

"I felt like a refugee in my own country. In fact, I felt like a Jew in Nazi Germany." - Khushwant Singh

I write these lines on October 31, 2005. It is exactly 21 years to the day since Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. The line quoted above refers to the experience of Sikhs in the days following the assassination, when it seemed as though India's capital was leased out for sometime to Satan, in order for the Sikh community to be taught "a lesson."

For those readers outside India to whom Khushwant Singh is a stranger, think of Thomas Friedman, the well-known, controversial, New York Times columnist. Imagine that a day arrives when Friedman was to issue a statement like the above, if Jews once again were to become a target for persecution in the United States. Till very recently, before the revolution in electronic media, Khushwant Singh was probably the best known journalist in the English print media in India. Moreover, he was also very close to the Nehru-Gandhi family, his magazine The Illustrated Weekly of India and the widely-circulating newspapers he edited never failing to heap sychophantic praise not just on Indira Gandhi, but even on her fascist son, Sanjay. But the pogrom against Sikhs in North India in November 1984 was of such violent intensity, with sanction from the highest offices in the country, that even the normally fawning Khushwant Singh had to fall back on his lonely courage and speak out on behalf of his (minority) community, against a government led by a son of his beloved ruling family.

Leading up to Khushwant Singh's volte-face was a telephone conversation with the then President of India, Giani Zail Singh, on November 1, 1984. Fearful that a lumpen mob may be heading to attack him in his house in the heart of New Delhi, he called the President and asked him to act. The President responded by advising him to take shelter in a Hindu's house, saying that this was the best that he could "do"! Bear in mind that the President is, by the Indian Constitution, the supreme commander of the armed forces. But then, even his own motorcade was stoned, en route home from the airport the previous day, when he returned from a visit abroad. Moreover, those who know the history of "the Punjab problem" also know Zail's hand in it. Nothing like the memory of your own deceit and craftiness to paralyze you into cowardly inaction.

This was one of the reasons for Khushwant Singh's turnaround.

No less than ten inquiry commissions have submitted their findings about the 1984 pogrom (one might add, so far), Nanavati's (in August 2005) being the latest. It bears reflection that the latest inquiry, like so many others before it, recommended further investigation. What? Yes, you heard that right. There are crimes committed by the state where its powers allow it to hide the truth forever (the evidence is concealed, classified or destroyed). The crimes of the Indian state in 1984 do not belong in that category. About few atrocities in modern history anywhere has so much of the truth been established and circulated so widely, the evidence gathered so meticulously and assiduously by people belonging to all political stripes (including such stalwarts of orchestrated political violence as senior members of the BJP). And yet there are people who believe that more of the truth needs to be known! Even when eternal procrastinators like Narasimha Rao, who was the Home Minister of India during the 1984 pogrom, and perhaps rewarded for his pliant cowardice with prime ministership after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, are dead!

The events in Delhi in 1984 changed me and many others who were witness to them profoundly. They also changed the city and the country, for the carnage in Bombay in 1992 and the genocide in Gujarat in 2002, each accounting for thousands of brutal murders, cannot be understood properly without reckoning with the far-reaching legacy of what happened in Delhi in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. The Delhi pogrom suddenly enlarged the barbaric limits of the possible, especially since it happened under the very eyes of power, in the heart of the capital of the "world's largest democracy." There were new lines drawn on the earth as to what was possible for men to do to their fellow men and women in independent India, new guideposts as to what was acceptable in a society which laid claims to being "civilized" and "democratic."

Twenty-one years later, despite official apologies from Congress President Sonia Gandhi (in 1998) and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh earlier this year, justice is many leagues away. Though thousands have been accused, a mere half a dozen criminals have been convicted. And some of the accused are known to be dead!

Sikhs and Delhi before 1984 - Some Personal Memories:

I first came to live in Delhi as a boarding student in Modern School, whose imposing red facade still catches the eye as one drives on Barakhamba Road, towards Connaught Circus. This was in 1978. I spent two years at Modern, one of them with a Sikh room-mate from Jammu. He was called Raju Sethi, who went on to play Ranji Trophy cricket and once hit a first-class ton against a West Indian attack led by Malcolm Marshall. He ended his career as captain of the Jammu and Kashmir side. He was gifted, but then that is never enough to play for India! I am not sure where Raju is now, but if I recall correctly his father used to run a thriving trucking business. Raju has probably grown it beyond recognition. In my recollection, Raju was friendly and high-spirited, and never far from a juicy expletive!

Raju was the second Sikh friend I made in life. I grew up in Patna, which, thanks to Guru Gobind Singh's shrine at Patna Sahib, is home to many Sikhs. While I did not have a Sikh in my class in school, there was the handsome Uttam Singh Mundy, two classes behind me, with whom I played some golf. While I surrendered the addictive sport during my college years in Delhi, since ideology got the better of me (I started thinking of it as a bourgeois pastime - it is!), Uttam went on to become one of the leading professionals on the Indian and Asian circuits.

My parents of course had many Sikh friends in Patna, most of them high up in the bureaucracy. In Delhi, I myself made many more friends who happened to be Sikhs.

I preface my memories of 1984 with these remarks only because the sense of complete shock that one felt when Sikhs were attacked can only be explained by the common image of Sikhs that prevailed in North India at that time: I was not alone in carrying in my mind the picture of a vigorous, hard-working, spirited community with an infectious sense of humour and a terrific ability to laugh at themselves. Virtually every single one of the Sikhs that one came across conformed to this image. For Sikhs to be attacked, that too in Delhi, a city to whose life and history they had contributed so vitally was virtually unthinkable. The last time that Sikhs were vulnerable, leaving aside the partition riots of 1947 (in which everyone was vulnerable), was perhaps in the incipient days of Sikh faith, when so many of the best

and bravest were martyred, some right in the heart of Delhi, to Mughal hegemony.

In public life Sikhs were prominent in the bureaucracy, the armed forces, the media, the academy, sports and entertainment, not to speak of politics. In 1984, the President of India, Giani Zail Singh, was a Sikh. How then was one to make sense of circumstances in which (turbaned) army generals and bureaucrats who had retired from senior positions in the state machinery had to be hidden in "Hindu" homes during those fateful days? To anyone familiar with Delhi in the 1970s and the early 1980s, Sikhs were a tough and successful lot. Who could dare to attack them? And why would they want to do so anyway?

Well, things had begun looking different since the movement for Sikh autonomy - sometimes secessionist, calling for a separate homeland for the Sikhs, Khalistan - had been launched in the 1970s, after the Anandpur Saheb Resolution. Everyone who lived through that time will be able to recall how the Congress, led by Indira and Sanjay Gandhi, not to forget Zail Singh, fanned the flames of Sikh terrorism in the early 1980s, primarily with the aim of toppling the ruling party in Punjab, the Akali Dal. It is true that several hundreds, if not thousands of people, over the course of the early 1980s, mostly Hindu, had been shot and killed in cold blood by the terrorists. (The reverse situation, in which security forces killed any number of mostly innocent Sikhs in "encounters," happened for the next decade.) The movement culminated in the phenomenon of Bhindranwale, a tiger that was batted and brought to maturity by none other than Sanjay Gandhi. The Sikh "extremists" occupation of the Golden Temple in Amritsar in the summer of 1984 and the ensuing Operation Bluestar which put a brutal end to it, laid out the background against which the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the pogroms organized to follow it are best understood.

That Mrs. Gandhi's own political machinations paved part of the way to Bluestar is well-documented. What is also true is that the state's attack on the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs - the Harmandir Saheb - wounded the secular ethos of Indian politics. The 1992 attack on Babri Masjid is easy to understand after Bluestar. Hindu majoritarian identity - and the peculiar, unhistorical sense that Hindus were exclusively entitled to rule India in their own interests, the most "un-Hindu" belief of all - was reinforced as a consequence of these two landmarks of criminal political folly, one carried out by the state, the other allowed by it. In the case of Bluestar, Mrs. Gandhi and her party ought not to have allowed things to get to the point where the attack on the Golden Temple became a *fait accompli*. Negotiations were possible up to a point, but the opportunities were squandered. Likewise, Rao's Congress government in 1992 ought to have been more stringent in defending Babri from the barbarians and honouring the commitment to secularism promised in India's constitution. We continue to pay the price for the fact that these things were not done.

