

OPERATION BLUE STAR AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SIKHS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

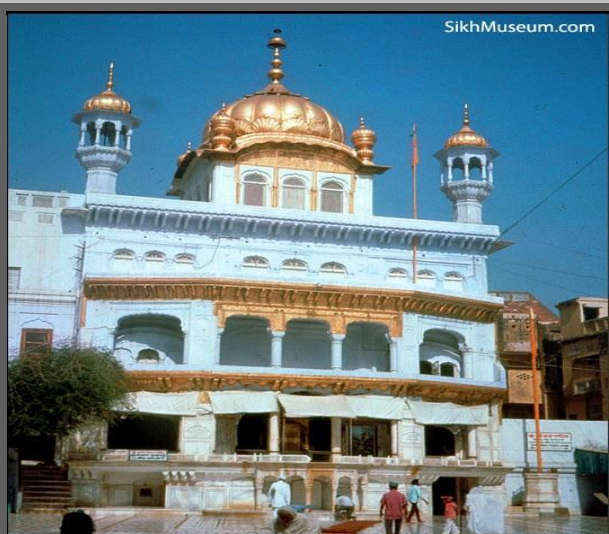


Image Source: Sikh Museum.¹

Introduction

The June 1984 was one of the grimmest times in India's Pre-Modi history. During that time, Sikhs of India were subjected to all elements of an apartheid state, ranging from racial segregation to full scale military operations. From June 1-10 that year, the Indian Government committed one of the most heinous crimes a human mind could possibly think of, by assaulting the holiest place of the Sikh religion i.e., the Golden Temple (*Harmandir Sahib*) at Amritsar, located in the Indian Punjab.² The sanctity of the Golden Temple for Sikhs is, what Mecca is for Muslims. Nonetheless, despite its holiness and the religious sentiments of the Sikh nation, the then Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army to forcibly flush out Sikh spiritual and political leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale along with its socio-political and religious followers.³ The carnage was codenamed

¹ "1984 Indian Army Attack on the Golden Temple Complex," *Sikh Museum*, 2012, <http://www.sikhmuseum.com/bluestar/photographs/index.html#tn3=0/slide3>.

² Louis E. Fenech and W. H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, Third Edition (Lanham, Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 233–34; W. H. McLeod, *The A to Z of Sikhism* (Lanham, Maryland, USA: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 94–95.

³ Pranjal Protim Barua, "Exploration and Analysis of the Collage of Represented 'Truth': Variations in the Narratives of Operation Blue Star," *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities* 1, no. 5 (February 2014): 129–41.

as Operation *Blue Star* and Mrs. Gandhi meticulously chose a Sikh Major General Kuldeep Singh Barar (later promoted to Lieutenant General) to do all the dirty work to further the widening divide within the Sikh nation. Also, the operation was conducted when the temple was overwhelmed by devotees due to Guru Arjan's Martyrdom. June 2022, marked the 38th anniversary of Operation *Blue Star* and even after almost four decades, the wounds of the Sikh nation still bleed.



Figure 1: The Indian Sikhs protesting and raising slogans in favour of Khalistan at the Golden Temple (India) on June 6, 2022.⁴

The Indian Sikhs, exiled, as well as the international diaspora still demand justice and compensation for the thousands killed, missing, and the atrocities committed against the Sikh women. They demand the fulfilment of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord of July 1985. The latter was signed between the then PM Rajiv Gandhi (son of Indira Gandhi) and the President of Akali Dal Harchand Singh Longowal. Though, apparently the agreement was signed under duress and Logowal's assassination cements such a hypothesis; nonetheless, it was perhaps the maximum that the besieged Sikhs could fetch from the Indian government.⁵

⁴ "On Operation Blue Star's 38th Anniversary, Khalistan Slogans Chanted Near Golden Temple," *The Wire*, June 6, 2022, <https://thewire.in/politics/operation-blue-star-38th-anniversary-khalistan-slogans-golden-temple>.

⁵ Fenech and McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, 258; McLeod, *The A to Z of Sikhism*, 94.

