

Assault on the Golden Temple Complex 5-6 June 1984

LT GEN JAGJIT SINGH AURORA (RETD)

Since Independence, it was for the first time that the Indian Army had been employed to fight a pitched battle against a section of its own people. The assault on the Golden Temple on 5-6 June 1984 turned a shrine of great sanctity into a battlefield. This has shocked and angered the Sikh masses and caused anguish to many more of other religious beliefs. The immediate question that arises is: was the army action really necessary? Was it the only solution? My view is that it was not.

To begin with, the Akali agitation had lasted for so long that it was obvious to anyone that it would continue till certain political demands were met. These demands were of all Punjabis; only, the Akali party had taken the initiative to agitate for them. Unfortunately the political demands were mixed up with some religious demands and the Akalis failed to carry Punjabi Hindus with them and later even alienated them. The only way to end the agitation was to find an answer to these political demands. The longer the solution was delayed, the more complicated the problem became. Had the government been sincere to find an answer it could have done so far more easily in the earlier stages.

Whenever the Akalis found their agitation flagging or losing momentum they came out with a new demand to keep it going. The delay also acted in favour of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale whose violent methods further alienated the Hindus. The government clearly failed to foresee the direction in which the situation was developing and by not acting in time caused great grief to the Sikhs and much harm to the national integrity.

The second important reason is that if a correct assessment had been made of Bhindranwale's role and his religious fanaticism, and if it was realized that no compromise with him was possible, action against him should have been taken much earlier. One must not forget that Bhindranwale had been taken into custody by the then chief minister, Darbara Singh, but was released under mysterious circumstances. Worse still, he (Bhindranwale) was allowed to travel

all over India with an armed bodyguard like a conquering hero. This established his image in Punjab as a man with whom the government was reluctant to tangle. It added to his charisma as a religious and popular leader.

If one is to believe Harkishan Singh Surjeet, and I see no reason to disbelieve him, he had claimed, both from public platforms and in writing, that many discussions were held between the Akali party and the central government when differences were narrowed down considerably and decisions were practically arrived at, but at the last minute talks were broken off by the government. As a result the moderate Akali leadership, eager to end the crisis, was forced to return to Amritsar empty-handed each time, where it was jeered at by the Bhindranwale group who said, 'Well, if you go with a begging bowl what do you expect? Unless you can stand up to this government you'll get nothing.' Slowly and steadily, the Akalis found themselves losing credibility among the Sikh masses, and Bhindranwale's influences increasing. My conviction is that if Sant Harchand Singh Longowal's position had not been weakened by these unfruitful negotiations, he and the others would have been able to control Bhindranwale. All the same it is a pity that the head of the SGPC, Gurcharan Singh Tohra, permitted Bhindranwale to shift from Guru Nanak Niwas to Akal Takht and entrench himself there.

Another glaring anomaly in the government's decision was to cloak the Operation Bluestar in such secrecy. In my opinion when an action is to be taken against a section of your own people, as against a foreign enemy, it is wiser to take the nation into confidence rather than be secretive. Before embarking on such an unprecedented operation it should have been realized that whatever the circumstances, the Sikhs would be hurt badly if the Golden Temple complex was assaulted. It was essential, therefore, to try and create a favourable public opinion amongst the Sikhs by informing them that the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that no other course was possible. To convince them a conclave of Sikh saints and prominent Sikhs could have been called and they could have been asked to persuade Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to vacate the temple complex. Even the *Jathedars* of the five Takhts could have been invited to this conclave and asked to issue a *Hukumnama* against storing of arms in the Golden Temple. Only if these efforts had failed then and only then should the final step have been taken. There is every likelihood that Bhindranwale would have found it difficult to go against the *Hukumnama* and the whole tragedy would have then been avoided. To counter this argument it may be suggested that there would have

been adverse reactions from the villages where Sant Bhindranwale was extremely popular and even venerated. Groups of armed villagers would have started marching towards Amritsar and it would have become very difficult to control them. This happened in any case when rumours of impending army action and the damage to the Golden Temple complex by the army spread. The army, however, was able to prevent these crowds from entering Amritsar city mostly by show of force. Only on few occasions fire had to be opened. The fear of mass Sikh peasantry entering the town of Amritsar to burn and pillage it, was entirely unfounded. It is beyond one's comprehension why a popularly elected government tried to act surreptitiously in an hour of national crisis. If the government believes that the majority of the Sikhs are nationalists why did it not give them a chance to prove themselves? It will take a long time before this anguish and sense of alienation begins to fade and the Sikhs once again feel that they are a part of the Indian nation.

