

# Remembering the Innocent Victims of the November 1984 Massacre

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”  
*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”  
*Article 5, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

“No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.”  
*Article 9, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*



## PURPOSE

To commemorate the thousands of innocent Sikhs who were murdered, tortured, raped, beaten, and burnt alive during the Delhi massacre in November, 1984.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, the Sikh struggle for autonomy heightened with increasing demands from the Akali Dal (major political party in Punjab) that promises made by the government at the time of India's independence be fulfilled. The government of India broke off discussions in May of 1982 resulting in heightened militancy both by Sikh separatists and by government security. The execution of young Sikh men in staged "encounters" with security forces was integral in setting up a cycle of violence.<sup>1</sup> This progression of events culminated in Operation Bluestar on June 4, 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army to invade the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, Harmandir Sahib (commonly referred to as "The Golden Temple"). Thousands of innocent pilgrims were killed and historical buildings, including the Akal Takht (the highest seat of religious authority), were demolished. Over thirty other Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) were also invaded and thousands of innocent people killed.

On October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two Sikh security guards. In the days that followed, anti-Sikh pogroms paralyzed New Delhi and most of Northern India, ultimately claiming at least 2,733 lives by government report (5015 lives by affidavits collected from victims' families in New Delhi alone).<sup>2</sup> Sikhs were beaten, stabbed, doused in kerosene and burned alive by mobs, tens of thousands of Sikh homes and businesses were burned.<sup>3</sup> The slaughter of Sikhs took place throughout India, even on trains headed to Punjab from around the

<sup>1</sup> Khalsa Human Rights Report, 1994, p.4

<sup>2</sup> "A Decade after Massacre, some Sikhs find Justice," N.Y. Times, by John Burns, 9/16/96, p.1

<sup>3</sup> Who are the Guilty?, People's Union for Civil Liberties, New Delhi, 1985, p.21

country. According to Chief Justice Sikri, “The Prime Minister’s assassination was seized upon as an opportune psychological pretext by those bent on exploiting the tension for political and material gains, to trigger off a massive, deliberate, planned onslaught on the life, property, and honor of a comparatively small, but easily identifiable minority community.”<sup>4</sup> Many of the organizers of these anti-Sikh pogroms have been identified as politicians at the highest levels of the Indian government. These individuals roam free even today and continue to participate in elections. No attempt has ever been made by the Indian government to bring them to justice.

## **ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND POLICE**

“Two lessons can be drawn from the experience of the Delhi riots. One is about the extent of criminalisation of our politics and the other about the utter unreliability of our police force in a critical situation.”<sup>5</sup>

-Retired Supreme Court Justice V.M. Tarkunde

- It is now an established fact that during the height of the violence in Delhi, the police not only refused to assist and protect Sikhs being hounded throughout the city, but there are recorded instances where the police were actively involved in the beating and looting or led the mobs in an orchestrated attack.<sup>6</sup>
- The Tarkunde Report states, “There is evidence that in several areas local Congress (I) leaders held meetings on the night of October 31, and these preceded the attacks and killings of the Sikhs... the Congress (I) ring leaders paid Rs. 1000 to each killer; as boasted by the killers themselves who invariably used to be heavily drunk before killing.”<sup>7</sup>

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

Human rights violations and atrocities continue to occur towards minority groups all over India including the areas of Punjab, Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Nagaland, and more. Freedoms we take for granted are non-existent for citizens of this “democracy,” such as simple freedom of speech and the right to voice one’s opinion. In fact, political and human rights activists who utilize non-violent means are targeted for torture and abuse.

- The bloody conflict in the Indian State of Punjab drew to a close in 1993, but the restoration of an elected government has not meant the restoration of the rule of law. To the contrary, the Punjab police continue to torture, kill, or cause their victims to disappear with impunity. The price of the government’s apparent success against the separation is the legacy of these abuses: a corrupt and brutal police force whose recourse to murder and torture has been sanctioned by the states as acceptable means of combating political violence. There is no indication that the government at the state or federal level has made any effort to investigate these abuses or prosecute the perpetrators, even though the identity of the latter is well documented.<sup>8</sup>
- With the bloody conflict in Indian controlled Kashmir now in its fourth year, Indian troops have embarked on a “catch and kill” campaign against Muslim militants, resulting in a sharp escalation of human rights abuse, including summary executions of hundreds of detainees in the custody of security forces. Troops have also engaged in reprisal attacks against Indians, assaults of medical workers, rape, torture, and arson. The upsurge in or other abuse is a testament to the failure of Indian government’s attempt to resolve crisis through force.<sup>9</sup>
- “Disappearances” in Punjab continue to be a problem. In a disturbing development on September 6, 1995, the General Secretary of the Akali Dal Human Rights Wing, Jaswant S. Khalra (who had documented several “unclaimed” bodies of Sikh men at cremation sites throughout Punjab) was abducted by the Punjab police and his whereabouts still remain a mystery with denial from the police.<sup>10</sup> *It has now been proven that Khalra was tortured and killed while in police custody.*

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<sup>4</sup> Report of Citizens’ Commission, New Delhi, 1985

<sup>5</sup> Truth About Delhi Violence (Tarkunde Report), Citizens for Democracy, New Delhi, 1985

<sup>6</sup> Khalsa Human Rights Report, 1994, p. 7

<sup>7</sup> Tarkunde Report, p.17, 22

<sup>8</sup> Legacy of Abuses in Punjab, Physicians for Human Rights, 1994

<sup>9</sup> Report on Kashmir, physicians for Human Rights, 1995

<sup>10</sup> “Determining the fate of the ‘Disappeared’ in Punjab,” Amnesty International, 1995, p. 2