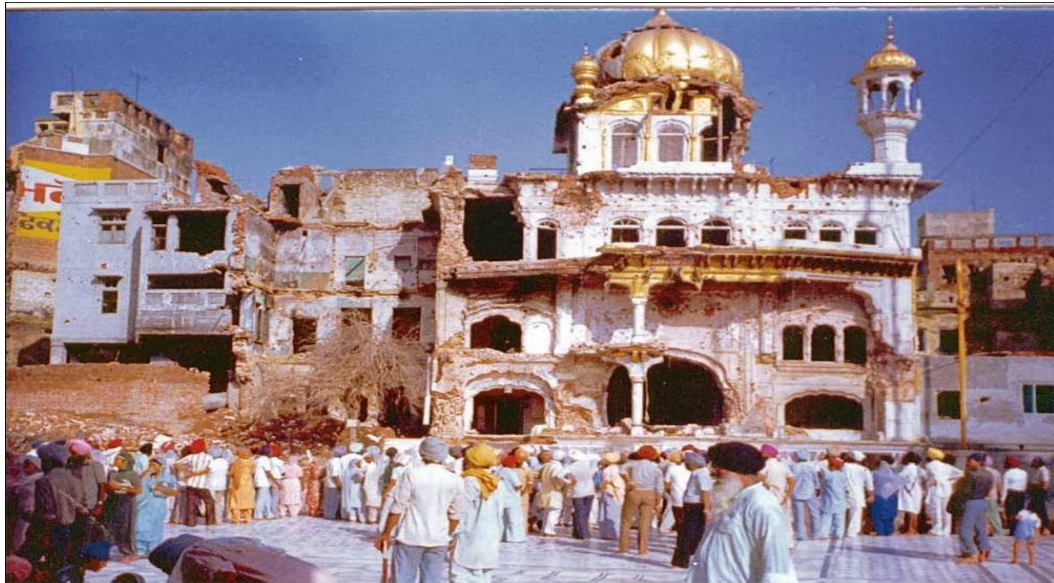


Figure 2: The Golden Temple destroyed by the Indian Army in June 1984.⁶

It is noticeable that Bhindranwale was Indira Gandhi's political ally and previously helped her political party the Indian National Congress in securing legislative seats in Punjab and elsewhere. However, the Sikh majority party Shiromani Akali Dal did little cooperation with Mrs. Gandhi, and naturally Bhindranwale, was adamant and hopeful that his cooperation could harness better living conditions for Sikhs in India. Such illusions shattered when he along with thousands of Sikh pilgrims were killed in a wholesale manner using unnecessary deadly force in June 1984. Also, a complete media blackout was ordered, Sikh movement was restricted, and strict curfew was imposed across Punjab to further shrivel the Sikh voices. It is strange that Bhindranwale's marginal political disagreements with Mrs. Gandhi were enough in declaring him an outlaw and an enemy of the Indian state. Perhaps, PM Gandhi exercised a prequel to *Blue Star* in 1975-77, when she declared an emergency and suspended the Indian Constitution.⁷ In the aftermath of the unfortunate event, with a clear intent to indiscriminately kill and destroy the besieged Sikhs inside the Golden Temple, the Indian Army used main battle tanks, armoured vehicles, heavy artillery, and helicopters in executing Operation *Blue Star*. During the same year, Operation *Wood Rose* was also conducted to exterminate Sikh resistance. Later, Operation *Black Thunder I* and Operation *Black Thunder II* were also conducted in 1986 and 1988, respectively to further decimate the Sikh nation.⁸

⁶ Lakhpreet Kaur, "Part 2: The Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984 | The Battle of Amritsar," *Kaur Life*, January 3, 2022, <https://kaurlife.org/2022/03/01/part-2-the-anti-sikh-violence-of-1984-part-2-the-battle-of-amritsar/>.

⁷ Paul R. Brass, ed., *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 55.

⁸ Ron E. Hassner, "Religious Intelligence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 5 (2011): 684–710.

