, tension and joy.

A child's dependency in seeking solace and comfort from the mother in moments of fear is poignantly captured in Gurbani in the verse: Mom, I hear of death, and think of it, and I am filled with fear.¹² Likewise the abundant nurturing love of the mother is beautifully expressed when the Guru says 'numerous may be the mistakes that the son commits, yet the mother does not hold them against him in her mind.'¹³

The widows we are talking of were poor. They had little education, huge responsibilities and mostly had to go by their own counsel. They kept their gaze fixed on responsibility ahead. At home they shared the memories of their ghastly experience but told the kids to be courageous, brave and strong and not to be consumed by hate or a feeling of revenge. They kept seeking justice and rehabilitation, but not revenge – eye for an eye or *khoon ka badla khoon*. They fit the mother metaphor.

¹⁰ - *jinh kee cheeree dharageh paattee thinhaa maranaa bhaaee eik hi(n)dhavaanee avar thurakaanee bhattiaanee t(h)akuraanee eikanhaa paeran sir khur paattaa eikanhaa vaas masaanee jinh kae ba(n)kae gharee n aaeiaa tinh kio rain vihaanee* – Asa M I, p. 417-12

¹¹ - Maru Kabir, p. 1105

¹² - *Maaee Sunath Soch Bhai Ddarath* – Devgandhari M V, p. 529

¹³ - *Suth Aparaadhh Karath Hai Jaethae Jananee Cheeth N Raakhas Thaethae* – Asa Kabir, p. 478

The immolating satee & the other satee

Let us look at another metaphor talked of in SGGS about widows who might choose the path of immolation akin to the old *satee* practice. Gurus discouraged the *satee* practice and Sikhs in fact are told: 'call them not *satee* who burn themselves along with their husbands' corpses; O Nanak, they alone are known as *satees* who die from the shock of separation.'¹⁴ What does this imply – not to immolate but die due to being separated? In terms of worldly relations, it seems to suggest that the Guru commends a widow to pick up the threads and live her life out trying to fulfill the shared dreams of the couple, choosing to face the vicissitudes that her life in separation unfolds and continue to cope with the challenges of life as best as she can. Such women attain to a higher spiritual state where the shock of separation kills something deep in them even as it awakens them to the responsibilities that their loss has thrown onto them. The challenge that this choice implies is above the symbolism of *satee*.

The women that we are talking about are the widows of this pogrom. Given circumstances of their being rendered widows and how they seem to have borne their losses as well as tried to discharge the responsibilities thrust upon them, it would seem that the above *satee* metaphor is where most of these women would possibly best fit into in the composite of Sikh theology and Sikh experience.

We cannot but admire their tenacity, their grit, their belief in themselves and their Guru that helped them raise their families or what was left of them. In this saga their individual human spirit stands out with healing support provided by Gurdwaras, some committed Sikhs and the mixed communities they lived in - with the legal battles being fought by HS Phoolka helped by Sikh Forum and some. Thus contemplated the role and place of these women as players in this tragic episode acquires a sort of embellishment that we may have never ascribed to them. Should it make a difference? Let us look further at the various factors playing out.

PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

The call of Gurbani

A simplistic paradigm if constructed from Gurbani would suggest that we are all subject to the divine principle of justice. In the true court of the true One, each and every action choice that we make will be judged as we will discover when we get there.¹⁵ In fact the Guru clearly says that O Nanak, having created the souls, the Creator placed *naam* acting as inner *dharma* – conscious judge or choice filter within each of us.¹⁶

So even though we have an inner presence of the divine *naam*, in most of us the influence of *haumai* is so strong that we continue to remain susceptible to the temptations of the five evil propensities. This causes us to be lured into corrupt and unethical practices. Sikh theological literature notes that at the societal level, while functionaries of the state turn corrupt and will do anything for graft,¹⁷ the people blind in their ignorance are like effigies filled with straw.¹⁸

¹⁴ - *Satheea Eaei N Aakhean Jo Marriaa Lag Jalannih Naanak Satheea Jaaneenih J Birehae Chott Marannih* – Suhi M III, p. 787

¹⁵ - *Karmi karmi hoe veechar sacha aap sacha darbar ---- kach pakai outha paaey nanak gaya jaapai jaaye* – Japji, Pauri 34

¹⁶ *Nanak jeeo upaey ke likh naamai dharma behaalyaa* - Asa M II, p.463

¹⁷ - *qazi hoe rishvati vaddi laike haq gavai* - Bhai Gurdas, Varan1/30

¹⁸ - *andhi rayat gian vihooni bhaah bhare murdaar* – Asa M I, p.469

The society therefore presents the lamentable scenario in which righteousness seems to have taken to wings since the rulers act as butchers¹⁹ and the protectors of faith have abjured their role.²⁰ Yet in this depraved environment, the response of ordinary citizenry seems guided by the instinct to survive through conformity.²¹

In such a world what should a believer do? A fundamental Sikh belief is that God intends this world to be a place for virtuous deeds and moral action.²² The concept was carried further as a moral factor in conflict situations. The Guru says that if a mighty one overpowers his equal, it may not be a cause for grievance--- (but) if a tiger mauls the herding cattle, its Master must answer.²³ At the same time Sikhs are persuaded not to shy away from righteous action --- and be determined to right the wrongs, fight to win.²⁴ They must endeavor that those in leadership role must be held accountable for their decisions to be just and equitable and withstand moral scrutiny.²⁵ The ideal in Sikhism is a modest and caring rule under which all the subjects may live in peace and harmony.²⁶ Perfect is the divine justice²⁷ and Guru Gobind Singh saw his own mission to be to resist tyranny and promote justice and righteousness.²⁸ The persuasion is clear that if the ruling elite become the oppressors, pursuit of justice is a moral and ethical imperative for the believers.

Being subject to scrutiny also bestows on humans the divine right to expect justice. Gurus did not commend apathetic submission or being blind subjects - *andhi raiyat* - and the Sikh vision of societal transformation is rooted in the ideal of the ultimate supremacy of divine bestowals over the laws and rules set by humans. That makes for the principles of *miri piri, sarbat ka bhala, ek pita ekas ke hum balak, shubh karman te kabhoon neh taroon* - all to come together to create the total conceptual frame that guided the pro-active and reactive Sikh resistance. In societal context the guidance is clear – *rajai chulee niaon kee* – the same thought that the ethicist John Rawls²⁹ has expressed in its modern context that justice is the first virtue of social institutions.

Realities as they exist & some pointers

The fact though is that in real life situations, even in the law abiding societies like the US, minorities generally receive tardy justice and are awarded stringent punishments for similar violations of law. Indian judicial system, while considered better developed than many other developing societies, is still known for its dilatory and corrupt practices.

Thus viewed the denial of justice to the victims of 1984 organized violence against Sikhs in Delhi is a serious failing of the rulers. Unfortunately the sordid tale becomes more sinister when we witness open intimidation of the few surviving witnesses with implied complicity of Sikh leaders said to be leaning towards the political party of those who incited the pogrom.

¹⁹ - *kal kate raaje kasaai dharam pankh kar udhriya* - M I p.145

²⁰ - *khatriyan te dharam chhodiya* - M I, p.663

²¹ - *neel vastra pehr hoveh parwaan* – Asa M I, p.472

²² - *hukme dharti sajian sachi dharamsal*- Suhi M III, p. 785

²³ - *je sakta sakte ko maare ta man raus na hoyi ---- sakta seeh maare pai vagai khasme saa pursai* - M I p.360

²⁴ - *de shiva bar mohey shubh karman te kabhoon neh taroon ---- nishchai he apni jeet karoon* (Dasam Granth)

²⁵ - *raaje chuli niyaon kee* - M I p.1240

²⁶ - *sabh sukhaali vuthiyaa eiho hoyaa halemi raaj jeeio* - M I p.74

²⁷ - *pooran niyaon kare kartaar* - M V p.199

²⁸ - *dharam chalaavan sant ubhaaran, dusht sabhan ko mool udhaaran* – Dasam Granth

²⁹ John Rawls [1921-2002] taught at Cornell and Harvard. He sought to develop a concept of justice appropriate to a democratic society. His most well known work is *Theory of Justice* [1971], further refined in later writings.

The added speculation that there could be more skeletons in the cupboard [e.g. 2011 discovery of the Sikh massacre in village Hondh-Chillar in Rewari district on 2/11/84 and July 2012 find regarding murder of 24 Sikhs in Haily Mandi, Pataudi³⁰] that may yet have to come to light makes it clear that while the authorities have been complicit, Sikhs had been apathetic.