The 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs happened in the wake of the assassination. To understand is not to justify: it is by now quite thoroughly documented that the Congress Party under Rajiv Gandhi instigated the "riots," as though the fact that the assassination on October 31, 1984 was carried out by two of Mrs. Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards, made the whole Sikh community culpable. The fact that justice yet remains to be done, 21 years on, is one of the reasons why I write this.

October 31, 1984: "Kuchh bhi ho sakta hai!" ("Anything can happen!")

To this day, October 31, 1984 strikes me as a day which set the tone for the history of India in the decades to follow. The Bombay carnage of 1992 and the Gujarat genocide of 2002 are only two ugly milestones in the recent history of Indian barbarism that could have been averted had the victims of 1984 received due justice in time. By its effective procrastination and denial of justice, the state made it possible for lumpen elements and their leaders in Indian cities to imagine that they could get away with murder as long as the government of the day gave them the signal and a holiday from the law.

On the morning of that fateful day I found myself in the University of Delhi, at the Delhi School of Economics, where I was studying for a Master's degree. While we were in class, there appeared to be some restlessness among the students outside the window. They were running around with their cups of tea, looking for someone with a transistor. Since there was no cricket match on that day one couldn't tell what the excitement was about. During the recess we heard what was at the time an astonishing piece of news: Mrs. Gandhi had been shot. People all around - her sympathizers and critics alike - were in a state of total disbelief and shock. After all, it was probably easier to imagine Mt. Everest melting into the ocean than to imagine India without Indira! There was no immediate announcement on All India Radio. However, all programmes seemed to have been suspended. Instead, there was the dirge-like drone of a Sarangi, from which everyone rightly concluded that the rumours were more than just that, though many people felt that it was probably another VVIP, not Mrs. Gandhi, who had been killed. Around the early afternoon, via BBC and Radio Pakistan, some people confirmed the rumours as true. The invincible lady was indeed gone. One of my classmates inferred, with more than a little alarm in his voice, that this meant "that no one was safe any more."

At the time, the fact that the assassins were two Sikh bodyguards was not seen by anyone taking part in our animated conversation as something significant. In fact, many were inclined to think that the famed "foreign hand," that Mrs. Gandhi had publicly dreaded all her life, might have been at work. In other words, the assassination may have been masterminded by some powerful CIA operatives. (Was it that far-fetched for us to think thus? I don't know. As someone once said "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Is there evidence to suggest a CIA involvement? I haven't done the research to have any opinion on the matter, but what if it were true? Would the mobs unleashed by the Congress on the evening of the day of the assassination have dared to direct their "spontaneous fury" by dragging out the employees at the US embassy in Chanakyapuri, intercepting every diplomatic vehicle with a white person sitting inside, dragging them out and ringing them with burning car tyres? There are certain lines that cowardly violence never dares to cross.)

Classes were adjourned soon after mid-day. I, along with a few friends, had to wait long at the bus-stop in front of Hindu College before getting a bus which was not already full. Everyone had begun to make their way out of the university. The buses were packed and people were anxious to know the exact truth. Mid-day newspapers and supplements reported "Mrs. Gandhi shot." The gap between that and a headline like "Mrs. Gandhi shot dead" (which most newspapers reserved for the morrow) was immeasurable in most people's minds. People were glued to transistors, and for once, not to know the cricket score. I can still recall the look of sheer disbelief on people's faces when the news was confirmed on the radio later in the day.

At this time of the day, in mid-afternoon on October 31, it was impossible even for those with a sharp horse sense to be able to foretell the violence that was to overtake the city by the same night. Had the violence been entirely "spontaneous," as many Congress leaders at the time claimed, shouldn't it have erupted as soon as the news of the assassination had been made public in the afternoon? Rajiv Gandhi, in defence of his partymen, made the infamous statement sometime after the pogrom that "when a big tree falls, the earth shakes." Well, it was quite obvious to anyone who lived through that autumn day in Delhi, that the earth took its own time to begin shaking, which makes it more than likely that a number of smaller trees conspired to shake it, many hours after the big one had fallen.

The people one saw in the buses and on the streets were shaken, grieving and mournful. They were certainly not violent. On the contrary I distinctly remember many people, young and old, expressing sadness at the fact that Indira Gandhi became a victim of her own machinations in Punjab.

It was quite late in the evening (at around 9 pm), when we sensed the first signs of the violence to come. My friends were dropping me at the bus-stop near the Delhi Zoo. On the way we heard a bunch of young men shouting aggressive, communal slogans such as "let no Sikh be spared," "throw the Sardars out," "*khooon ka badla khooon se lenge*" ("we shall avenge blood with blood"). This was the first time that one could sense that Sikhs may be seriously vulnerable in the wake of the assassination. Now, many hours after the event, the tension around the city was quite palpable. Fear was writ large on people's faces.

I lived with my parents in New Friends Colony, in South Delhi, at that time. The journey home from Kaka Nagar, where my friend lived, was a short one, perhaps only 20 minutes. But they stretch long in my memory. Commuters in the bus were silent with expectation. One could see some vehicles burning on Mathura Road, the main artery in that part of the city. Small groups of thugs armed with lathis, chains, rods and other street weaponry, were stopping passing vehicles and peeping inside, looking for Sikhs. At the Ashram bus stop I heard voices reaching into our packed bus from the open windows, asking whether there was a Sikh on the bus. I held my breath, holding on to the rails at the back of the bus with my sweaty palms. Without exception, everyone (including myself) who spoke in that moment shouted immediately, and without looking around, that there weren't any. Later, when the bus moved again, I looked ahead to see if there was a turban visible in our bus. There were a few, hiding themselves below the level of the windows, protected by people around them. And I am sure I saw several women in Salwaar-Kameezes, who were most likely Sikhs.

I held my breath, since there were still a number of stops before the bus reached Okhla, its terminus. My own stop in Bharat Nagar, one of the many hamlets which had now given way to a posh South Delhi colony, was a few stops before Okhla. Fortunately, the bus driver was a sharp and decent fellow and decided that he was not going to allow any trouble on his bus, certainly a rare exception in Delhi. So he shouted before every stop, asking if there were any passengers who wished to get off. If there weren't any, he would simply speed past the stop (this being an hour when there was almost no one trying to get on to the bus). If there were, he would drop them at a safe distance after the stop, eluding the possible crowd of thugs waiting near each stop.

My parents were relieved to see me back home. The news of widespread violence from around the city was confirmed by a variety of people who called us that night. The fact that the violence was directed solely at Sikhs could not be confirmed at that time by anyone. But the fact that they were certainly among the targeted group was emerging clearly. There was, in addition, a general sense of dread, that anything may happen as a consequence of the assassination, that all law and order may break down and chaos may engulf the city. In short, lacking better knowledge, most people were quite confused as to what was really going on, a soil ripe for rumours to grow in.

Rumours and credulity in a climate of fear

And there certainly were rumours at the time, hard to verify. One heard that Sikhs had been seen distributing sweets after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. Another story that made the rounds the next day was that the water supply in various parts of the city had been poisoned by the Sikhs. The most incredible story of all, taking old people's slumbering collective memory back to partition days in 1947, was that trainloads of dead Hindus had been arriving at railway stations in Delhi!

The story that sent shivers down all our spines was that Sikhs, armed with *Kirpans* (swords), were gathering in their thousands in the Balasaheb Gurdwara in Nizamuddin to forge an attack on Hindus in the area! In the mood that prevailed in those tense hours on the morning of November 1, the story sounded credible especially since we knew that so many Sikh houses in the vicinity had been looted and burnt. It was somehow easy for most people to imagine hot-blooded Sikh youth wreaking revenge on Hindus after having suffered the first blows.

All these later proved to be baseless claims, meant for an entirely different purpose altogether. Nonetheless, the rumours served their aim, in that they succeeded in whipping up considerable anti-Sikh feeling in our locality, even amongst so-called educated people. I did not see any Sikh distributing sweets to celebrate Mrs. Gandhi's assassination or dead bodies of Hindus arriving in Delhi in trains. Nor did I meet anyone who had personally seen such things. Whosoever talked about such happenings had only heard about such incidents from others. Water everywhere was safely being drunk. And yet, practically everyone was talking about such events as having actually happened, basing their expectations and actions on them.

What amazes me from this distance in time is just how much people at the time - young and old, men or women, educated or otherwise - were willing to take what they heard from others at face value without much scepticism or investigation! There was little exercise of patience in the formation of impressions and opinions about events to which there were no witnesses at hand. Some conclusion had to be drawn. There was a despairing haste about it which still disturbs me. Those few voices who counselled a "wait, watch, find out and then act" approach were hushed down by the sheer number of those who claimed to "know" what had been happening and wanted to "do something about it."