Analysis and Afterthought

Why Indira Gandhi chose a Sikh soldier of the Indian Army known as Major General Kuldeep Singh Brar to storm the Golden Temple – the Holiest place in Sikh religion? How saint Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale turned into a terrorist from being a close and trusted associate of PM Indira Gandhi? Was military operation and killing of thousands of innocent Sikhs the last resort? How and why 1984 is still the blackest year in the history of modern India? These are among the numerous questions a common follower of the Sikh religion still asks from the Republic of India and the Indian Army. Let us now probe the unfortunate incident in the light of the aforementioned questions.

The Operation *Blue Star* was a deliberate military operation carried out of political necessity by the Indian Army on the direct orders of then PM Indira Gandhi in the first week of June 1984, to kill or capture Sikh saint named as Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale and to clear the Golden Temple of lightly armed Sikh devotees. The operation was a desperate attempt by PM Gandhi to use Sikh elements in the Indian Army in such a way that may result in a twofold effect. First, Sikh General's actions would yield in hatred within the Sikh community and its people would be divided either in its favour or against it. Second, to give the world a secular view – in which a Sikh General of the Indian Army carried out a military operation against the people of its own religion at the holiest Sikh Temple.

Many Indians say that perhaps Indira Gandhi chose Maj. Gen. Kuldeep Singh Brar – a Sikh, for Operation *Blue Star* so he would be able to fully understand the sanctity and holiness of the Golden Temple Complex and would refrain from desecrating the *Akal Takht*. Well, it sounds the perspective of a few people who intentionally paint the 'planned massacre' as an inadvertent or unplanned escalation of the battle between Indian Army and Sikh devotees. Even for the sake of an argument, if one considers this perspective – another thing comes to one's mind, isn't PM Gandhi wanted to create a fuss or rift within the Sikh community by deputing a Sikh Indian Army General to do the dirty work? The latter makes sense in relation to the former. How ridiculous the assertion may look; it still has strong footings since Operation *Blue Star* was prepared in such a hasty manner that exhibited serious military flaws as well as lack of operational brilliance in its execution.

It still is a surprise for the students of Indian politics that once Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale was a close associate of Indira Gandhi, and he campaigned for her so that the Indian National Congress may form its government in Sikh-dominated Indian state of Punjab. Thanks to the print and electronic media archives, one can see and observe Bhindrawale and Indira together campaigning for the Congress. Otherwise, Indian Hindu-dominated media would have painted an entirely false and malicious picture of Bhindrawale and his devoted followers. Indira was well aware of the influence and respect Bhindrawale possessed in the hearts and minds of the Sikh people and being a believer

of Realism, she was desperate to either turn that devotion in her favour or simply eliminate it by any means possible. After using him and his followers, it was time to get rid of them. It was the basic reason that Bhindrawale turned into an enemy of the Indian state from being a spiritual leader and Indira's ally (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The bullet ridden body of Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale.⁹

Operation *Blue Star* saw some heinous crimes committed by the Indian Army. It is shocking that the Indian Army retired Major General Shabeg Singh was among the thousands of Sikhs killed during the massacre. Maj. Gen. Shabeg Singh was the one who fought exceptionally in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War and was responsible for the arming and training of 'Mukti Bahini' (a terrorist group) (Figure 4). But surely, Shabeg was unaware of the fact that soon he was destined to become a victim of Indian Army's duplicity and hypocrisy. Shabeg and the rest of Sikhs were brutally murdered, since their only crime was to demand freedom and provincial autonomy under the auspices of the Indian Constitution (Figure 5).

⁹ Radhika Chopra, *Amritsar 1984: A City Remembers* (Lanham, Maryland, USA: Lexington Books, 2018), 17.



Figure 4: A profile picture of Maj. Gen. Shabeg Singh.¹⁰



Figure 5: The Indian Army soldiers proudly stand near the desecrated dead body of Maj. Gen. Shabeg Singh.¹¹

¹⁰ "Pictures Of General Shabeg Singh (Shaheed)," *Sikh Sangat*, December 8, 2007, <https://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?/topic/32808-pictures-of-general-shabeg-singh-shaheed/>.

¹¹ Chopra, *Amritsar 1984: A City Remembers*, 38.