The Sikh version of the status of delivery of justice is that despite the establishment of three commissions and seven committees of inquiry, Indian judicial system has failed to prosecute any of the *main* organizers of the pogrom either on its own or due to official pressure. In spite of prolonged trials, only 13 persons have been convicted, one declared a proclaimed offender and some of the key instigators like H.K.L Bhagat, Jagdish Tytler and Kamal Nath, continued to be given cabinet minister positions. Seventy-two policemen were identified for connivance or gross negligence and 30 recommended for dismissal but no one was punished. Besides, the rehabilitation of victims has been tardy and compensations meager. The throwing of a shoe by Sikh journalist, Jarnail Singh, at Chidambaram during a press conference forced removal of Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar as candidates for the 2009 Lok Sabha.

Delhi Police version however is that 442 persons have been convicted - 49 sentenced for life, three for more than 10 years and one case is pending trial. Six Delhi Police officials were also punished for various lapses. The CBI has completed reinvestigation of seven cases registered against them. Of these, courts have accepted closure reports in two cases and five are at trial. Of the 56 cases against 225 persons registered by the south west district police stations, three resulted in conviction, two were pending trials and in 30 cases, accused were acquitted. The remaining 21 cases had been sent as "untraced" or not enough evidence for trial.³¹ Obviously there are major inaccuracies that need to be reconciled, if only for the purposes of record.

If we recall soon after the 84 pogrom several volunteer interfaith groups came into being who documented some of the incidents; others who tried to collect evidence, examine it and make a determination of the guilty and yet others who helped with bringing succor to victims in the early stages. The main witnesses of this pogrom were the survivors, mainly Sikh women, old people and children. Based on their personal accounts, the People's Union for Civil Liberties [PUCL] and the People's Union for Democratic Rights [PUDR] produced the report 'Who are the Guilty?' and Citizens for Democracy with 'Truth about Delhi Violence' within two months of the occurrences. A report of the Citizen's Commission was issued in Jan. 85. Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar conducted interviews with several survivors in late 84/early 85, published in 1987 as a book. Veena Das worked on the experience of the survivors of Sultanpuri from November 5, 1984 till July 1985, published 1990. In 2007, two works based on interviews with survivors in Tilak Vihar Widow Colony by Jyoti Grewal and Angela Harlock were published. Personal experiences and recollections of the violence presented in

³⁰ All India Sikh Students Federation and Sikhs for Justice claim to have unearthed another Sikh genocide site at Haily Mandi, Pataudi, in Haryana in which more than 28 Sikhs were killed in a systematic and well-planned attack. FIR number 282-83 registered at Pataudi police station on November 12, 1984, alleged that death squads burnt Sikhs alive by pouring kerosene oil on them. The FIR had more than fifteen names of the accused and a list of 24 witnesses but on April 26, 1986, Sessions Judge VM Jain acquitted all the accused because of the lack of evidence <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/1984-anti-Sikh-riots>>. Another FIR number 165 was also claimed to have been registered at Pataudi Police Station by Harbhajan Singh of Village Kheri who survived the attack <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Harbhajan-Singh>>. It is clear that Sikhs were targeted in a pattern identical to Delhi killings. [GLZ 29/7/ 2012]

³¹ June 20, 2012 by PTI Source: <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/442-convicted-in-various-anti-Sikh-riots-cases-Delhi-Police/Article1-875466.aspx>>www.hindustantimes.com

many of affidavits filed are available on: www.carnage84.com. There are a number of other works that have documented the events, cases and other relevant facts about the pogrom. Yet it has not made the Congress political leadership to accept any accountability for the pogrom or to support the process for delivery of justice.

Cynicism about the integrity of ruling elite is not new and the lament by Guru Nanak about *rajai sinh mukaddam kutai* continues to be true. Things have changed a little in recent times with the growth of an aggressive media and some signs of vigilance among citizen activists. A recent helpful development is the verdict by a special court in Ahmedabad that has held 32 people guilty of premeditated violence in the massacre of 99 Muslims in Naroda Patia, in the 2002 BJP led anti Muslim pogrom. The narrative given out in this case was that the Muslim killings were spontaneous reaction to the murder of Hindu pilgrims in Godhra - the state was not complicit, nor did the police take instructions from their political bosses to look the other way. As a way forward, it was suggested to bury recrimination about the past and look to the future.³² The aggrieved Muslims persevered and succeeded helped by Congress.

An encouraging related insight emerges from a recent US federal appeals court ruling that the case seeking reparations for descendants of American slaves can go forward if plaintiffs can **in part** prove the violations despite its antiquity. This could be setting a risky legal precedent but it appears that when it comes to exposing those responsible for violating the rule of law, the judicial opinions are veering towards a more empathetic view of victims of organized acts of collective discrimination and that questioning of adequacy of available evidence may not be of much avail, if the pursuers of delayed justice keep their efforts alive.

The above developments however are not likely to be of much help to Sikhs in the 1984 cases or in a future situation unless they develop the ability to collect the facts and create resources for pursuing justice. Sikhs would do well to form watchdog groups and organizations that can help pursue justice for the victims of hate, discrimination and violent crime specifically directed for being Sikhs. The Jewish holocaust experience shows that they collected detailed data on all the victims and oppressors. Simon Wiesenthal³³ and others created a wanted list and kept hunting for Nazis responsible for the holocaust crimes. The number one on the list Hungarian Laszlo Csatory, 97, was taken into custody and charged by Hungarian authorities in July 2012 for helping to send around 15,700 Jews to the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. He had fled to Canada from where he was forced to flee in 1990s and ended up in Budapest. Wiesenthal Center located him and alerted the authorities in 2011.³⁴

The Sikh experience post Sep 11 in the US also offers some instructive pointers. Soon after vulnerabilities of Sikhs due to mistaken identity sank in, SALDEF that was primarily a media watchdog group enhanced their legal assistance role. Later United Sikhs and newly formed Sikh Coalition added to legal defense resources. This has facilitated their getting quicker resolution of non violent incidents and some assistance in follow up of violent incidents while advocacy has helped in seeking better enforcement policies and improve awareness about the pervasive Sikh issues.

³² For details, read news reports and article by Mukul Kesavan, Times of India, Sep 1, 2012.

³³ Weisenthal [1908 – 2005] dedicated most of his life to tracking down and gathering information on fugitive Nazis so that they could be brought to justice for war crimes. He co-founded Jewish Historical Documentation Center in 1947 to gather information for war crime trials. He came to be known as a Nazi hunter.

³⁴ <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/world-s-most-wanted-nazi-held-at-97-244806?ndtv>

Sikh advocacy and legal defense organizations have been working in concert with other faith based advocacy groups like the Council on American-Islamic Relations [CAIR] and most of the successes they have had with the Federal Administration arose out of initiatives by CAIR or jointly with them. A recent example is that of the Defense Department allowing Sikh and Muslim students participating in Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps to wear turbans and *hijabs* while in uniform. This was taken up by CAIR when a Muslim girl was not allowed by her commanding officer to wear hijab in the homecoming parade. The Army agreed to allow the Cadets to request the wear of religious head dress, such as the turban and *hijab*.³⁵ The inevitability that we need to recognize is that our voice gets some attention if it is leveraged by the support of others who are similarly affected or who consciously support the freedoms that we are denied and are willing to extend their support to our cause.

Sikh organizations are planning to seek the endorsement and support of genocide victims - Israel, Armenia, Bosnia and Rwanda - for the Sikh Genocide Petition [per Akal Takht edict of May 05, 2012] to be filed before United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for investigation into systematic, intentional and deliberate killing of Sikhs during November 1984 pogrom and to recognize the same as Genocide. Sikhs for Justice and All India Sikh Students Federation have launched a campaign to collect a million signatures in support of this Petition which argues that 'the intentional and deliberate nature of the attacks on Sikh lives, properties and places of worship during November 1984 makes them crime of Genocide as per Article 2 of the U.N. Convention on Genocide'.

To seek the support of other groups or to piggyback them to ameliorate discrimination or to get justice is not wrong even though our dependency on CAIR may seem ironic in view of our informative campaigns for mitigating the impressions of so called mistaken identity. Pursuit of justice and religious freedoms is a shared human objective and if we read the Guru's message conveyed through their words and example, justice and freedom of belief that are so necessary for a righteous and nurturing social order are divinely bestowed blessings that must be the endeavor of and defended by all believers.

In fact seeking such issue based support is a common practice used by Christian and Jewish interfaith advocacy activists. For this we need friends in other walks of life. That we harbor reservations on associating with some faith groups or sects does get reflected in the variety of views that we hear and read in Sikh forums. Decisions on such collaborative efforts should be made on the merits of issues without getting over swayed by prejudice.