In the following days, when the true stories began to emerge from different parts of the city, it became clear how masses of people had been misled by a handful for quite deadly purposes.

What the Sense Have Found Difficult to Believe

The night of October 31 was a tense one and it was hard to sleep in peace. The sight that greeted me, when I woke up the next morning and opened the door to the terrace is so clear in my recollection that it could have happened yesterday. The day was clear and the sun was up, but there were many places on the horizon, and some much nearer than the horizon, from where streams of black smoke were billowing up to darken the sky. One could hear from not so far away the jubilant choruses from the various mobs which seemed to be indulging in the arson.

I dressed and went out into the street in the direction of the spot which seemed to be the nearest source of the smoke. It was a big house in our block that belonged to a Sikh family. It was in flames and a mob was busy dousing what remained of it in kerosene oil. There were several hundred people - mostly young men and boys - egging each other on as they shouted, "Maaro! Jalaaoo! Koi Sardar bachne na paye! Indira Gandhi ki Jail!" ("Kill! Burn! Let no Sikh be spared! Long live Indira Gandhi!") Even as my heart was kicking in my chest I tried to be brave and told some of them to stop, trying to reason them out of the madness. I got my shirt torn in the process, even as I was told by a lad that nothing would happen to me or my family (the reason for which I was to find out only later). There were street urchins - boys no more than ten or twelve - carting away kitchen gadgets, the stereo, the TV, the VCR, all kinds of furniture and rugs, jubilant with their booty.

My first impression was that the underclass had taken the opportunity of the breakdown of law and order to unleash their anger at the affluent classes. It was only a bit later that I realized that I had been projecting my own rudimentary understanding of Indian sociology to make sense of what was going on. Not that there was no class dimension to the mob behavior we were witnessing. But it was at best subliminal. For, after all, only Sikh homes were being targeted. The mob had passed by our own home, for instance, without even so much as a glance of any kind of interest. That the leaders and organizers of the mobs might have channelled the class anger of the underprivileged to achieve their nefarious end was of course still a tenable hypothesis. (This was done most effectively in Gujarat a few years ago.)

The streets were empty except for a few motorcycles that were running back and forth. The men on them seemed to be ferrying the oil to the people doing the arson. I then noticed that the pillion riders on at least two bikes had sheets of paper in their hands. When they stopped I looked over someone's shoulder that they were holding in their hands a list of houses to be burnt! The list had the house number and the name of the head of the household, usually a 'Singh'. That was the first time that it occurred to me that the rioting was well-organized, that a political party may be behind it. How had the arsonists managed to get this information? Did they have access to ration cards? Phone numbers? Investigations done after the pogrom revealed that Congress leaders had supplied mob leaders not just with money, weapons, transport and oil, but also with ration and voter lists issued by the government.

On more than a few occasions we saw auto-rickshaws arriving with several tins of kerosene oil and other flammable material such as gunny sacks. Vehicles and houses of Sikhs were being burnt amidst yells and shouts all around. A story we heard was that in

one house an old gentleman in a wheel-chair had been pushed into the cauldron from the second floor of his house. Later, it turned out to be a rumour.

I walked down the road opposite my house towards Bharat Nagar (a cluster of shops, and houses where mostly milkmen, vendors and auto-rickshaw drivers resided). At the end of the road was a burning DTC bus (Route No.403), which had allegedly belonged to a Sikh and was thus being burnt. There were several other vehicles, scooter rickshaws, taxis and private cars, which were burning along the main cross road known as Eastern Avenue.

There were at least two large mobs, of about 500 - 600 people each, armed with sticks, lathis, stones and rubble. They were going around New Friends Colony and Maharani Bagh looting and burning the vehicles and houses of Sikhs. I, along with a few friends, followed one of the mobs around the colony. The thing that struck us most profoundly was that the mob was not an angry one. (So the class theory was clearly untrue!) It was going about its destructive business in a calculated, in fact, celebratory manner. They seemed to be in no great hurry (the cops, we were to discover later, were on holiday after all, a fact that the arsonists must have known all along). "At last the Sikhs were being taught a lesson," and "everyone" was to contribute to this terrible ritual of public justice, we were told.

Many houses - 35 if I remember correctly, and all belonging to Sikhs - were burnt in New Friends Colony alone. Typically the mob would first look for the occupants of the house (most of them had escaped in time), empty it of all belongings, throw gunny sacks doused in kerosene over the house and set them on fire. If there was a car in the driveway it received similar treatment.

It was clear that only Sikh houses in our locality had been targeted. In some cases, the nameplates outside some houses had been removed, to avoid detection by the mobs. Often, this very fact made it a target of the violence and the arson. Servants were frequently interrogated because the residents of the houses were not present. The servants often tried to save the houses by concealing the identity of the owners. When the leaders of the mob felt convinced that they were being lied to, the houses were attacked. So far as I know, they did not make a mistake. In other words, they did not burn any houses belonging to Hindus, even if some of the Sikh houses that went undetected were left alone, one right in front of our house, their servants having successfully convinced the leaders of the mob that their bosses were not Sikh. The latter were smuggled away into a neighbor's house early during the day.

I walked towards the Gurdwara in Taimur Nagar, half a kilometre away from where we lived. I could not believe my eyes. The beautiful edifice was engulfed in huge flames, which were quickly reducing everything to ashes. Here the mob was even bigger and was shouting communal slogans quite openly. Once again, there were men on motorcycles issuing instructions. (Seventy-two Gurdwaras were burnt in the capital during the pogrom.) Many shops belonging to Sikhs in the bazaars in Bharat Nagar and Taimur Nagar were burnt down as well. In front of the Gurdwara in Taimur Nagar, I saw two trucks apparently belonging to Sikhs, in flames.

It must have been before 11 in the morning that we tried to call the local police stations. The numbers were constantly busy. On one occasion, when I did get through to the

Sriniwaspuri police station, the police officer at the other end simply denied any help, pleading that they had "other" duties to perform. In the end, I walked down the road to the Police Chowki at Bharat Nagar, only to find it locked, with not a uniformed man in sight.

We tried calling the Fire Brigade. But no one answered the phone.

Almost bang opposite our house, in C-Block, stayed at that time Ashwini Kumar, a senior retired police officer in front of whose house there was always a police van parked carrying his pehredars (security guards). My brother and I approached them and asked them to please call Mr. Kumar. The first time we made the request, the gun-toting men simply looked curtly the other way. The second time, we were more insistent, upon which we were told that the Sahib was out of town. This was a lie. Our servants claimed to have seen him on his morning walk that very day. Whenever we tried calling Mr. Kumar, the line was busy. This further increased the likelihood that we were being lied to.

At one point in the afternoon we approached the aide to Mr. Kumar, only to be told that the (armed) policemen were there for his personal security and could not interfere in the affairs of the rest of the colony. In fact, a house, which was almost opposite to the house of this officer, was looted and partially burnt. The policemen stood there, watching the mob indulge in looting and burning.

Repeatedly during the day we tried to reach the police in many of the stations in South and Central Delhi. Not once did we succeed in speaking to a constable or an officer. Later we learnt that a house belonging to a Sikh family had been burnt down the road from us by a mob, even as a jeep loaded with policemen drove past.

Doordarshan TV, the only (state-run) channel in those days, was merely showing Mrs. Gandhi's body lying in state in Teen Murti House, with people filing in and out, paying their last tribute to her. Even on TV, some members of the Youth Congress, well within earshot of the new Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, were shouting, "Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge!" Such seemed to have been the depth of state endorsement of the violence. If someone had relied only on TV news and coverage in those days they couldn't possibly believe that almost 3000 innocents were murdered in 4 days, most of them in broad daylight in India's capital city. Not one image of the looting and arson, let alone of the killing, was ever shown on TV. It would have appeared that the city of 9 or 10 million people was in solemn sorrow and mourning at the death of the great departed leader.

The looting and arson went on till about 5 pm after which it suddenly stopped. We learnt later that a curfew was going to be imposed and the army was going to be called out. At 6.30 pm we saw a tank appear in our neighborhood. Why this could not be done earlier is quite clear, in light of what later investigations by human rights groups revealed.