The Operation *Blue Star* was followed by Operation *Wood Rose* that was aimed to “to arrest secessionists who roamed the Punjab countryside.”¹² However, in doing so, the Indian Police, Army, and other law enforcement agencies grossly violated liberties and basic human rights. An author cited the survivor of Indian atrocities Wassan Singh Zaffarwal who argued that:

“Prior to June 1984 we used to talk about the Anandpur Sahib resolution because it contained the right to self-determination within India. After 1984 we needed our own independent home. The government that could kill hundreds, send thousands to prison, rape our women and generally humiliate our people, there could never be a compromise with them! We now needed an independent home for the Sikhs.”¹³

#NeverForget84 and the Assassination of Sidhu Moose Wala

The Indian singer and Congress leader Shubhdeep Singh Sidhu also known as Sidhu Moose Wala was assassinated on May 29, 2022, in the Mansa district of the Indian Punjab, and according to various reports a Canada-based gangster took the responsibility.¹⁴ However, it is worthy to probe that Moose Wala’s views regarding the genocide of Sikhs during June 1984 were quite against the Indian statecraft. Apparently, Moose Wala was a strong supporter of Sikh nationalism, and his assassination could be the result of such continued righteousness (Figure 6).

¹² Anne Noronha Dos Santos, *Military Intervention and Secession in South Asia: The Cases of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, and Punjab* (Westport, Connecticut, United States of America: Praeger Security International, 2007), 102.

¹³ Joyce J. M. Pettigrew, *The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerilla Violence* (London: Zed Books, 1995), 149.

¹⁴ “Sidhu Moose Wala: Punjabi Singer and Rapper Shot Dead,” *The Guardian*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/30/sidhu-moose-wala-punjabi-singer-rapper-shot-dead-shubhdeep-singh-sidhu>.



Figure 6: A screenshot of Sidhu Moose Wala singing against the Indian statecraft and lamenting the carnage of June 1984.¹⁵

Indian Propaganda against Pakistan

It is very disturbing that the Indian statecraft has an established habit of putting all the blame of its own wrongdoings on its rival Pakistan. A Sikh survivor argued that “There were many incidents when the [Indian] army went into villages that Sikhs fought back with their *kirpans*. Many chose to die in this way. Many young men slept on the rooftops and when the army trucks came, would flee.”¹⁶ In such a state-sponsored authoritarian system where the Sikhs had little or no freedom, how could Pakistan provide assistance to Sikh victims of Indian atrocities across the international border (Figure 7).

¹⁵ “Sidhu Moose Wala- Never Forget 84,” *YouTube*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z19ks8tuD0Q>.

¹⁶ Pettigrew, *The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerilla Violence*, 149.