One of the strongest features of the Sikh community before this action was that despite being a minority, very few actually felt that they did not belong to the national mainstream, as they have lived harmoniously with all other communities; the fact that they looked different or had a different religion was never a consideration for them to feel apart. Now they do. And this is highly unfortunate both for the Sikhs and for the integrity of the country.

I went to Amritsar on 6 July, visited the Golden Temple and talked to the army authorities and others who were there during the army operation. The damage to the entire complex was much beyond what was reported in the media news or the press. It was difficult not to feel hurt and to control one's anguish. It is not easy to rationalize when your deepest sentiments are injured.

I consider that the Operation was put through in a great rush. Detailed reconnaissance and deliberate planning was not done. The army has blamed the intelligence authorities for lack of information but what stopped the army from confirming, rejecting or supplementing the information given by personal reconnaissance by the concerned commanders and other key personnel? These reconnoissances could have or should have been done before the main forces came on the scene. June 5 was not a sacrosanct date. In fact it was a bad choice. That year 3 June was Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom day. On that day a large number of Sikh devotees visited the Golden Temple. That was the day when curfew was imposed in the entire city. When the city administration realized that it was the fifth guru's martyrdom day they first lifted the curfew for sometime

and then reimposed it. It is now believed by people that many of the devotees were not able to come out and later were killed during the military action. This could have been avoided if the Operation was undertaken a few days later. With all the time at their disposal, when the government decided to go ahead with this Operation they did so in a great hurry, which resulted in many more deaths and much more damage to the complex. Had more time been permitted for planning and preparation, a way could have been found to deal with the extremists occupying the Akal Takht from the back through the built-up area. As it was, some of the high buildings around the complex had been occupied by the CRPF and BSF before the army arrived. More could have been occupied by them to give army personnel suitable jumping-off places to surround the Akal Takht from the rear. But, the army did not seem to have enough time to consider these possibilities.

The plan which was executed seems to have underrated the resistance the army was likely to meet or was so much influenced by the other considerations that it suffered from adhocism. I do not wish to question the army's competence or the commanders' ability. I have always felt and still feel that under the circumstances and the compulsions imposed on them they completed a difficult assignment successfully and with great care. The fault mainly lies in not permitting them enough time which was required for proper planning and preparation. I did raise the question of outflanking the Akal Takht. I was told that the area was so heavily built up, that it was not feasible to infiltrate through such an area. I maintain that an attack by infiltration from behind the Akal Takht together with the frontal attack should have been attempted in order to get the defenders facing two or three directions. As it happened the troops had to go through the Parikrama and came under prearranged fire wherever they went. It appeared that the army simply did not have the time to consider these possibilities before they actually ringed the temple complex. Once they did so, it became difficult to hide the onset of the action. The troops could have come in only after a preliminary survey had been made by small parties moving about as devotees. Launching the Operation in such a tremendous hurry was, of course, a political decision. It was a mistake that should have been avoided to reduce bloodshed.

Given the constraints of time and other restrictions, one cannot fault the army for using direct approaches and depending on superior firepower as against tactical manoeuvre. They realized that the Operation consisted of two distinct

parts: one, of getting Bhindranwale and his men out of Akal Takht and two, bringing Longowal, Tohra and their men safely out of Guru Ramdas Serai. The latter operation was simpler. The troops did meet with some resistance possibly from the armed members of the Babbar Khalsa. They were able to overcome this by the use of superior fire power and took the two leaders into custody together with two or three hundred others who were all unarmed. The White Paper has claimed that Bhindranwale's men succeeded in killing several of these people. I doubt it. There is always some confusion in a battle. These people after being taken into custody were collected in the courtyard of Teja Singh Samundari Hall. Either a grenade thrown by someone or a shell fired by the army landed amongst this group which caused casualties. The army understandably reacted violently and spread into Teja Singh Samundari building where they entered each room after first spraying it with bullets. This resulted in further casualties. It is unlikely that Bhindranwale was planning internecine murders at this stage while he was fighting for his life in the Akal Takht complex.