Going forward

The suggestion emerging is for us to create some sort of legal defense groups in India that help victims of hate crimes, discrimination, riots get justice and take on the task of advocacy against any oppressive or discriminatory policies. Such pursuits can generally be protracted and need organization and legal as well as other professional resources along with continued support by the community. Serving the legal needs of those who suffered for being identified with a group is a tough and rather un-remunerative area for legal practice but it could attract young talent interested in social issues and we may be surprised at the number of volunteer lawyers and clients that such legal aid cells may bring together. A pilot project as an adjunct to the Sikh Forum could be a good start.

³⁵ Reported in SALDEF Advocate, Jan 2012.

The commissions set up to inquire into the events of 84 pogrom only whitewashed the guilty officials and politicians. The Government has provided survivors some compensation though in that area too there are complaints of both inadequacy and delay. What Sikhs are asking for is the prosecution of instigators and perpetrators. Though the already dim hopes about the outcomes are further clouded by growing cynicism, justice is still worth pursuing if for no other reason than that giving up the effort would be worse than an adverse verdict.

Justice which constitutes the core of good governance had become a casualty in the pre 2001 India. This apathy has somewhat changed post Gujrat events in 2002 when the strong Muslim lobby backed by Congress support led to the Supreme Court intervention. In spite of the availability of pretty extensive documentation and compelling contemporaneous information gathered through interviews and affidavits by many volunteer groups, applying pressure to 1984 cases is proving difficult with the weak Sikh lobby and the evidence considered badly tainted plus the media not finding any real topical interest in the rehash of old stories.

FORGIVE

The emerging pressures

Societies, especially in the West, have in the more recent past, become liberal enough to sort of celebrate those who forgive thus putting overt and covert pressure on the victims to forgive the offender[s]. This has led to movements like Restorative Justice that are being selectively used in certain situations to facilitate healing the victims and encourage the offenders to own up to their crime. There have been some suggestions for the victims of the 84 pogrom and the Sikh community to forgive and forget the event and move on. In our analysis that follows we will be looking at the suggestion to forgive closely for its practicability.

Those who have worked with the restorative justice process, suggest never urging, pushing or expecting the victims to forgive out of some kind of obligation or force a victim to forgive an offender, especially of a violent crime. Acceptance of accountability by the offender is key to the success of the process though some victims may forgive without meeting the offender or knowing that the offender took responsibility for the crimes. Such state of mind of the victim is akin to living by the precept inherent in jahan khima teh aap – God is where forgiveness is.

Another factor to keep in mind is that Restorative Justice Process is not quite in sync with the way criminal justice cases are handled. The crimes are viewed as having been committed in contravention of laws against the state and neither the victim nor the offender is expected to be able to influence the process. We however know that the media has the ability to influence processes and outcomes apart from the effect of ideological predilections of the officials. The difficulties may be compounded due to the fact that neither repentance nor forgiving comes easy and both may not happen at all. If there is active lobbying, the usefulness of the vitiated process to resolve politically motivated crimes can become questionable.³⁶

A further complicating factor in the instant situation is about the difficulties in establishing clear identity of both the victim[s] and the offender[s]. We have a situation where none of the criminals has asked for forgiveness nor is it clear as to from whom forgiveness is expected to

³⁶ For a more extensive analysis read Lisa Reaat, The Justice & Reconciliation Project (JRP) California; Marina Cantacuzinoat, www.theforgivenessproject.org. UK; John Whiteat, Sycamore Tree Project, a restorative justice program in Acacia Prison in Western Australia <http://www.restorativejustice.org/RJOB/lisa-rea-justice-forgiveness-and-victims-of-crime/>

come. It is clear though that no third person can have the right to forgive the criminals on behalf of the victims or their families. These decisions really are personal and are not made in answer to a call by the media or by the PM in the Parliament House. As for forgiving by the Sikhs as a community, we propose to turn to the scriptures and history for seeking any insights or guidance about the likely expected Sikh response.

Guidance from Gurbani & tradition

The Sikh tenets guide us that God is the epitome of forgiveness. The Gurus sing paeans of praise of God for His acts of forgiveness e.g. God has been true to His nature and has not bothered about the devotee's merits or demerits.³⁷ Forgiveness therefore should have a place of importance in the matrix of human acts of omission and commission. This seems to come naturally to us when as parents, overlooking the past errors, we teach the children to not repeat errant behavior going forward.³⁸ Sikhs also glorify those who - *dekh ke undith keeta* – having witnessed chose to ignore. Thus an act of forgiveness is divine, saintly and fatherly - an act of grace or to motivate better future behavior or to deliberate decision to not respond to provocation. The act of forgiving is a complex decision choice – the complexity increasing if identity of offenders and victims becomes fuzzy in collective organized violence directed at a specifically targeted vulnerable group.

Let us turn to history to see the responses of the Gurus to certain events in their lives that had elements of gross intimidation and about which they have mentioned in their writings. Guru Nanak was witness to the conflict at Eminabad during Babur's third invasion and has vividly described the excesses of his soldiers – the verses cited earlier, see notes 8-10.

The above event was the collateral effect of the Lodhi-Afghan conflict for control over India. Widows of the vanquished were dishonored by Babur's soldiers with the complicity of their superiors. The time was early sixteenth century with the then existing permissiveness in battle situations but Guru Nanak did not accept it and raised his voice. In Babur Vani shabads that reflect on Babur's invasions, the Guru characterizes Mughals to have been sent by God to punish the Lodhis for their fall. At the same time he likens the punishing Mughals to a bridal party of sinners who indulge in rape and ravine. The Guru asks: where can then one go – God who attached mortals to all these allurements, sits alone and watches on and even chides God for not showing compassion when the suffering screamed in pain. There is no hint to forgive the offenders. If at all the Guru clearly says that if the powerful attack and kill the weak and vulnerable, their master must be called to answer.³⁹

Let us also look at an incident mentioned in the compositions of Guru Arjun. As the story goes, Sulahi Khan was a Mughal courtier. Prithi Chand, Arjun's disaffected brother invited him and both conspired to finish the Guru off. While showing him round, however Sulahi's horse stepped over a burning kiln that gave way and he was roasted alive. Guru Arjun writes 'first I was counseled to send a letter or secondly to send two men to mediate or thirdly to do something [to evade the oncoming danger]. I have renounced everything, and I meditate only on You, Prabh. Now, I am totally blissful, carefree and at ease. Enemies and evildoers have

³⁷ - *prabh apnaa birdh samaareya, hamra gun avgun naa beechariya* -(M V p.623)

³⁸ – *pichhle avgun baksh leye prabh aage marag pave* – Sorath M V, p. 624

³⁹ See also other related compositions: Asa M I, p. 360, Tilang M I, p. 722

perished, and I have obtained peace.’⁴⁰ At another places, Guru Arjun writes: ‘God preserved me from Sulhi, (his attack). Sulhi did not succeed in his plot, and he died in disgrace. God drew forth His axe and smote off his head and in a moment he was reduced to ashes. Plotting and planning evil, he was destroyed. He who created him thrust him into the fire. Of his sons, friends and wealth, nothing remains; his brethren and relations have all abandoned him. Says Nanak, I am sacrifice to that Prabh who fulfilled the prayer uttered by His servant.’⁴¹ There is thanksgiving for receiving divine protection but there is no suggestion of forgiving or praying for forgiveness for the unprovoked, conspiratorial attacker.

Namdev in a shabad narrates being asked to revive a dead cow or face death - to test if Gopal will come to his aid. It happens and the cow revives. The king is repentant and Namdev tells the king that the purpose of this miracle is that you, O king, should walk the path of truth and humility.⁴² The king’s repentance made forgiveness a moral response.

Guru Gobind Singh too had suffered many attempts on his life and his young sons were killed during battles with the forces of Aurangzeb. In Zafarnama he asks the king what was achieved by killing his four tender sons, when he, like a coiled snake stayed alive. Bravery does not consist in putting out a few sparks and in the process stir up a fire to rage all the more!⁴³ (78-79) The Guru avers that king must be cognizant that God could not have wished for him to create strife but instead to promote peace and harmony among the people. (65) Nor should the ruler use his strength, power and resources to harass, suppress or deprive the weak for this will erode his ability to rule effectively and make the State unsafe. (109) In spite of all that happened the Guru is gracious, kind and compassionate and wants to close the matter without any lingering resentment. He says ‘if only you were gracious enough to come to the village of Kangar, we could then see each other face to face. (58) Come to me so that we may converse with each other, and I may utter some kind words to thee. (60) You are bound, indeed by your word on the Koran, let, therefore, the matter come to a good end, as is your promise. (76) In this exchange there is a clear and pro-active attempt at reconciliation after lengthy and bloody conflict but even this does not suggest unilateral forgiving as a means to closure or to move forward.