It was not until several days later that Doordarshan reported on the mayhem in the city. Newspapers began to tell the stories pouring in from different parts of the city. New Friends Colony had been no exception to the general pattern of organized arson and violence. Shops and houses belonging to Sikhs had been looted and burnt everywhere. More disturbing, and this came to light only after November 3, Sikhs had been murdered by the hundreds in the most brutal manner possible.

The Luxury of Peace

The next day, November 2, 1984, my family and I took a walk around the colony. We saw the charred remains of many houses that had been burnt down, interspersed with many houses that had not been touched at all. The pattern was obvious. The houses belonging to those who were not Sikhs had not been touched. Sikh houses had been burnt down to the point where only the bare structure - the basic masonry and flooring - remained. None of the furniture and the woodwork could be seen any more. There was still some glow in the embers in some cases. And of course, the striking smell of kerosene and ash. There were twisted and gnarled pieces of metal. Broken fans and tables lay strewn randomly in the chaos. Virtually nothing had been spared.

We attended meetings throughout the day to form peace committees and patrolling squads. There was no further violence in our part of the city, a fact surprising in itself, if the claim about the violence being a spontaneous outpouring of rage at the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi had any truth to it. The rage died down rather easily. A young man from Bharat Nagar (whose name I unfortunately don't recall two decades later), and who turned out to be a Congress worker, told my father that we should not bother to form peace committees, that "our" property would not be touched. "If you lose even a pin, you can get it from me," he boasted. He said that "they" had planned on teaching a "small lesson to the Sikhs but the matter had got out of hand."

The army was conspicuously present unlike on the previous day. There were armoured vehicles and Jawans on foot patrolling the deserted streets. It was not clear though whether there was a curfew in effect.

In the afternoon on the same day, I met a State Bank employee from Bharat Nagar (whose name again eludes my memory now). He took me through the small by-lanes of Bharat Nagar. The scene that greeted me is unforgettable. Everyone, it seems, had been "well-prepared" for a reprisal by the Sikhs. From small children to the elderly, everyone was armed with some lethal weapon or another: either rods, lathis, knives or swords (small firearms being relatively inaccessible in those days). This man told me not to worry and requested me to dispense with the idea of peace committees and that "they" (the people of Bharat Nagar) would protect the colony from a Sikh reprisal, should they dare to attack. People hid stealthily in their homes in a way that only miscreants aware of their dirty deeds would. Rumours and falsehoods (spread in some parts of the city from loudspeakers used by police vans), had had the desired effect. This was terrorism in action.

It merits mention that the fear of reprisal that many wrong-doers carried should not lead anyone to think that this was a Hindu-Sikh riot we were witness to. It was a straightforward pogrom against the Sikhs of the city. So far as I know no Hindu died at the hands of an attacking Sikh. In places where the Sikhs tried to defend themselves against mobs, by gathering in Gurdwaras in some parts of the city, they were promptly disarmed and dispersed by the police, to facilitate subsequent slaying at the hands of lumpen mobs, giving further credence to the belief in the connivance of the police and the administration.

Later that afternoon, I met a Sikh family (from a few houses down the road from us) who were taking refuge in our neighbours' house. They had left their own house on the morning of November 1, for fear of attack on their life and property. (Their house, in fact, was

attacked on the 1st and just about everything was looted. The servants, however, managed to save the house from being burnt by the arsonists). They were quite shaken up, as was our immediate neighbor when we met her.

A couple of days later I met the family of one of my friends from college. Her father was a retired naval officer. They had been rescued from their place in a Trans-Yamuna colony by other friends and were now taking refuge at their place in one of the officers' houses in New Delhi. They were still shaken up from their experience when I saw them.

A Descent Into Hell: What the City Had Experienced

On the morning of November 4, 1984, alongwith several of my friends, I went to Lajpat Bhawan (near Moolchand hospital in South Delhi) from where relief and rehabilitation work was being organized for the victims of the violence.

Only when we started listening to reports of people from different parts of the city did one realize how widespread and intense the scale of violence had been, and how much had been hidden behind the sanctimonious TV coverage of the last rites for Mrs. Gandhi. At that stage it was not known how many people had been killed. (In fact, it was not known until the Ahuja Committee submitted its report in August, 1987!) Yet, even if a small fraction of the stories one was hearing had truth in them, it was clear that something on a scale quite out of the ordinary had taken place in the capital. And that the violence had lasted in some areas for three or four days. Common sense suggested that this could not have gone on without having the support and sanction of the state. The detailed documentation done by human rights groups in the coming weeks established just how elaborate this support was.

Given that the government was slow to enforce law and order, let alone bring succour to the afflicted, a citizens' group, the Nagarik Ekta Manch, had been formed to organize the relief and rehabilitation effort. We promptly joined it and were assigned relief work in the Trans-Yamuna police station of Farsh Bazar, for the victims who had suffered some of the worst violence in the city, in the locality of Trilokpuri. It is now well documented that between 400 and 500 people lost their lives in this area alone, 150-200 of them in the infamous Block 32.

For the next 8 to 9 weeks a group of us worked at the Farsh Bazar Police Station. Such was the apathy of the police that this was one of the few police stations in the entire metropolis of Delhi where Sikhs had been offered shelter. Thousands of Sikh victims had been brought to Farsh Bazar after the army rescued them from their homes in Trilokpuri and nearby areas on November 3, 1984.

Our experience at the relief camp was sobering. Not only was it painful to witness at first hand what the previous few days of barbarism had done to a beleaguered people. What was even more disturbing was listening to and recording the eye-witness testimonies of widows, orphans and the few men who survived the pogrom.

My very first memory of Farsh Bazar is that of a terror-stricken, dazed lot of people - wailing women and children, men (some of whom had even got their hair and beards shaved off to conceal their Sikh identity) physically hurt, some of them with blood still

pouring forth from gaping wounds, old people looking lost. In all some 3000-3500 fugitives, all Sikhs, mostly Labhanas from Sindh and Rajasthan.

As we started working with the victims, the fact that they were all Sikhs, and most of us - volunteers - working with them were Hindu, faded into the shadows. Even the few young men - and there were very few - who swore revenge on their assailants and assassins never spoke of harming Hindus in general. They only wished to avenge themselves on precisely the ones who had taken part in the pogrom. They were all known characters. In fact, the most notable fact of our experience at Farsh Bazar was that it deepened everyone's humanity, the communities we came from becoming a marginal fact in the midst of the enormity of the suffering. The victims were immensely grateful for the help they were receiving. We, on the other hand, were too shaken and moved to leave the suffering to their fates. Within us too there was intense anger, pain, and indignation.

Over the next few weeks we carried out relief work, distributing medicines, food, clothing, blankets and other necessities to the victims. During the course of our work we heard an endless number of sordid tales about the anti-Sikh violence in Trans-Yamuna areas. From the evidence that poured forth, it was plain that the violence in places like Trilokpuri, where some of the goriest stories came from, had been well-organized. There was a pattern to the killings. People were felled with lathis, rods, bricks and stones. Kerosene, which was supplied to mobs by the party workers of the Congress, was poured upon them and they were set fire to. Almost every victim pointed out the role of the police - they either colluded with the miscreants actively or watched passively as the mobs indulged in arson and killing. For volunteers like us, there was no reason for disbelieving the accounts given by the victims. A terrorized community, still grieving over its multiple bereavements, is not prone to lying or exaggeration. Taken at face value the cumulative evidence emerging from different parts of the city pointed over-whelmingly towards a high level of planning and organization behind the pogrom.

Chilling Testimonies

We would arrive at Farash Bazar after breakfast and work there till the evening. Every day we helped distribute relief and supplies and recorded testimonies and eye-witness accounts from a dazed people who had lived, till just the other day, in Trilokpuri. Now they could not dream of returning to the places where their old homes once stood. Fear was only one part of the reason for this. Weighing heavier in their perception were memories of their loved ones humiliated before their eyes before being put to death.

Our testimonies were used by the team from PUCL-PUDR (the human rights groups in Delhi) to compile the section of their report on the pogrom that dealt with Trans-Yamuna colonies. Thereafter, the testimonies were also taken by those legally qualified to do so. Moreover, all the evidence - and there is no dearth of it whatsoever - has been presented to the inquiry commissions. Thanks to the wonders of information technology it can be sampled at many different websites today. Here I will just try to recall a few significant impressions that stay in memory and note some of the salient patterns that the testimonies revealed.