The securing of the main Golden Temple complex was the crucial task. To overcome the resistance here three to four infantry battalions and two commando groups were employed. They had to be supported by mortar, artillery and tank fire. Although the entry of troops took place from various directions, eventually they all had to traverse over the Parikrama around the Golden Temple and the Sarovar. While approaching the prepared defences over this area troops had to assault over open ground bereft of all cover. This is where they suffered most of the casualties. The commando groups who led the first assault suffered the most. Once inside the quadrangle there was little or no room for manoeuvre. The Akal Takht lies well back and dominates all frontal approaches. It was not easy to close in with the defences located there and the troops had to use tank fire liberally to destroy most of the defences before they could overcome the resistance. The attack started after dark on 5 June. All other areas were cleared of the defenders by the morning of 6 June, but the Akal Takht defences were overcome only by 1 o'clock on the night of 6-7 June. From all accounts the fighting was bitter and no quarters were given or asked.

It is also clear that the army did not expect such resistance from all sides. To save lives first an armoured personnel carrier was used which was disabled as it came close to the Akal Takht defences. Later tank lights were used to blind the defenders to help the infantry close in. This move also failed. Eventually the tanks were brought into the Parikrama and were used to destroy the prepared

defences of Akal Takht.

The casualty figures as given out by the authorities are 84 killed and 230(?) wounded on the army side and 493 killed and 86 wounded on the other side. The ratio of killed to wounded is very high as far the army is concerned whereas the ratio from the extremist side would indicate that either they fought to the bitter end or no mercy was shown.

Though the main operation ended with the fall of the Akal Takht defences, mopping up operations continued for the next three days. Suicide squads of Bhindranwale's followers had to be cleared out from the neighbouring buildings. During these operations much damage was caused to private property and many innocent people lost their lives. Unfortunately, dead bodies by the hundreds lay in the open inside the complex which were finally cleared after three days with the help of municipal committee vans. All those killed in the complex were cremated en masse. Relations were not permitted to claim the dead bodies. No proper record of those killed has been drawn up and made available to the public so far. This has led to many rumours, where the numbers of killed have been greatly exaggerated.

It was claimed that the Golden Temple was not damaged during the operations because strict instructions had been issued to the army not to fire in that direction whatever the provocation. In actual fact the Golden Temple had more than 250 bullet marks which I saw with my own eyes. I also saw that there were no prepared defences inside the Golden Temple. There were defences in other parts of the complex – brick-and-mortar and sandbag breast works and bunkers – but none inside the temple. If there was fire from the Golden Temple it would have been certain mobile light machine-gun teams who must have gone there temporarily. Chances are that in the heat of the battle some small arm fire was directed on Harmandir Sahib in spite of the instructions to the contrary. It is understandable. What is not understandable, however, is why the information about the damage was kept a secret. Such secrecy only resulted in the loss of credibility of the government-controlled media.

Besides the destruction of Akal Takht, the loss of the historic library is even more poignant. The building either caught fire or was set on fire and its contents entirely destroyed. Steel shelves containing valuable manuscripts and books lie twisted out of shape in the backyard. The building is being fast repaired but all the ancient handwritten texts and granths, some of them inscribed in the gurus'

own hands, have been irretrievably lost. The whole library, in fact, is a burnt out shell. The controversy surrounding the destruction of the library is unfortunate. While the army claims that it caught fire on the morning of 6 June when fighting was in progress, the temple *sevadars* and *granthis* present during the Operation maintain that it was set on fire on 7 June.

It was the use of tanks which eventually enabled the army to overcome the resistance. Without the use of tanks it would have been very difficult and expensive in human lives to capture the Akal Takht. The sequence of events in this Operation shows that plans had to be modified as the situation developed. Maybe the army tried its best to restrain the use of heavier weapons till it was forced to do so. On the other hand it was possibly due to lack of information and incorrect appreciation that the army had to react to unexpected situations. The government's insistence on speed and secrecy – very good weapons in fighting an enemy – caused more damage and confusion when dealing with a section of its own citizens.