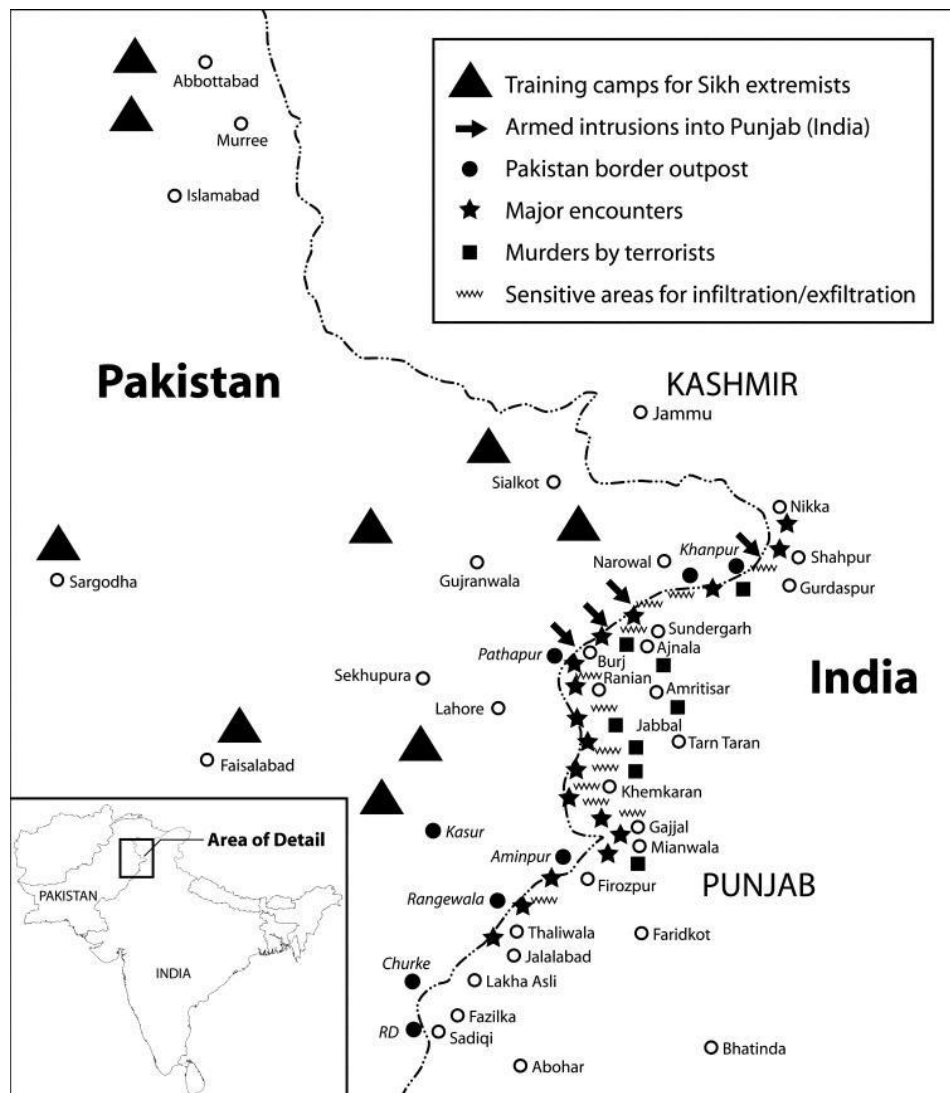


Figure 7: The Indian propaganda regarding Sikh training camps in Pakistan.¹⁷

The Contemporary Indian Sikhs

The diaspora of the Indian Sikhs continues to protest the carnage of June 1984 and are relentlessly persuading the international community to probe the Sikh genocide in India. The exiled Babbar Khalsa International of the Sikh nation continues to operate in Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Also, the dilapidated Sikh farmers of India are facing unfriendly legislation and their protests across India made international headlines.

17 Santos, *Military Intervention and Secession in South Asia: The Cases of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, and Punjab*, 114.



Figure 8: The Indian Sikhs diaspora in Toronto, Canada, remembering Operation *Blue Star*.

Note the portrait of Maj. Gen. Shabeg Singh on the roof of Hummer.

Conclusions

In hindsight, it can be concluded that the attack on Golden Temple or Operation *Blue Star* was a calculated and premeditated attempt by the Indian statecraft to somehow fake and fade the Sikh distinct identity. The unfortunate event was not an accident, however, it did stir up the religious sentiments of the Sikh nation. It is to be remembered here that the killing of PM Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, at the hands of her two Sikh guards was the truest manifestation of such religious sentiments.¹⁸

Today, every honest and sensible soul mourns for the Sikh victims of Operation *Blue Star*. The chief architect of the latter military operation Lt. Gen. Kuldip Singh Brar survived many assassination attempts by the self-righteous Sikhs. It is quite traumatising that despite irrefutable facts and the accounts of the eye-witnesses, Lt. Gen Brar continues to deny any foul play.¹⁹ Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale's 'Babbar Khalsa International' still operates outside 'Democratic India' since there is no place in India for Sikhs who demand rights and freedom within the framework of the Indian Constitution and the Anandpur Sahib resolution. The United Nations, European Union, and various organizations of human rights must investigate the dilapidated and worsening human rights conditions in India for Sikhs and other minorities including Muslims and Dalits.

¹⁸ Brass, *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, 74.

¹⁹ "Fair & Square - Lt. Gen. KS Brar - Operation Blue Star Interview," YouTube, July 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLiBFUQexoc>.

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