Widows would bring before us their wounded children, some of them with burn marks on their bodies. Some of the older women, who had lost many younger members of their

families, sometimes their own sons and daughters, wished for an early death for themselves instead of having to negotiate the grief and sorrow of the years that remained to them. They found it hard to believe that people who had been their neighbors for years could betray them to killing mobs so readily and in some cases even turn upon them themselves. Some of the Sikh men, especially the younger ones, had their heads and beards shaved.

The death squads were recruited from neighboring villages. They were mainly Bhangis, Ahirs, Gujars and Jats, in most cases accompanied by local residents of Trilokpuri. It is pertinent to point out that the Trans-Yamuna resettlement colonies were vote-banks of the Congress party and the then Member of Parliament from East Delhi, H.K.L. Bhagat (who became the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting under Rajiv Gandhi's government in 1985), who was named in hundreds of testimonies, was one of the masterminds of the pogrom in this part of the city. (He won the December 1984 parliamentary elections by a record margin.) Hundreds of affidavits gathered by volunteers and collated in several reports testify to the fact that early in the morning on November 1, 1984, street weapons such as sticks and iron rods were distributed by Congress leaders to young men willing to kill. Oil was supplied to the mobs from the many depots owned by the same leaders. State-owned transportation, such as DTC buses, was made available to move them to the site of action.

There was a pattern to the carnage. Typically, Sikh boys and men were first beaten mercilessly with sticks and rods, then doused in kerosene or petrol and finally, they were garlanded with burning tyres. Sikh boys were often disguised as girls to escape lynching mobs. Most of the Sikh women in Trilokpuri were raped. Girls of 10 or 11 to women of 75 or 80 were raped, some of them several times. Some of my female friends recorded painful testimonies of gang-rapes of women in the presence of their own children, overseen by the main organizers from the Congress Party near drains and Nalas. The aim, evidently, was to utterly insult, humiliate and butcher the Sikhs. Even male children were not spared. Bhagat himself was heard calling to the mob: "Yeh Saanp Ka Bachha Hai, Isko Maro, Mat Choro, Agar Chhoro Toh Bada Dukh Dega" ("He is the child of a snake, kill him, don't spare him, if you spare him, he will give a lot of pain.") This was a pogrom, not a riot.

The fact that the patterns of violence were so similar throughout the city of Delhi should put paid to the view that it was all but a spontaneous outburst of rage and indignation against the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. Moreover, as some observers have pointed out, in most riots the number of people killed is smaller than the number of people injured. The fact that in the pogrom of 1984 the situation was reversed only further establishes the fact that the killings were well-organized and the assailants were granted adequate time to carry out the orders from above.

Several names, other than that of the satanically ubiquitous H.K.L. Bhagat, recurred in the testimonies. One was that of Dr. Ashok Kumar, a Congress Councillor from the area who ran his clinic in Kalyanpuri, which adjoined Trilokpuri. According to the victims, it was he who organized a meeting in Trilokpuri on the evening of October 31 and masterminded the violence of the next two days, before the paramilitary forces, and later the army, came to Trilokpuri. According to the survivors, Dr. Ashok led the mobs the next day and incited them to kill.

Another name that kept coming up was that of the Congress Pradhan (chief) of Trilokpuri, Rampal Saroj, a Bhagat loyalist, at whose house the main organizing meeting was held by Bhagat and Dr. Ashok on the evening of October 31. Several women testified that he ordered the rapes and led the mobs that killed their husbands. Two decades on, Saroj is now apparently deceased!

The name of Kishori Lal kept being mentioned. He became notorious as "the butcher of Trilokpuri." He is in fact one of the few people who has been sent to prison for life for his role in the massacres. In 1996, he was convicted of having murdered at least eight men. Most of the victims were poor, Labhana Sikhs originally from Sindh or Rajasthan: daily wage earners, auto-rickshaw drivers, coolies, mechanics and small artisans.

To this day, every now and again, images of the widows, their children and the few adult Sikh male survivors of the pogrom in Trilokpuri, return to haunt me. I recall, though I have not met them in years, Gurdeep Kaur, Barfi Bai, Bijar Bai, Darshan Kaur, Harbhajan Kaur, Sunder Singh, Inder Singh and Mohan Singh, among others. Many of them were moved from Farsh Bazar to Tilak Vihar in West Delhi six months after the pogrom.

Where were the police? Conniving! There is much evidence to show that Soorvir Singh Tyagi, the Station House Officer (SHO) at Kalyanpuri police station, prevented his own constables from stopping violent mobs and effectively "oversaw" the violence. At one stage on November 1, when the mob was attacking and burning the Gurdwara in Trilokpuri, a group of Sikhs got together to defend it. When they were pelted with stones they returned the favor, only to be told by the policemen that they must return to their homes now and stay indoors rather than indulge in violence. Soon after, the rampaging mobs started arriving at their doorsteps and began the spree of arson and murders. There is also plenty of evidence, well-documented by now, that SHO Tyagi did not register reports from or of Sikh victims. He is also known to have recorded omnibus reports (for tens of murderers and accused!) instead of the legal requirement of separate ones. Apparently, there were instructions from senior officers to club all riot cases pertaining to Trilok Puri in one FIR (First Information Report). The cowardly complicity of the police was critical to the success of the violence.

One of the official inquiries, carried out by the Kusum Mittal Committee had indicted a number of police officers throughout the city for dereliction of duty, criminal negligence and often overseeing mob violence in which Sikhs were burnt to death right before their very eyes. Tehelka.com published a piece earlier this year in which they claimed that not a single police officer from those crime-filled days has been properly prosecuted. Many have retired and those still in service have received promotions. The pension of one of the senior retired officers has been reduced by 30%. "Justice" can sometimes be that precisely apportioned!

One morning that November I visited some blocks of Trilokpuri - including the notorious Block 32 - with one of the victims, an auto-rickshaw driver Mohan Singh (whose two brothers were burnt to death), and some other volunteers. I have never seen anything like that before or since in my life. The area wore a dreadful, haunted look. Entire blocks of houses had been burnt down. A strong odour of kerosene still hung around in some of the courtyards. Burnt scooters and autorickshaws, mangled metal from furniture and assorted

equipment were strewn around the narrow lanes. There was plenty of ash and in some places, remains of human clothing eerily lay about, sometimes close to unmistakably human-shaped stains on the ground. The stench of corpses was yet discernible, even though they had been cleared out several days prior to the day that we visited.

I remember the evening that H.K.L. Bhagat came to see the Sikh victims at Farsh Bazar. The widows did not let him enter the premises and booed him away from there. The man who later on became the Chief Justice of the Indian Supreme Court, Ranganath Mishra, was the one who headed the first major official inquiry into the pogrom. About Bhagat he concluded thus: "Mr. Bhagat, being a sitting MP and Minister, was not likely to misbehave in the manner alleged." That's all. Unsurprisingly, it turned out that Mishra had such faith in Bhagat's integrity that he never even asked to cross-examine him!

Over 1000 Sikhs were killed in Bhagat's constituency in East Delhi alone! If Bhagat did no wrong, as Mishra seems to claim, then how is it that neither he nor any of the other Congress eminences named in the unofficial reports on the pogrom (Sajjan Kumar, Jagdish Tytler, Dharamdass Shastri, among others) ever filed defamation lawsuits against the writers of these public reports?

Such was their immunity that between 1984 and 1989, Bhagat held four cabinet ministerial posts under Rajiv Gandhi. He was expelled from the Congress in 1998 (it had little to do with his role in the 1984 pogrom), is now politically extinct and reportedly suffering from due dementia and loss of memory. One of the spearheads of the 1984 pogrom, he is himself 84 years old today!

Explaining the Pogrom

"When a great tree falls the earth shakes." Rajiv Gandhi had seemed to defend the violence in these words, weeks after the pogrom. What he perhaps forgot to add was that the earth shakes much more just before an election. Imagine that the assassination had happened some months after the elections of December, 1984 (which Mrs. Gandhi's party might even have lost!). It is debatable if the pogrom would still have been organized, and with such precise preparation.