Much has been said about the quantum of weapons and preparation of defences by the extremists. When I visited the Golden Temple with my wife in December 1983 and spent two hours one evening and two the following morning, I could see no defences of any description. As a devotee I visited various parts of the temple as well as Baba Atal Gurdwara. There were no signs of any defensive preparation anywhere. Bhindranwale was living in Guru Nanak Niwas at the time. I next visited the Golden Temple on 24 February 1984, by which time he had moved into the Akal Takht building. I saw people carrying weapons in the Parikrama area but there were no fortifications. The top of the Langar building had been fortified with sandbags and I was told there were periodic firings from the CRPF and hence the sandbags had been put up for protection. The defences did not appear very formidable, as anything on top of a building can be knocked off quite easily.

When I visited the temple again on 6 July, exactly a month after the Operation, I saw some of the defences which might have been built over, but a large number had been left to show to the people how the defences had been built by the terrorists. It was obvious that in a period of three months – between March and June – much had been done and the defences had been well sited. I knew Maj Gen Shabeg Singh, who had served under me during the Bangladesh Operation in 1971. He had not lost his professional touch. From the account of the battle as narrated by Maj Gen K.S. Brar the extremists had taken every

advantage of their defensive positions and fought valiantly and skilfully.

So far it has not been possible to assess the strength of the extremists in the Golden Temple complex. It is possible that quite a few of the Babbar Khalsa who were deployed towards Nanak Niwas would have escaped. In the main complex quite a number of the devotees got trapped because of the curfew on 3 June 1984. Everybody inside the temple was not an extremist or terrorist. From the figures that the army has released – 493 terrorists killed, 86 wounded and more than 1500 taken prisoner – it is clear that many of them were devotees or those who had come to join the peaceful *shahidi jathas*. The number of weapons seized, though large, would indicate that these were insufficient to equip a force of more than 2,000 people. The number of weapons seized from all parts of the temple complex, including the Sarovar, were about 1000, which included over a 100 pistols. This only reinforces the argument that a large number of devotees got trapped. It has been mentioned that the terrorists refused to let them out. This is unlikely. It appears that while the army was broadcasting a message asking the people to come out, *shabad kirtan* was in progress and not many heard the army appeal. Also from 4 June onwards continuous firing was going on which forced people to stay indoors. This was confirmed by some of the people who were with Sant Longowal at that time. They only came to know about the appeal at about 5.30 p.m. on 5 June through a messenger. Sant Longowal deputed somebody to check the information but before anyone could get out heavy firing restarted and people went back indoors.

The use and stocking of firearms inside the Golden Temple is reprehensible and inexcusable. I make no excuse for Bhindranwale and his followers for preaching and practising violence as this is against the tenets of Sikhism. There is, however, a need to correct the picture that has been painted by the media that sophisticated weapons were found inside the temple. The first thing to remember is that in a war weapons get lost! In both the wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, a large number of weapons were picked up by people and never accounted for. With the large-scale smuggling going on across Punjab-Pakistan border some gunrunning must have taken place. Since 1960, the government has been issuing arms to certain reliable people living close to the border for security purposes. So there have been a lot of unaccounted weapons in circulation in Punjab, used often in family feuds, property disputes and dacoity. Their buying and selling has been a lucrative trade. Another point to note is that of the weapons seized inside the temple, only 60 self-loading rifles bear foreign

markings. The rest are all of Indian origin. Further, there were no medium machine-guns or mortars. There were, however, a large number of light machine-guns. Ammunition for both the light and medium machine-guns is the same, but a medium machine-gun has a higher and more sustained rate of fire. There were two rocket launchers with the terrorists but only one was used. It is obvious, therefore, that there were not so many sophisticated weapons. Quite a lot, yes; but the impression that has been built up in the public mind of foreign governments deliberately arming the terrorists with a view to overthrowing the government is grossly overdone.