The above approach by Guru Gobind Singh seems to be a precursor to the modern day model successfully used by South African truth and reconciliation commission under Archbishop Desmond Tutu [1995-1998] to redress violent acts, human rights violations and politically motivated crimes that were committed by individuals either for the state or for the liberation movement. Surviving victims and relatives of dead victims were given opportunity to tell their grievances. Individuals who confessed to the crimes that they had committed under the apartheid were granted freedom from prosecution if their acts were found to be politically motivated. Those who refused to testify remained liable for criminal prosecution.

⁴⁰ *dutee-ay mataa du-ay maanukh pahuchaava-o. taritee-ay mataa kichh kara-o upaa-i-aa. mai sabh kichh chhod parabh tuhee Dhi-aa-i-aa. mahaa anand achint sehjaa-i-aa. dusman doot mu-ay sukh paa-i-aa - Asa M V, p. 371*

⁴¹ *sulehee thae naaraaein raakh sulehee kaa haathh kehee n pahuchai sulehee hoe mooaa naapaak kaadt kut(h)jaar khasam sir kaattiaa khin mehi hoe gaeiaa hai khaak ma(n)dhaa chithavath chithavath pachiaa jin rachiaa thin dheenaa dhhaak puthr meeth dhhan kishhoo n rehiou s shhodd gaeiaa sabh bhaae saak kahu naanak this prabh balihaaree jin jan kaa keeno pooran vaak – Bilawal M V, p. 825. See also Bhairon M V, p.1137 in similar strain, which possibly refers to an incident of attempted poisoning of young Hargobind.*

⁴² *Eis Patheea Kaa Eihai Paravaan Saach Seel Chaalahu Sulithaan – Bhairo Namdev, p. 1166*

⁴³ The numbers in parenthesis are the verse numbers in the original text.

Let us now turn to the August 2005 apology by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. In his address, he said: 'On behalf of our government, on behalf of the entire people of this country, I bow my head in shame that such a thing took place... I have no hesitation in apologizing to the Sikh community. I apologize not only to the Sikh community but to the whole Indian nation because what took place in 1984 is the negation of the concept of nationhood enshrined in our Constitution... we as a united nation can ensure that such a ghastly event is never repeated in India's future.'

Unfortunately in his entire address Manmohan Singh did not refer to the complicity of the Congress leaders in organizing the pogrom. As such the apology while it is regret expressed by a successor Government about the occurrence of the [ghastly] event and therefore has to be given serious consideration, reluctance to acknowledge any remorse for the complicity of Congress party members in the 'ghastly' acts fails to convey empathy to the victims or Sikhs as a community. Instead he commends victims to promote nation's sense of security by not remembering the event. Witness: 'By reliving that, by reminding us again and again you do not promote the cause of national integration, of strengthening our nation sense for security' - some unfeeling evident there notwithstanding his seemingly genuine sense of grief!

It is this kind of continued reluctance to accept accountability for complicity in the planned and organized crime and insincere attempts to seek constructive solutions or to bring a sense of justice and security to the survivors and the Sikh community that has kept the memories and mistrust alive. The sense of simmering lack of trust became evident in the TV debate on 6 June, 2012 after the formal foundation stone laying at Amritsar by the Singh Sahibaaan for the Bluestar memorial. The media were back to using all the stereotypes and invectives [like terrorists, anti national, dangers to peace etc] for Sikhs and if it had continued for a period of time as had been done in the 80's it could have again precipitated a grave safety risk for Sikhs living outside Punjab.

I do not think Sikhs are being obdurate. They have been and continue to be ambivalent about forgiving unless circumstances of the case pose no moral or ethical dilemma. The American Sikh response to the 5 August, 2012 killing of Sikh worshippers at Oak Creek, WI Gurdwara by a white male seems to confirm this reluctance of Sikhs to throw forgiveness at offenders who committed egregious offences against the innocent. Some relatives of the victims wanted to place, alongside the victims, an empty coffin to remember the killer at the memorial *ardas* as a symbol of forgiveness. That did not happen. Sikhs instead chose to leave a simple but striking memorial - they installed a small gold plate engraved with 'We Are One. 8-5-12' beneath one of the bullet holes left unrepaired.⁴⁴

The above tells something about the way Sikh thinking coalesces rather effortlessly to a collective choice of the manner in which they live through and past any traumatic situation - with calm dignity and thoughtful memorializing seemingly turning a tragedy into triumph by embracing an elevating, gentle, principled call! Forgiveness for the perpetrators of gruesome, pre-meditated mass murderers of the innocent is better not asked of or expected for the victim communities to give unless the mainstream society as a whole can come together to recognize collectively the accountability of the offenders as a pre-requisite.

FORGET

⁴⁴ Sikh temple holds 1st Sunday service since attack, Associated Press report by DINESH RAMDE, 12/08/12.

Let us look at the suggestion to the victim group to forget the events a bit more closely. The act of forgetting implies a conscious choice to not remember any more that the traumatic events happened, curb the memory as irrelevant and to not ponder over the need for vigilance or caution to avoid its future repeat.

It should be obvious from the foregoing discussion that 1984 events and the following decade are difficult for Sikhs to forget for their holiest shrines were desecrated by the Indian Army assault in June 1984 and then in November 1984, in Delhi and several other places within the country, Sikhs were subjected to organized and systematic killings, Gurdwaras burnt and the Sikh properties looted after Indira Gandhi was shot by her Sikh guards. Reports about this period record comments like:

- US State Department's Country Report in 1993 for India on Human Rights Practices chronicled that: Extrajudicial executions were also encouraged by the Punjab government's practice of offering bounties for killed militants. The chief minister told the state assembly that over 41,000 such bounties were paid between 1991 and 1993; in some cases more than one person claimed credit for the same killing.
- Physicians for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch reported in 'Dead Silence: The Legacy of Human Rights Abuses in Punjab' that: The decade-long insurgency in the north Indian state of Punjab and the brutal police crackdown that finally ended it cost more than 10,000 lives. Most of those killed were summarily executed in police custody in staged 'encounters.' These killings became so common, in fact, that the term 'encounter killing' became synonymous with extrajudicial execution.
- Amnesty International, in a 1993 report called, 'An Unnatural Fate: Disappearances and Impunity in the Indian States of Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab,' wrote: Each year, scores of people 'disappear' in Punjab from among the many thousands of political prisoners detained -- Official figures given by the Home Minister in March 1993 put the number of people then held under TADA [Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act] in Punjab at 14,457; unofficial sources say several thousands more are held -- State complicity in such practices is evident from a clear pattern of official cover-up.

Given this legacy of abuses that Sikhs have endured and knowing that there are thousands of them who feel that their pain has not been recognized by the government or the mainstream and that the abusers are still roaming free, any advisory to forget is not likely to be accepted by the community. Instead the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators and their being rewarded rather than being held accountable makes not forgetting an imperative for the community.

The 84 pogrom was a one sided, deliberate, conspiratorial operation planned, organized and executed by a highly organized group of Congress political workers, complicit government officials, police and hired mobs that selectively targeted male Sikh youth and middle aged men. They came close to a total success. Such attacks border on the genocidal and must not to be forgotten.

Sikhs have had a pretty traumatic passage during their short history of half a millennium. In the end, after heavy sacrifices, they succeeded to carve out an area in the Northwest India where their supremacy became unchallenged. They however did not want to forget the traumas they had been through and introduced references to some of these in the text of their formal supplication at the end of religious services.

Apart from the negatives of the realities involved, Sikhs as a group of highly religious people should not be expected to forget or ignore egregious injustices or institutionalized oppression. Their belief in fighting for the righteous cause and resist discrimination is extremely strong and their history is nothing if not a chronicle of making sacrifices for the shared values of freedom and equality. Belief in *dushat nivaaran sant ubhaaran* – defeat the evil to assure the ascendancy of the virtuous – as a principle is antithetical to accepting to forget that evil ever happened or forget its existence in our midst.

SEARCHING THE WAY FORWARD

What then is the way forward? The justice route is deeply tainted and even if Sajjan Kumar is given some sort of punishment at this late stage, it is not likely to assuage the Sikh hurt or to restore Sikh confidence in the efficacy of the Indian judiciary and judicial processes – at least for the subject events.

Forgiving can come easily to Sikhs if they sense that it would possibly encourage some move in the direction of abiding societal changes. That does not seem to be the case here for apart from the apology by the PM, there is little evidence that the attitudes towards the Sikhs have changed. In the recent unpleasant and unfortunate controversy involving retired General V K Singh, the Sikhs were again unabashedly brought in by a powerful group of retired officers in their plea filed in favor of V K Singh in the Supreme Court trying to imply, none too subtly, a conspiracy involving PM, General JJ SINGH and SGPC to install a Sikh as the next COAS. The internet was abuzz with malicious and unrestrained Sikh bashing. This type of organized spreading of disinformation cannot be ignored because riots do not seem difficult to trigger in India – witness the speed and sudden-ness of the July 2012 Bodo-Muslim riots in Assam that resulted in over 80 deaths and lakhs seeking safety of relief camps.