How else does one explain the pogrom? Given the failure of the Indian state to address the abiding misery of masses of people, every incumbent government of independent India after Nehru left the stage in 1964, has had a difficult time convincing the electorate that it should be voted back to power. (In fact, since the 1971 election, the 1984 polls have been the only one - out of 9 - parliamentary elections in which the incumbent party or coalition was returned to office.) Mrs. Gandhi's government, after "the Punjab problem" and Bluestar, not to mention corruption, rising prices and large ongoing unemployment, was not in a different position either. Her assassination gave her party and its whips a perverse opportunity to capitalize (pardon the pun!) on "the sympathy vote." And if it could be conveyed to the electorate as to just how angry the public was with the assassination (for which, what better means than a pogrom like the one we saw), even better. Till 1984 it was somehow assumed widely that only the RSS and its party outfit, the BJP, played communal politics on a large scale. In November, 1984, the Congress lost its innocence in the eyes of the public. It realized now the political gains it too could make from a communal strategy. A "Hindu" had been assassinated and "Hindus" were not going to take this on their chin.

Enough was enough.

We have seen this sort of communal baiting of voters on an intensified scale ever after. The BJP and the Sangh Parivar of course turned it into the staple of Indian politics, before being decimated at last year's polls. 1984 paved the way for the assault on Babri Masjid, the Mumbai riots of 1992 and the genocide of Muslims in Gujarat a few years ago, to name only the most prominent legacies. In this sense, the pogrom of 1984 intensified and accelerated the communalization and criminalization of Indian politics. The elections after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination were advanced in order to garner the sympathy vote of Hindus. The Delhi lumpens had served their purpose when it became clear that Rajiv's communal campaign - relying on such slogans as "why do you feel uncomfortable when you sit in a taxi driven by a person from another state?" - would have a landslide victory. The opposition party that claimed to be defending the interests of Hindus, the BJP, managed to get only 2 seats, while the Congress stomped home with over 400 (in an election with just over 500 parliamentary seats being contested).

They did a better job of convincing the Hindu majority that they could defend them. Communal politics had come of age in India, under the able stewardship of the secular Congress!

To me, as to most other observers and witnesses, the 1984 pogrom was entirely preventable, because it was entirely organized. No less than ten official inquiry commissions have submitted their reports by now. While most of them have avoided stating the obvious, the mountains of evidence that they present leaves little doubt as to the main conclusion: the pogrom was organized by senior members of the Delhi unit of the ruling Congress Party, most likely under orders from above (when you recall that riots were also instigated in so many other cities of North India). Indeed, it appears that the authorities could have prevented or halted the violence once it had started, if they had wanted to. Even if Rajiv Gandhi could be excused (since he was grieving over his personal loss), Home Minister and future Prime Minister Narasimha Rao could not be pardoned for several days of inaction. If the army could be called out in sufficient strength in South Delhi areas by the evening of November 1, having already been put on notice by the authorities the previous day, then why couldn't it be used earlier, and why not elsewhere, for instance in Trans-Yamuna localities? For the grand funeral on November 3 after all, the army was present in the selfsame city in full regalia.

The army had been deployed in strength in Amritsar, where no rioting had happened. Clearly, the authorities feared reprisals there for what the Congress leaders had planned and accomplished in Delhi and some other parts of North India. Delhi "stabilized" only after November 3, thanks mainly to the efforts of the army. Sikhs in Trans-Yamuna localities did not get attention and relief till the army arrived. Of course it needed to be deployed earlier. Obviously, Congress leaders, beginning with Rajiv himself perhaps, were not going to allow that!

The massive censorship of the media - both Indian and foreign (reporters had their films seized at the airports) - soon after the pogrom is further evidence to establish the fact that the massacres were ordered from the highest levels of the state apparatus.

Why It Shall Happen Again, Unless...

"Congress has got a clean chit in Delhi. Bharatiya Janata Party has been cleared in Gujarat. Riots will continue if you don't punish the guilty. There is no guarantee that our children will not avenge 1984 on innocent people in future."

- Pogrom survivor Mohan Singh, speaking to a reporter in 2005

"While in Nov.1984 democratic values were slaughtered and soul of Indian constitution was burned in daylight by the rioters, what happened after the riots was still worse and the justice itself has been slaughtered by sheer non-investigation and total absence of concern. In the name of investigation only an eyewash has been done. The manner in which the prosecution has proceeded and the trial in these cases has proceeded speaks volumes about the health of the criminal justice system. By simply delaying the trial and delaying the investigation, aged and old witnesses have either become extinct or untraceable and the accused get benefit.

"The manner in which the trail of the riot cases had proceeded is unthinkable in any civilised country. In fact, the inordinate delay in trial of the rioters had legitimised the violence and the criminality. A system which permits the legitimised violence and criminals through the instrumentalities of the state to stifle the investigation, cannot be relied upon to dispense basic justice uniformly to the people. It amounts to a total wiping out of the rule of law."

- Delhi High Court Additional Sessions Judge, S.N. Dhingra

Let us dream a little and speculate how an honest government and a responsible leadership might have acted on November 1, 1984, after there was enough knowledge (as numerous witnesses have deposed to several inquiry commissions) that the capital city was ablaze with deadly violence. It would have begun by establishing a central control room (just as Nehru had asked Mountbatten to do in 1948, after Gandhi's assassination, to pre-empt communal rioting) which would have been directly answerable to the Prime Minister. Curfew and shoot-at-sight orders would have been given across the city. If the police were unsuccessful in controlling the violence, paramilitary forces, ready for the specific purpose, would have been called out in strength immediately. If the arson and killing was not brought under control within a few hours by them, the army would have been deployed. The violence would have died a necessary death on November 1 itself.

Thereafter, a high-powered, impartial inquiry commission would have been asked to conduct a time-bound investigation into the riots. They would have been allowed to examine all police files and cross-examine the full range of witnesses. No individual, no matter how powerful, would have been spared thorough cross-examination. The results of the investigation would have been released to the media and the public. The truth would have been known, perhaps in 1984 itself.

The only problem is that the election result might have become significantly more doubtful if it had turned out that the violence was instigated by the ruling Congress Party. And Rajiv Gandhi, in order to save political honour, would have had to resign.

The fact that none of the above transpired only increases the probability of foul play near the very top of the decision-making hierarchy of the day. For if any one out of Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao and Zail Singh were profoundly disturbed by the violence and wished to

stop it, they had plenty of time and power to do so.

There are people who believe that the 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs was a one-time political event that shall not happen again. I am afraid I cannot agree with them. Copious evidence to the contrary has already appeared. Even if some have argued that the 1992-93 Mumbai riots (and there the use of the word riots is perhaps less inappropriate) cannot be compared to the 1984 pogrom, since several hundred Hindus died in the former in addition to over a thousand Muslims, it is surely undeniable that the Gujarat genocide against Muslims in 2002, overseen as it was by the Modi government in Gujarat, and allowed by the Vajpayee administration in New Delhi falls into the same category. In both cases, the state went on holiday and the rule of law was suspended to make the massive public violence possible. Even in the case of Mumbai, while most Hindus were killed by Muslims, Muslims were killed both by police bullets and at the hands of mobs led by the Shiv Sena.

Mumbai 1992 and Gujarat 2002 reveal the truth of the view that deadly political habits and the ailments of history do not die away till they are treated at the root. Unless and until justice is done (and not just in terms of the monetary compensation which the Prime Minister has yet again promised to those who suffered the inhumanities of 1984) and those men in uniform and kurta-clad leaders in harness who still occupy high offices, who conspired to write the first chapter of its kind in urban barbarity in post-independence India, are made to face the full music of the law, one can safely speculate that the demons of the communal past will continue to haunt urban India and further erode the fragile fabric of the Indian republic.

It seems that the old wisdom of the demonstrative power of punishment, to make similar crimes by others less likely in the future, has been forgotten by today's rulers. When veteran, seasoned killers like Tytler and Sajjan Kumar roam freely, their crimes forgotten by all except the ones who suffered from them, it is scarcely surprising that Modi and his mafiosos in Gujarat get bold enough to commit barbaric deeds on the streets in 2002. Not only do we nourish outlaws in our midst - we elect them to parliament and give them such civic responsibilities as a union or a chief ministership. Moreover, not a single police official has been convicted for the crimes of 1984 either, while many have received promotions, making a mockery of the police service.

As a result of the machinations of Congressmen like Bhagat, Tytler, Sajjan Kumar and Dharamdass Shastri, there are several thousand Sikh orphans in Delhi alone. They were toddlers when their parents were killed. Most of them have grown up in bitter surroundings with strong feelings of revenge. They are unlikely to be stilled until they see the law working for them. After all, consider the most striking fact: 21 years after the pogrom, a mere half a dozen people have been convicted for nearly 3000 murders!