To not forget the memories of the pogrom by the Sikhs is a moral burden that the Sikhs have to carry unless they see some encouraging outcomes in the delivery of justice or the evidence that the future unfolds gives confidence that the mainstream has moved from its urges for assimilation of or domination over the Sikh minority and there is a sense of acceptance of the past wrong-doings against Sikhs by the Congress party in particular. Otherwise the call made for forgetting will continue to be a non starter.

What do we then do? How can we bring some sort of sense of healing to this long running sore? There must be a way forward and we must all find it collectively. May be we could first try to figure out what it is that we are trying to bring healing to – is it just the 84 Pogrom or is it the 1984 events or is it the Sikh issues post independence of India or all the above through the prism of the experience of 84 pogrom and after? To me the last option makes more sense. Let us proceed.

The partition effect

Many Sikh who have lived through the 1947 and 1984 [Punjab & Delhi] episodes tend to see these as a sort of continuum. These events have a historical link and it would be instructive to understand the nature of issues that may have percolated from one to the next so that it helps our search for the future course of action.

The 1947 division itself was the cumulative outcome of the persistent mistrust between Sikhs and Hindus on one side and Muslims on the other. A collateral effect of the partition seems to

have been to free Sikhs from the haunting historical memories of being hunted by the Muslim rulers, thus reducing their underlying sense of hostility against the Muslims. This has helped the Sikh interface with the Indian Muslims to turn into a neutral mode. Significantly while the Sikh relations with Muslims have become less tense after the partition, their strong traditional kinship with the Hindus has suffered a setback – leaving its imprint on Sikh orientation.

The problems of healing and closure of 1947 if they persist are limited to where the families were divided. I have not come across any study on the subject though the theme has figured in some novels and movies. Separation trauma experienced by Sikhs and Hindus was more about the fracturing of support system built around village societies, *biradaries* and extended families. The displaced on either side had to face problems of resettlement in new places with little welcoming support by the locals. They had to rebuild their lives and their social support systems anew and in difficult circumstances but they did not feel as if they had been target of the ire of the mainstream of societies they sought refuge in.

The religious problems arising out of the division affected all three communities - Sikhs more than the other two because several of their holy sites including the birth place of Guru Nanak were left in Pakistan. This has been a source of considerable anguish to the Sikhs but with an active and growing Diaspora and their ease of access to visas, the Sikh shrines in Pakistan are not seen as remote as they once were. The cultural legacy of the divide that suffered a severe setback initially seems now turning into a bond in a nostalgic turnaround sweeping Punjabi communities almost globally. In a nutshell, the lingering problems of the partition are more in the realm of regional politics among South Asian countries.

Punjab casting shadow

The linkage between 1984 Punjab happenings and the Delhi pogrom is stronger. The effect of the Sikh agitation preceding 84 was intended to be felt in the power corridors of New Delhi and it did. The Central Government responded very strongly to the Akali attempt to agitate in Delhi during the 1982 Asian Games. I & B Ministry also launched a persistent anti-Sikh slant in the state controlled radio and TV and the PTI news releases. The Akali Dal Anadpur Sahib Resolution was labeled as separatist and anti national. The Punjab situation continued to worsen and the Central Government launched a military assault labeled Operation Bluestar at major Gurdwaras across the State, including the Golden Temple Complex at Amritsar. Akal Takht was destroyed, Bhindrawale and his associates neutralized and hundreds of assembled worshippers killed. Sikhs were stunned. Resentment ran deep. A few months later two of the Sikh security staff of Indira Gandhi shot and killed her. As if to a cue, thousands of Sikh men were brutally killed in Delhi in highly organized and coordinated attacks led by the Congress leaders with the Police idly standing by. Though the existence of a continuum is evident, we would caution against the reading of a cause and effect relation as being too simplistic, given the complexities of high stake politics involved.

Evidently what happens in Punjab casts a shadow on Sikhs elsewhere in India. The pogrom brought home to Sikhs outside Punjab that they can easily be held hostage in any high stake political gamesmanship that may develop between Akalis in Punjab and Central Government. Visible identity would further compound the Sikh vulnerability for selective targeting. Given these realities, though apparently not realized by the Sikhs, it would have been clear to the political strategists that an attack on Delhi Sikhs in the full glare of media, had no chance of failing to achieve the type of political gain that Congress leadership would have wanted and did reap in the elections held a couple of months later in December 84.

Creating safe havens

Any choice of strategies for future must consider the question of possibility of Sikhs outside of Punjab being again subjected to such hostage treatment. Tensions between the Centre and Punjab can arise in future and if those tensions are rooted in issues that affect Sikhs or Sikhi then it could happen that Sikhs out of Punjab support the positions taken by Punjab State or by Sikh leadership. In that scenario, what can Sikhs do to avoid a repeat of Nov. 1984?

Creative answers to the above vulnerabilities must be found. Sikhs outside of Punjab do see Punjab as a potential safe haven in the event of a repeat of 1984 type pogrom but migration of the type that Sikhs undertook in 1947 to buy freedom from the anxieties of likely oppression by a Muslim majority should be absolutely ruled out. We have to recognize that we are and will continue to live as a minority in India and the rest of the world. Creating a secure space for ourselves is our need and we have to work for it individually and collectively in local communities. While some preparedness to defend against any intruders could be of help, this objective is likely to be more effectively accomplished by nurturing local relationships within the local community and close neighborhoods.

As mentioned earlier, a telling example is that Sikligar Sikhs who were resident in a host of villages around Delhi survived while Sikligars settled in Delhi resettlement colonies suffered the worst fate. The Sikligars in villages had developed a relationship of reciprocity with local land owning class of Tyagis and received in return, their safety and well being.

In my travels and life abroad I have run into examples of lone Sikhs living well adjusted and productive lives in fairly remote settings. In 1982 while a visiting Professor to the Institute of Economics, Zagreb, I one day saw another Sikh at lunch at the other end of the largish dining room at the hotel. He had almost strayed into those parts in early 50's, had a Serbian wife and still maintained his Sikh *bana*. Again in 1989, I was asked by one of the business associates of my client in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, if I knew Dr Singh. Sure enough the good doctor was almost my younger look alike, living with his young Sikh family with no other Sikh resident anywhere in the county.

The real remedy is not to be isolated when in isolation. Sikhs do revel at it but curiously their problems multiply when their numbers increase. T Sher Singh recently wrote: 'I was in Texas a few months ago. Sikhs living in the remotest of communities rule the roost. And are solid Sikhs, living in the full glory of the faith and doing extraordinary things for the community at large. Similarly, they always fare well in isolation, no matter where they are. It brings the best out of them.'⁴⁵

Is enough being done or can we do more

My sense is that Sikhs vaguely realize this compulsion though what they are doing about it is not clear. In India, while I do find the Sikhs to be more socially engaged, yet I am not sure if the level of empathy for them has increased. Reciprocal relationships are not easy to develop in many settings. Our endeavor also has to be that non Sikhs have some understanding of the Sikh issues and the reasons why Sikhs want these redressed. Further, when issues affecting Sikhs come up for debate in the media, our representations should not seem unprepared and

⁴⁵ T. SHER SINGH, The Numbers Game: It's Not Our Racket, August 2, 2012, sikhchic.com

defensive – leaving lingering doubts about our purposes and expectations in a highly vibrant, competitive and potentially divisive society.

The killing of six Sikhs at Oak Creek Gurdwara, in Wisconsin, on 5 August, 2012 by a white male again raised alarms about the risks that the Sikhs continue to face in the US. The crime is being investigated by the FBI though there are concerns that the likely linkage of the killer to hate groups among the Christian right may get buried in the electoral vote bank politics of the presidential campaign. Some lessons seem to be emerging from this happening – one that while Sikhs may have built relationships with their neighbors in the Diaspora that may not be true for their Gurdwaras. Another that there is possibly an undercurrent of hatred or suspicion about Sikhs in lay minds⁴⁶ and lastly that while the dignified stance of the congregation and the Sikh community has been lauded, the protests in India have been characterized by the intemperance that has always made Sikh causes to suffer. The proof is visible in photograph of swords drawn protestors from National Akali Dal with provocative anti American placards accompanying a news item in Times of India, Delhi, p. 10, August 7, 2012.⁴⁷

An unintended effect of the Delhi pogrom seems to have been that Delhi Sikhs and DSGMC have come to occupy a greater voice in Sikh affairs. Another manifestation of this attitude is the diminished centrality of Punjab politics, Akali political maneuverings and even the affairs of the SGPC and Akal Takht in Delhi and among the dispersed Sikh community elsewhere. This direction of change may not easily get reversed but potentially it could be beneficial to Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere out of Punjab. In the long run however it may weaken structure of the Sikh religious authority so assiduously cultivated by the SGPC over the years.

Engaging other faiths

The initial aim of interfaith engagement was to attempt to create, by informed discussion, a level of understanding on highly divisive scriptural positions and historical animosities between warring faith groups. In most dialogue exchanges, the more accepted view now is that while inter-cultural dialogue may be helpful, theological dialogue is practically impossible and may not even be desirable. The few Indian interfaith meets that I have attended are mostly caught up in either bonhomie or superficial exchanges on theological similarities. The process seems to be evolving and representation of Sikhs is mostly by the

⁴⁶ Even though Sikhs are well recognized in Canada - their three largest centers outside India are Vancouver, Mississauga- Brampton and London, England, they do struggle with an undefined suspicion. A 2009 Angus Reid poll of more than 1,000 Canadians showed that 53 per cent were positive of Judaism, 57 per cent for Buddhism and 72 per cent of Christianity. Islam was viewed favorably by 28% and Sikhism by 30 % - almost clubbed together. Section: <<http://blogs.vancouversun.com/category/staff/life/spirituality/the-search/>>The Search Largest Sikh community in North America struggles with suspicion. August 7, 2012

⁴⁷ Also see my op-ed in the Patriot News, Harrisburg, PA, 7 August, 2012 , concluding that Sikhs need help of the media to remove misconceptions arising out of prejudice and mistaken identity promoted by the stereotype post Sep. 11. A report based on interviews with me, Jewish and Ahmediya leaders in the same issue mentions the extent of attention that Jews pay to security issues when they plan events at Synagogues. For details see: http://www.pennlive.com/editorials/index.ssf/2012/08/sikhs_need_help_to_avoid_misco.html . In another 08/11/2012 Article by Byron Williams, Oakland Tribune, says: -- there was a certain je ne sais quoi that was missing. I can't help wondering whether there was a subliminal "othering" associated with the Sikh community. Did it require the irrationality of hatred put into action for the country to realize that since 9/11, Sikhs have been scapegoats for the ignorant? In our post 9/11 world, Sikhs have been victims of increasing number of hate crimes, school bullying and workplace discrimination --- pejoratives -- that include: "raghead," "Taliban," "terrorist," and "al-Qaida." >http://www.contraco.statimes.com/portlet/article/html/render_gallery.jsp?articleId=21284190&siteId=571&startImage=1 <

educated class or similarly placed people who may have limited reach to influence higher ups in religious authority hierarchy.

Interfaith engagement today also is being used, especially in the west, to facilitate some level of interaction and coming together of diverse faith groups to address current and imminent areas of societal concern. These networks also help the leaderships in different faith groups develop relationships that can be helpful in diffusing difficult situations. Some even suggest that to dispel ignorance most productive approach may be to expedite global public efforts of inter-religious engagements within and among our neighbors.⁴⁸ The suggestion would be helpful to some extent because firstly not all can easily engage in or be persuaded to engage in interfaith conversations. The ability to broaden the reach beyond activists and a group of interested persons is also constrained.

Even a limited reflection would point to our need for dialogue with Muslims and Hindus. At a practical level, Sikhs have effectively benefited by lobbying jointly with the Muslims in the US. Sikhs living in most of the Muslim countries including Pakistan do not feel insecure about their safety of person or property and have in most locations been left alone to worship their way. There have been difficulties no doubt with restrictions on non-Muslim worship in some Muslim countries, the Taliban and occasional undercurrents of below the surface tensions between the communities in some places, but in the overall Sikh-Muslim interface in recent past has been relatively free of rancor.

Muslims, in the post 1947 India, are no longer a silently suffering, diffident group of people trying to live down the stigma of separatism. Though they are mostly poor, their large and growing population gives them tremendous political leverage. Sikh relations with Muslims in India however have been sort of tentative. I do not recall any occasion when Sikhs may have gone out on a limb to defend Muslims against stereotyping in India. The Muslim voices too have been faint when Sikhs were victims.

I was invited to the 4-day Global Minorities Meet at the Parliament House Annexe, Delhi, organized by a group of Muslim activist organizations in early 2008. They did not invite any Hindu delegate, though Muslim leaders from Islamic countries were aplenty. Their clout was quite visible with Central Cabinet Ministers hosting dinners every evening and Hamid Ansari the Vice president, inviting all to a Garden party. Discussions were open but the communiqué issued soft pedaled Sikh issue of justice for 84 pogroms even though DSGMC had made a substantial contribution to the meet. My personal view is that *public* demonstration of Sikhs joining hands with Muslims, would be a high risk strategy in the West.

Considering that we are small in numbers, divided, not well organized, short on volunteers and do not have deep pockets or strong political lobby, we need to find ways to leverage our influence. The Diaspora model of a coalition of similarly affected minority groups coming together does not seem to be likely here. The moral voices also do not seem strong enough to effectively counter inflammatory rhetoric and frenzy that often unleashes trials by innuendo or waves of hate campaigns in the media. In such an environment, my sense is that we may yet get more support from segments of Hindus. Indian Muslims may turn supportive if they feel more self assured about themselves and may be about us too.

BRINGING CLOSURE

⁴⁸ Dr Harbans Lal in his comment mailed to me and posted on Sikh forums relating to my op-ed cited above.

Sikhs appear to be more buoyant than they have been in a long time in India. Sikh institutions are multiplying and doing some excellent work. The societal prejudice against them that was widely experienced earlier even by the most liberal Sikhs is at its lowest. The victims and families of 84 pogrom do remember their grim sufferings but their clear priority is to get out of grinding poverty and despondency subsuming their lives. To the Sikh intelligentsia, 1984 events seem a distraction - so have the need for political identity; though they continue to be concerned about Sikh religious identity issues.

On the other hand the influential western Sikh Diaspora would like that we receive justice, an expression of contrition, security for religion, language and culture along with some regional autonomy in a federal setting. Even though there would seem to be some divergence between the memory play and expectations in the Sikh Diaspora and Indian Sikhs, the fact is that the positions are evolving on all sides.

We have discussed at some length the questions relating to pursuit of justice, suggestions to forgive and forget the event and the variety of other factors that may have relevance in the process of making choices. We also argued that the trauma of 84 pogrom impacted all Sikhs though those who suffered loss of life and property constitute the core that have endured the most and have also set some markers that deserve recognition.

At the same time, the event, its memory and the poignancy of relevance of this trauma in our future positioning is receding in our own minds. This is so because the grinding lethargy and obstructive moves by the official machinery have reduced the process to a static position with little movement on unresolved issues, not much spoken about what may have been achieved and no effort by us to showcase any positives that the tragic event or its grueling aftermath may have given rise to.

Looking for and bringing out some positives from this sad and long story would help us as a community to possibly impart some added healing to the long suffering victims. We remain cognizant that it may not be possible to find a way that meets the urges and expectations of each one of us. In cases of injustice or grim tragedy it is hard enough for families and friends to look for the good – the notion seems far more outlandish and difficult when it is sought for communities.

In any case my sense is that there is a possibility that while Sikhs continue with the ongoing pursuit of justice and rehabilitation of the affected families, we may gain by highlighting the positives that we may find and agree to bring to public attention in a concerted and thoughtful manner. For this it may be instructive to draw upon the Sikh experience in the past in coping with trauma and see if that could help in our present search.

MEMORIALIZING

Traditionally what we seem to have been doing is that in difficult and trying times we never avoided or shirked away from facing the oppression that the evil were thrusting upon us. We took it on the chin and bore the atrocities with calm fortitude. We did not give up trying that the dissent gets resolved and continued our struggle. Yet we recognized what we thought was heroic or showed a sign of rare humane values or was in the shared interest of righteousness - we not only highlighted it but also accorded it a durable place to it in our memories in various

manners. The positive in the most traumatic situations was never lost on the Gurus or their Sikhs. Let us take a few examples.

On reading Guru Gobind Singh's Bachitra Natak one does not fail to notice that he is equally praising of valor whether it is by the enemy or the defenders. Witness the lavish praise for Kirpal Chand, the Kangra Chief as a true, valiant Rajput whose bravery was praised in the nine regions of the world – he was ally of Alif Khan. Likewise the Guru praises Hussain, Jujhar Singh, Gopal and so many others for their bravery. His manner of presentation is such as if he is a witness and not a participant to the conflict.

Another example from that period is the act of Bhai Kanhaiya to fetch water to all the fighters on the battle field including the enemy and tend to their wounds, much to the discomfiture of the Sikhs. The Guru however was appreciative of Bhai Kanhaiya's explanation when asked at the insistence of Sikhs that he saw the image of the Guru in them all – whether friend or foe. Bhai Kanhaiya continues to be revered as the rarest example of altruistic person.