This level of injustice and abuse of human rights would be unacceptable under a dictatorial regime. It is one of the miraculous ironies of the practice of political ethics today that not only is India presented to the world as a paragon of freedom and democracy but that the United States, so eager to pounce on far lesser crimes in the case of countries that try to carve out a path independent of it (such as Cuba, Venezuela or Iran), is quite happy to leave unopened the many cupboards in which the skeletons being concealed by Indian governments are "hidden" and are rattling. Concessions to an ally in the "war on terror"!

This, of course, is quite consistent with the standard two-toned practice of US foreign policy. However, we also live in a time in which governments across the world are trying to come to terms with the injustices of history. Human rights commissions are being appointed and international standards of justice are being invoked by countries as varied as South Africa, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Chile, France and Germany, not to speak of the growing pressure that is being put on the Bush administration in Washington to face up not only to crimes of the past but to stop the ongoing violations of freedom and human rights in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and the secret archipelago of torture chambers set up by the CIA worldwide.

The small, petty everyday crimes of individuals are as nothing compared to the weight of the collective crimes of humanity, when a group of people belonging to a certain nation or a certain religion, caste or community choose to hurl their collective might upon vulnerable members of another group. The damage is particularly lethal if the full force and legitimacy of a modern state is behind it. If a youth is caught stealing a cookie in California, he may end up in prison for some months or years. If you steal a continent, you may end up becoming the United States of America. Get caught killing a man and you are a murderer and will suffer the cumulative justice of the law. Kill a million and you may become the Secretary of State. Such is the unwritten code that terrorists everywhere seize upon. We have reached the point where one rule for the state and another for terrorists simply won't do. It is plainly inconsistent with the rule of law as with any self-respecting system of ethics.

Justice in India, as elsewhere, seems to follow in the tracks of the same moral hypocrisies as elsewhere. An event of the magnitude of the 1984 pogrom, which accounted for three thousand brutal murders, orphaned 4000 children, widowed thousands of women, displaced 50,000 people, and inflicted pain and humiliation on an epic scale, unfamiliar to India since 1947, calls for far greater public attention and collective moral scrutiny than has been forthcoming hitherto. Might defines right in India too, and believes itself to be in the right, merely because it has the power to make it seem so. The truth is that only those who have suffered at the hands of such routine injustice actually have a sense for what is right.

It is worth recalling that the papers of the Mishra Commission, the main official inquiry into the pogrom, have never been made public. Much evidence, especially the crucial handwritten notes of Ved Marwah (who headed the very first inquiry into the pogrom), has also been destroyed, because as an honest officer he was cutting too close to the bone. Why isn't Manmohan's new government, that prides itself on transparency and accountability, making the information public?

The time has arrived to face together these elementary truths about the world we live in.

There are those who would like us all to forgive and forget ("It happened two decades ago, after all"). Darshan Kaur, who was widowed by the 1984 pogrom, and dared to identify H.K.L. Bhagat in public, has this observation for them. While speaking to a reporter after the Nanavati Commission tabled its report in August, she said: "Let Sonia Gandhi forget Rajiv Gandhi and Indira Gandhi first." Leaders of the ilk of Narasimha Rao have relied in the past on the short life of public memory to evade the delivery of justice and save the face of their party. But how will they get past the several thousand embittered hearts, many of them bonded by common suffering and ghettoised in one-room tenements in West Delhi's Tilak Vihar since 1985? How will they assuage the seething anger of the young people who have grown up in the wake of the pogrom? When an atrocity of such

magnitude has occurred, whitewashes won't do. Before a line is drawn under the whole event, wisdom demands that justice be done. Only then can any genuine peace and harmony can be expected.

And yet, all it evokes from our Prime Minister (and not Tytler, Sajjan Kumar and others) is a feeble apology, 21 years after the event, when many of the perpetrators, survivors and witnesses of the pogrom that escalated the barbarism of independent India, are long gone, dead. There has to be a minimal sense of balance: the atonement has to be in proportion to the atrocities. If you apologize, you clearly take responsibility for what happened. But then it behooves you to do so completely. In matters of justice there is no half-way house.

The crimes of the Congress are serious. That it left the fate of the country's capital city in the hands of barbaric lumpens for several days, that it set a catastrophic precedent for the future, that it threw dust in the face of the constitution, that it brought a more or less permanent loss of prestige to the highest offices of the Government of India and shame to the country, that it continues to insult the intelligence of thousands of eyewitnesses who helplessly saw with their own senses the evidence of state betrayal of the people and the constitution, above all, that it alienated a loyal community from the rest of the country, abandoning it to suffer the humiliation and pain in silence, all this constitutes grounds for not mere apology but the appointment of a South-Africa style public Truth and Reconciliation Commission which will see to it that justice is done and faith in the rule of law slowly restored.

When injustices have been so prolonged and almost institutionalized, as is the case with 1984, this is what is minimally necessary. The likes of Tytler and Bhagat ought not only to be punished fully and fairly by the law but made to apologize publicly to the widows and orphans of 1984 on TV, before the eyes and ears of the entire nation. Likewise, the widows and survivors of 1984 have to be given the chance to tell their stories on TV. Only this will reveal the full scope and shame of the crimes to the nation and make the aspiring Modis of the future think twice before acting as they have done in the past.

If the Congress thinks that Modi's crimes in Gujarat are reprehensible, then minimal moral consistency demands, no matter what the short-term political risks, that it take a harsher view of its own crimes, the ones that set the tone for others to follow. If need be, a thorough purge of the party leadership, as much as of its rank and file, must be carried out if the party is to survive in the long term as a political force of any secular and moral credibility. If one may be allowed to express some expectant optimism, if only to save the futures that we all imagine today, the Congress leadership should strike a open public deal with the BJP opposition that they will come clean on 1984 if the latter do so on Gujarat 2002. Once everyone is on the same page there is a chance of a new dawn. Otherwise, as one of the Sikh survivors from 1984 once said, "*Yeh sab chalta rahega*" ("these things will go on").

Only a few meagre steps towards justice have been taken. The resignations in August this year of two of the chief architects of the 1984 pogrom, Minister for NRI affairs Jagdish Tytler and Member of Parliament Sajjan Kumar, after they had (once again) been named in the Nanavati Commission report, is certainly salutary (though it must be noted that they tendered their resignation to party president Sonia Gandhi and not to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh!). Last month, under massive public pressure and media exposure, the

Union Home Ministry has asked the cases against Jagdish Tytler, Dharamdass Shastri and Sajjan Kumar to be reopened. All this is certainly welcome. But far, very far, from enough.

The list of culprits is long and the masterminds still very much at large (if they haven't reached their graves already). Justice, by being so delayed, has already been largely denied. The surviving Sikh widows and orphans of 1984 find the situation unacceptable. Repeatedly, the guilty have been named by one commission of enquiry after another. Each time the government has asked the police to withdraw the case. The fear, I suppose, is that if one Tytler or Bhagat is squarely convicted he may squeak some secret in public which would reveal the culpability of bigger heads, who must be saved from rolling. One wonders who they might be, given that the three biggest ones in India in 1984 - Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Home Minister Narasimha Rao and the President Giani Zail Singh are all dead!

As things stand, the farce is hard to escape. In some cases, the accused, the accusers and witnesses have all already died. Ram Pal Saroj was one of the masterminds of the pogrom in Trilokpuri, named in hundreds of affidavits. He is deceased, and so is his accuser, Santokh Singh, whose three sons had been killed by a mob led by Saroj! Even if you are familiar with the labyrinthine standards of Indian bureaucracy, the absurdity catches you by surprise.

Justice is truly being mocked when the tenth inquiry commission into the pogrom has asked for further investigation, a generation after the events happened. As the quotation from the Delhi High Court judge above indicates, the investigations have been shoddy throughout, ever since the Marwah Commission was not allowed to complete its work in November 1984, when it had started to investigate senior police officers.

It would have been simpler, easier and immensely more straightforward for Rajiv's government to have declared in 1985 itself that it was not going to be possible for justice to be offered for the victims of the violence after his mother's assassination, that it was tragic and unfortunate and that's about it, his "great tree" metaphor capturing the essence of the matter. But the pretence to constitutional loyalty must be kept up if political legitimacy is to be sustained in a democracy. And so, 20 years and 10 inquiry commissions later, we are not yet closer to truth (let alone to justice). "We still do not know the truth," the Prime Minister admitted in the Rajya Sabha in August. He conceded that "to err is human: there were lapses." Error? Lapses? One after another, by one powerful state functionary after another? For 24, 48, 72 hours? 5, 10, 20 years? There are issues on which even unusual courtesy from a newcomer to politics has a hollow, faithless ring.