The martyrdom of Guru Arjun strengthened Sikh resolve rather than weaken it. In Guru Hargobind's time the bards sang the songs of valor in *bir ras* as the new symbols of aigrette, canopy, sword and chase nurtured their confidence to carve out their own destiny. They did not cave in and took on the mantle of protectors of universal values.

Sikhs have used various facets of memorializing so that the preserved memory assumes an aura of the sacred and thus turns into a powerful expression of survival, renewal and moral victory in the face of extreme adversity. The following extract from the English version of the text of *ardas* is an example of the succinct manner in which the Sikh trauma from late 17th century to 1947 partition has been capsule as a memory:

'Meditating on the achievement of the dear and truthful ones, including the five beloved ones, the four sons of the tenth Guru, forty liberated ones, steadfast ones, constant repeaters of the Divine Name, those given to assiduous devotion, those who repeated the Nam, shared their fare with others, ran free kitchen, wielded the sword and overlooked faults and shortcomings, say "Waheguru", O Khalsa.

Meditating on the achievement of the male and female members of the Khalsa who laid down their lives in the cause of Dharma (religion and righteousness), got their bodies dismembered bit by bit, got their skulls sawn off, got mounted on spiked wheels, got their bodies sawn, made sacrifices in the service of the shrines (Gurdwaras), did not betray their faith, sustained their adherence to the Sikh faith with unshorn hair uptill their last breath, say "Wondrous Destroyer of darkness", O Khalsa.

O Immortal Being, eternal helper of Thy panth, benevolent Lord, bestow on the Khalsa the beneficence of unobstructed visit to and free management of Nankana Sahib (Pakistan) and other shrines and places of the Guru from which the Panth has been separated.'

We also have used oral media like phrases, verses, lyrics, stories et al to summarily describe traumatic experiences and in many cases to trivialize or even challenge the oppressors to reinforce courage in the community in extremely trying circumstances. Examples are many – *dadhi* recitals of *vaars* relating to several Sikh battles and sacrifices, verses jeering at killings of Sikhs by Manu, *deg tegh fateh*, *saakaa[s]* about *Akali Lehr* and the like. Some incidents are remembered using paintings, calendar art and memorabilia associated with the heroes.

Sikhs established Gurdwaras at various sites associated with their trauma. Gurdwara Shahid Ganj and the preserved well in its premises at Lahore speak of the story of the women and children who suffered tortures and gave their lives there. Memorials have been created or are planned at some of the sites of major Sikh battles. Plans to planting of trees and shrubs that grew at the time of Guru Gobind Singh in Machhiwara area are also afoot. Foundation stone for a 30 x 30 feet three-floor memorial within the Golden Temple complex for those killed during the Army assault in June 1984 was unveiled on 6 June, 2012.

Guru Gobind Singh has left us a vivid example of trying to give a chance to the process of reconciliation to resolve interminable cycles of hate and violence to right the injustices and gross violations suffered by Sikhs. Missive called Zafarnama – epistle of victory – that the Guru wrote to Aurangzeb unsparingly memorialized the injustices and treacheries committed by the satraps of the King yet the Guru also offered reconciliation saying: ‘if you were gracious enough to come to the village of Kangar, we could then see each other face to face. On the way there will be no danger to thy life for the whole tribe of Brars accepts my command. Come to me so that we may converse with each other, and I may utter some kind words to thee. I will send thee a horseman like one in a thousand, who will conduct thee, safe to my home.’ [58-61]

We thus see that several approaches have been used by Sikhs to memorialize their history and experienced trauma of persecution, sacrifices made in their struggles and during some of the trying times they lived through.

1984 pogrom should and does inspire a lot of reflection. Yet the memory of the pogrom that has survived is a legacy of fear, humiliation, bitterness and alienation. The best that the most difficult times always bring out in men has stayed obscured by the over-riding need to keep chasing the government inaction and attending the commissions of enquiry and various other charades to mitigate the suffering of the victim families.

A few movies and documentaries dealing with the pogrom such as Amu directed by Shonali Bose and The Widow Colony – India’s Unsettled Settlement directed by Harpreet Kaur have made an attempt at capturing the facets of the trauma that the victims continue to cope with. 1984 Sikhs’ Kristallnacht edited by Parvinder Singh is a powerful documentation of the burning of four Sikhs in Pahar Ganj area of Delhi. Authors of a number of reports and books have documented in detail what transpired undaunted by the enormity of the task and the risk of being marked by the power elite.

These efforts have been commendable. These must be lauded but I am not sure if collectively they can serve the purpose of memorializing in an effective and deserving manner. If we have to think of memorializing this episode, we may have to look a bit far and beyond. Let us look at the US September 11 experience here as an example.

Americans were stunned by the unexpected terror attack on their homeland on September 11, 2001, in which about three thousand people including firefighters, police and rescue workers were killed. It aroused very strong patriotic feelings in the population. The country has waged a terribly expensive and their longest yet military operation in the form of the Global War on Terror and spent billions of dollars to try and ensure that opportunity for launching a similar attack is denied to potential terrorists in the future. The evidence does suggest they have been successful in the latter so far.

To design a fitting memorial to those who died a contest was announced. Victims' families wanted the winning design to expose more of the tower bedrock and display personal items of the victims while Firefighters and Police wanted names of their fallen comrades set off from others. Both were accommodated in the winning design. It was an open process but significantly the memorial was intended to showcase the shared sense of trauma and the acts of bravery by the Firefighters, Police and other Rescue Personnel in trying to save the others. As will be seen there were two facets to their endeavor – response to offenders and remedies on one part and memorializing the event on the other. Both were linked but had separate sets of objectives and differing methodologies to accomplish the same.

MEMORIALIZE WHAT & HOW

So the question is what kind of memorial do we build? It should be a decision by Sikhs as a community, to the extent possible with the involvement or support of interfaith groups, voluntary agencies who are engaged in promotion of peace and harmony and any receptive media contacts. The best course would be to form a Committee supported by identified volunteer groups for specific tasks and responsibilities. The Committee should be open to receive suggestions and their recommended choices should be looked at by an Advisory Group before being adopted.

Guardians of the memory of November 1984 should primarily be the widows and their kids and their input should be given high consideration. For this purpose they would have to be organized or at least brought together. This responsibility may best be divided between Sikh Forum and Nishkam who have maintained contact with them. The Committee may gather the views and suggestions of the community through meetings or presentations arranged in a few locations. Wider consultations with the community can be accomplished using the electronic media resources.

Our foregoing discussions would possibly trigger some thoughts about what are the types of things that should be memorialized about this episode. We would however offer a few additional comments before we put a suggested listing of what all the memorial could display or provide to serve its purpose of not only becoming a complete and authentic resource on the pogrom, but also recognize all those whose support and co-operation helped the Sikhs at that critical time, identify any sacrifices that must be recognized and highlight any positives that may be attributed to the Sikh conduct during and post the pogrom.

My conversations with the widows lead me to believe that they certainly did not entertain any thought of revenge at any time. Their consistent view was that though the perpetrators were mostly Hindus, they were incited and led by political agents and also some hoodlums. They again were conscious that those who tried to rescue them were mostly Hindus and members of other faiths as were those who provided them immediate support and succor as they were being moved to the relief camps. As time went by most of the heavy lifting was done by the Sikh community but the initial help by and kindness of volunteer activists from other faiths is etched in their minds.

As they slowly started trudging through the daily routines, their resolve received spiritual and ethical strength from the Gurdwaras and Gurbani. They thought of their responsibilities. They thought of the sacrifices made by the Gurus for the well being of one and all. They thought of the message of acceptance of divine will that the Gurus repeatedly stressed. To them trying to

keep their children safe and free of hate became their dharma for this was one sure way they could see them adjust to their trauma and live through their deeply scarred lives.

So even as the widows talked about their hurt and did not want the children to forget about it, they also did not want them to become obsessed with hate and vengeance. This may not have ensured that the kids will sense closure – perhaps they did not, nor did the mothers. The kids may have dropped out of school, drifted into depression, took refuge in use of drugs, some committed suicide but none, not one of them ever committed a hate or violent anti social act or crime. The cycle of hate did lose traction. It stopped.

The story lives on today – almost three decades later. If we ponder over it, here was a unique occurrence that happened. I asked them if it was fear that made you do it. Their response was touching and clear. ‘We lost our husbands, fathers, sons in front of our own eyes. We were dishonored and raped. We were left with nothing. There was hardly a pain and suffering that did not befall us. What more could have been done to us? We were left with the kids, the old and the infirm. They had to be cared for.’ Words are mine, the thoughts were theirs.

Let us build a memorial that is a testimony to the collective contribution to societal peace and harmony by a group of deeply scarred, poor, uneducated Sikh women whom fate had dealt an extremely hard blow. They cried. They died several deaths but struggled on only as a Sikh of the Guru would have, to go on living under divine *hukam* and endeavor ceaselessly to deliver on the responsibilities that are placed on us. It is the making of such choices by a widow that the Guru perhaps had in mind when he said - *Satheea Eaei N Aakheean Jo Marriaa Lag Jalannih Naanak Satheea Jaaneeanih J Birehae Chott Marannih* – call not them 'satee', who burn themselves along with their husbands' corpses; O Nanak know only those as 'satees' who live the death of separation.

Let us build a memorial that honors fortitude; that honors the burden of *girhee*; that honors so many good people around who in ways, big and small, help us get past our most difficult and trying times; that honors the collective strength and resolve of the weak and vulnerable and that recognizes that honor does not only come through great worldly success but also having lived a life that serves whom nobody will own or tend to if abandoned. This could be as great a contribution to the wellbeing of the society as any.

Let the memorial be a place of peace where the sacred music of all persuasions brings a deep sense of calm to all who visit. Let it recount what happened without shame or rancor but in love that only gushes forth when we let our defenses drop and face the truth and reality of the good and bad that we all are capable of. Let us do it so that not again are so many burnt alive, nor are so many children left without fathers, their lives scarred forever. Let us do it inspired by the prayer of the Guru – *jagat jalanda raakh lai apni kirpa dhar* – pray, save this burning world through thy kind mercy!

Let the memorial we create be a celebration of life, of the shared quest of all for peace and harmony. Located in Delhi it will add luster to the image that Sikhs have inherited here through the great examples set by Guru Harkrishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Mata Sundari, the great Misl leaders like Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Baghel Singh, added to by the builders of the modern New Delhi and the emerging vibrant India.

Let me now do little bit of mechanical detailing for what it is worth – offer some bullets on what the memorial may possibly include:

- A Sikh prayer room
- A Chapel for silent prayer by any faith believer
- Memorial tablet with names of those killed and selected information
- Display of Pogrom: time line, pictures, paintings, books, reports, news clippings, articles, etc – to be digitized later
- Damage to Gurdwaras, loss of property, businesses
- Media reports, articles, pictures from their archives
- Screening room for movies, documentaries, slide shows, power point presentations etc relating to the Pogrom and other activities promoted by the Memorial Committee
- Quest for Justice – commissions, police, CBI, Court Judgments, cases, evidence, affidavits and other materials as judged by those who helped with this effort
- Citizen Help: saving Sikhs by risking ire, citizen enquiries, interviews, affidavits, relief efforts, lobbying with political and administrative authorities
- Display or library of sketches and stories of widows and other survivors who had to take responsibility for family with pictures as possible; data on kids and their growth
- The uniqueness elements: the organized nature of the pogrom, the selection of targets and manner of killing and the peaceful response of widows and the kids
- Memorial a monument to the dead but more a celebration of those who lived on and took the responsibility for their future and those of their dependants. They are the real heroes of this tragic episode.

One more suggestion comes to mid. The trauma about 1984 happenings, more specifically in Amritsar and Delhi, is deeply etched into the Sikh minds globally. Both stories even though dispersed space and time-wise, are historically linked and in some ways get connected during their recall in Sikh memories. It may therefore be worth considering that when the Memorial as discussed above is taken up for execution, the plans include the possibilities of carving out subsets of exhibits whose digitized versions can be assembled into customized packages that can be used for displays at Conferences, in Exhibitions and Galleries and for organized shows anywhere in the world. This would necessitate that the Memorial Secretariat is equipped to perform library functions in addition to their curator role.

EXPECT RESISTANCE

Presently construction work is in hand at Virasat-e-Khalsa memorial project at Anandpur Sahib, Baba Bandha Singh War Memorial at Chhappar Chiri in Mohali, Wadda Galugharsa Memorial at Kup Rahera in Sangrur and Chhota Galughara Memorial in Khanuwan Chamb in Gurdaspur with generous funding support from the State Government.⁴⁹ These projects have not drawn the ire of any group in India.

⁴⁹ Chief Minister Badal approved Rs 44.52 crore to mitigate the shortfall of the estimates and Rs 74.55 crore for phase II of the Virasat-e-Khalsa project on 2 Oct. 2012 and directed plans to be prepared to initiate activities like historical plays, vaar recitation and shows at the sites particularly on weekends. [Tribune News Service, October 2, 2012]

While recounting the efforts for justice under existing laws and seeking of some rehabilitative measures for the victim families may not draw ire, displays about the organized nature of the pogrom and the complicity of political leaders is likely to be strongly resisted by the power elite of most hues in the country because this may likely reflect on them.

I am saying this looking at what happened when the Sikhs formally announced the foundation stone laying of the Gurdwara to memorialize the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple complex by the Indian army. On 6 June, 2012 Sikhs witnessed the five Singh Sahibs unveil the foundation stone for a 30 x 30 feet three-floor memorial for those killed during the Army assault in June 1984.

Intelligence Bureau reported that radical elements like Damdami Taksal and Dal Khalsa were trying to revive the separatist movement and on June 7 the Ministry of Home Affairs wrote to Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal advising action against radical elements behind the setting up of the memorial. Balbir Punj stated that the BJP was opposed to the “politics of memorials”. In a statement in the House on 22 June 2012, Badal said it was felt that this “saka” needed to be commemorated through a symbol of peace and harmony.

While the construction of the memorial at Amritsar is proceeding, the subject has also elicited interest in the foreign media. A story by Jason Burke of The Guardian published on 2 October, 2012 read in the situation that ‘Support for some kind of memorial appears almost universal in Amritsar --- Analysts say permission for the memorial, mooted since 2005, was granted after the local ruling party was surprised by widespread protests over the hanging of a jailed Sikh militant this year --- there is a new cult status among teenagers of Bhindranwale of a Sikh Che Guevara --- A key grievance of the Sikhs is the failure of the government to punish those responsible for the attack on the Golden Temple, the mob violence or abuses by security forces during the insurgency.’⁵⁰ So while the debate continues, some incidents can be used to speculate about the rising specter of Sikh militancy. A word of caution here for Sikhs – stay watchful about a repeat of Oak Creek in India for the media frenzy and stereotyping of Sikhs, when an incident like the attack on Lt. Gen. K S Brar happens, can easily whip up uncontrollable anti-Sikh hate in some.

After Brar questioned the Centre's silence over the issue of memorial being built in Golden Temple complex, some within the government started to strongly advocate that hardliners would use the memorial to keep the memories of 1980s alive among the youth. Even though a team sent by central government was told that the new structure would be a 'gurudwara' and also informed by the state authorities that no name or photograph of any person killed during Operation Blue Star by the Army would be written on any wall of the proposed 'gurudwara', a senior home ministry official cautioned the state government as well as the SGPC on 13 October, 2012 about the provisions of the Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1988, that prohibits any act which promotes or attempt to promote disharmony or feeling of enmity, hatred or ill-will in society and has a provision for imprisonment up to five years with fine, if the managers of the religious institutions violate the law. The official said, "The

⁵⁰ Sikh Golden Temple memorial reopens old wounds in India <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/02/sikh-golden-temple-memorial-india>>

onus of misuse, if any, squarely falls on the SGPC if it allows the memorial to be erected to glorify those who took law into their hands and killed many innocent people".⁵¹

CONCLUDING

There will be resistance from many and possibilities of many bogies being created cannot be ruled out. Yet it can be hoped that if the project is launched with the involvement of interfaith groups and social activists, many voices in support of the mission will also arise. If that is accomplished, it may indeed bring some kind of closure in the same way as memorializing did in the past after even more gruesome occurrences.

Here it may be relevant to quote what Barack Obama said on visiting the concentration camp at the Buchenwald in Germany: 'we must reject the false comfort that others' suffering is not our problem --- It is up to us to bear witness; to ensure that the world continues to note what happened here; to remember all those who survived and all those who perished, and to remember them not just as victims, but also as individuals who hoped and loved and dreamed just like us.'

The memorial should be an abiding recognition of the innocent who were killed, an inspiring reminder of the struggle that the affected families lived through guided mainly by the frail widows and honor the fortitude of these real victims of the event and heroes of this long, sad story. The good in those who helped the victims must be recognized. The story of the pogrom and within that the story of these women must be told and its memory preserved.

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⁵¹ Vishwa Mohan, TNN reporting 13/10/12 at <[http://timesofindia .indiatimes. com/india/ Centre-cites- 1988-law- warns-SGPC- on-memorial/ articleshow/ 16789587. cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Centre-cites-1988-law-warns-SGPC-on-memorial/articleshow/16789587.cms)>