Failure to restore public faith in the rule of law would lead, as always, to people taking the law into their own hands as and when they feel the need or get half a chance. Then one can also expect informal forms of retributive justice. Memory still brings back the images of Arjun Dass and Lalit Maken, two of the Congressmen named in the original PUCL report as having organized the violence, who met their fates on the streets of the capital in the 1980s.

Enough of the truth is already known in order to bring charges. Surely some utterly important person in the present UPA government must have the courage (and the Nehruvian wisdom of foresight) to draw the obvious conclusions from the evidence which is already in public view. Is there anyone there? Rahul Gandhi?

Justice, if and when it arrives, will not remove the trauma of the widows and the orphans. It will diminish it. It will go some distance towards reducing the possibility of such moral catastrophes in the future by restoring to a degree, public faith in, and more significantly fear of, the rule of law.

Most laudable and necessary is the effort of independent lawyers and human rights advocates, such as Harvinder Phoolka in Delhi and Jaskaran Kaur's group "Ensaaf" in the US, among so many others. Without their sustained efforts the little justice that has been earned would not have come about. They are fighting with enormous courage and grit on an issue which has profound significance not just for the Sikh community but for the legitimacy of the Indian state, and the long-term survival of the Indian democratic polity itself.

That there has been such little collective public reflection not only on the pogrom of 1984, but on carnages that took place in Bombay and Gujarat over the next two decades only shows how weak Indian democracy, let alone its putative secularism, actually is. Surely democracy is something more than the mechanical casting and counting of votes once every five years to measure and compare the popularity of equally corrupt and opportunistic political groups? Without open dialogue and vigorous debate, both in and outside the parliament, especially over matters of grave public injustices done to communities, democracy becomes a cosmetic exercise in political futility, a curse to the idea of citizenship. It begins to resemble a tyrannical system whereby parties take turns at looting the public exchequer and manipulating (and sometimes killing parts of) the voting public to maintain themselves in power. Even a monarchy in the hands of a loved king could do better.

Terrorism, Brutally Demonstrated

The Indian government, in a grand alliance with the increasingly exposed Uncle Sam, claims to be fighting these days a war on terror. Manmohan Singh and his government have been all too keen to end terrorism. Not a day passes when we don't hear some official indignation over "cross-border terrorism." But, like their worthy counterparts across two oceans, they don't seem to wish to understand why it arises. In the Indian case, it is altogether suicidal to ignore recent history, whether it is in the case of Kashmir or Punjab. If Indira Gandhi could speak from her grave, she would ask the present rulers to be wiser.

We are indignant at 62 people being blown up in the capital by terrorists last month. But just imagine, for that is minimally what one must do at this late stage in the drama, 3000 innocents brutally murdered under the sun, by armed mobs relieved of the constraints of the law, their bodies desecrated with burning tyres, thousands of women raped, many of them multiple times and before their own children, their places of worship, houses and little shops set ablaze, policemen and political leaders guiding and masterminding the whole performance from the shadows, the army kept in the sidelines for days to allow the orgy to be completed, and all of this too in the capital of "the world's largest democracy," while dignitaries and leaders from across the world were paying their last respects to the departed leader only some miles away from the action - here was terrorism, if ever someone needed a laboratory demonstration and a living definition!

If terrorism is the use of violence against innocents for political ends, both the Delhi pogrom of 1984 and the Gujarat genocide of 2002, conducted strictly with electoral goals in mind, provide text-book instances. The only problem is that the BJP-led opposition recognizes the horror of the former, the ruling Congress of the latter, but neither of both. A remarkable state of affairs indeed.

Some Personal Reflections

For us in India, 1984 doesn't just mean Operation Bluestar, the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi and the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and North India. For, within weeks of the pogrom a similar number of people were accounted for by the gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. Orwellian premonitions for the year were certainly validated in India! It was a ghastly year.

The pogrom happened, among other places, in New Delhi. Remember, one is not talking about some backwater town in the North East or some remote hamlet in the Kashmir valley. One is describing the events in the capital city of the world's largest democracy, which prides itself on its secular credentials and is often pointed to as a showpiece of democratic success in the Third World.

It is as though some few thousand African-Americans were murdered by white supremacists in the heart of Washington DC, over a period of a few days, while Dick Cheney asked his administration and security forces to go on vacation, in the wake of the assassination of Bush by two of his own security men (who happened to be black). Even by the appalling standards set by the Bush administration recently, it is hard to imagine!

But that is exactly what was set in motion in Delhi in November 1984.

Even if in some corner of my heart I have had an affection for the city of Delhi, I never had a high opinion of it as a place hospitable for human beings to live in. After 1984, one's faith and trust in the city nosedived into a moral abyss. 1984 was a barbaric reminder of all the blood that history generally floats on. Delhi, especially, has known plenty of bloodbaths in its long, violent past. But reading about all that in the history books was one thing. To be fated to witness it with one's own senses quite another. Somehow, one had never imagined that such ghastliness could come to pass in independent India. Our illusions of secular freedom suffered a mortal blow in those first days of November 1984.

I have never felt as physically insecure, before or since. One normally takes the physical surroundings and social circumstances of our lives to be steady and stable, a yardstick against which change can be measured over time. One never imagines the environment itself as a ceaseless movement which only offers the appearance of steadiness and stability. 1984 changed that for many of us, perhaps forever. Nothing in my experience prior to that November had ever wrecked the "givens" of everyday life as mortally as the well-orchestrated pogrom of 1984 did.

Within hours one's sense of security was shattered forever. The fickle fragility of human life lay exposed to the lethal violence of mass frustration, which seemed to have lain just inches below the surface of social peace. It seemed as though anyone in the city of Delhi with adequate power and resources could any time hire a willing mob to rob, plunder, burn,

desecrate, maim, rape or kill. And if the state itself wished to expand its power, by demonstrating it "informally," there were enough knives on hire to slash through the butter of vulnerable humanity, as long as the police and the security forces could be asked to look the other way, or better still, enjoy the orgy themselves.

Every piece of the state's administrative machinery - the political leadership, the parliament, the bureaucracy, the police, the army, the judiciary - every nut and bolt in the power structure could be sent on holiday to pave the way for opportunistic, wanton violence to do its work. As a friend observed at the time, it was under Rajiv Gandhi's genteel leadership that the pogrom was organized. One can only imagine the bestiality that would have been summoned for the occasion had his fascist brother been still alive. Yes, there are things to be thankful for, even in the darkest moments of our lives!

This is the first time I have written anything about the horrors of 1984. Like most people who were witness to the terrible events of those days, I have found it hard to relate what I saw and heard with my own senses or heard from victims of the violence shortly after the events had transpired. In the hierarchy of horrors that the modern world offers, the pogrom of 1984 surely ranks very high. That human beings can get so dehumanized as to inflict such unimaginable and cowardly brutality on their neighbors and fellow-citizens is a sobering realization of the fragility of the modern human condition. There is no progress. Humanity just beats barbarically around the bush (pardon the pun, yet again). The wounds of history rarely heal, even when justice is done. And when justice is altogether denied, as it has been in the case of the victims of 1984 by one cowardly government after another, then the wounds linger and fester, hardening the arteries of collective memory and making the violence worse when the floodgates of anger and revenge reopen in some fragile future.

Meanwhile, for thousands who still like to hope for justice, who share the fate of people of courage like Darshan Kaur, Mohan Singh and their children, the heart carries prayers. May life grant them faith and fortitude in their suffering. Till a few years ago, whenever I took a train from Nizamuddin Railway Station in New Delhi, Sunder Singh, who worked as a coolie there, somehow always found me. I had met him at the Farsh Bazar relief camp. He lost many family members in Trilokpuri in 1984. And whenever we met, we embraced and smiled, with tears in our eyes.

Let's forget freedom, democracy, civilization and the other deceitful slogans of our time. Let us only recall our humanity. We don't need the rest.

(I finished this essay on November 14, 2005 which, as luck would have it, is Jawaharlal Nehru's 116th birth anniversary, familiar to those of us who have gone to school in independent India as "Children's Day.")

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