I am certain that for the army it has been an extremely unpleasant task. Some of the officers have come under a great deal of criticism. I know both Lt Gen R.S. Dayal MVC and Maj Gen K.S. Brar VrC well. Both had served under me. Dayal was the hero of Hajipour Pass in 1965 War with Pakistan, while Brar commanded his battalion with distinction in Bangladesh Operations. Both are gallant and capable officers. It is unfair to criticize them for the conduct of this Operation which could not have been of their own choosing. They, however, did not falter and carried out their assignments loyally and to the best of their ability. The actual conduct of the Operation was the responsibility of Brar, but I doubt if he had much freedom in its planning and execution. One thing that impressed me was that before going into the battle he told his troops that if any one did not wish to take part in this Operation he could opt out. This was a fine gesture, though at that time no soldier was likely to back out. In spite of carrying out the Operation successfully, he has had no sense of achievement. He had to spend much of his time explaining why so much damage took place and so many casualties occurred. It is wrong to blame the officers for the shortcomings of higher policy decisions.

At this stage it may be appropriate to evaluate the role of Maj Gen Shabeg Singh whose name has shot up to great prominence after this Operation. I knew him well and first met him in 1948 during the Jammu and Kashmir Operations against Pakistan. For sometime he was a parachutist and so was I. I came in contact with him again in 1963-64 when he was a staff officer in intelligence branch of a Corps Headquarters and I was a divisional commander. During the Bangladesh Operations in 1971, he served under me, when he was employed for training guerillas of the Mukti Bahini. He was competent, enthusiastic and well liked. He was not particularly religious at that time as he used to clip his beard and cut his hair. Shabeg really seemed to enjoy the kind of job he was doing; he

got along very well with the Bangladeshi trainees and enjoyed their confidence. He had the capacity to enthuse people around him. I last met him after my retirement when he was area commander in Jabalpur as a major general. Later he was transferred to Bareilly from where he was dismissed for certain administrative irregularities. I had no opportunity or cause to doubt his financial integrity when he was serving under me. In Shabeg Singh I found a useful and valuable officer who enjoyed any job given to him to which he brought much zest and enthusiasm. I recommended him for an Ativashisht Seva Medal which he was given for the Bangladesh Operations. I think he went overboard and joined Bhindranwale together with a number of other army officers who, after leaving the army returned to Punjab, to find how values had changed. Their dissatisfaction stemmed from the fact that the retired servicemen were accorded little respect or consideration by the civil administration. To add fuel to the fire during the Asiad in 1982 when all Sikhs travelling to Delhi from Punjab were stopped and searched regardless of their status or convictions they felt grieved and some of them came under Sant Bhindranwale's influence. In Shabeg's case, his dismissal from service and later harassment by the CBI became a motivating factor. Maybe he got some professional satisfaction, to organize the defences for Sant Bhindranwale's fight against the government. There were other officers who had become Bhindranwale's disciples but did not stick by him till the end. The fact that Shabeg did, and was ready to die for him, speaks as much for his loyalty or bitterness against the government as for Bhindranwale's charismatic appeal.

It is for the first time that desertions on such a scale have taken place from the army. The episode in Ramgarh could be termed a mutiny when the regimental commandant was shot dead by the soldiers. From what one has been able to glean from newspaper reports, one can only surmise that these incidents occurred spontaneously and were not a premeditated plan or deep-seated conspiracy as averred by some. This is apparent from the fact that most of the deserters picked up weapons from their units, got into military transport and left from places like Pune and Ramgarh, hoping to reach Amritsar in large groups! Even a little bit of clear thinking would have made it obvious to them that they stood no chance of reaching Amritsar without being intercepted, killed or rounded up en route. This is actually what happened. That such an occurrence took place is enough of an indication of the magnitude of emotional reaction they must have felt losing complete balance. More disturbing is the fact that such an event should have taken place in the Indian Army with its unsullied record of discipline and loyalty. Without making excuses for those who deserted or

mutinied one cannot help feeling that the authorities failed to foresee that an assault on the Golden Temple complex may lead to such an eventuality. Had the authorities appreciated that fact and taken senior army officers into confidence before hand, they would have had time to prepare their men by explaining to them why the army action was imperative.

Clearing of the terrorists from the Golden Temple complex and other gurdwaras was only Phase I of the Operation Bluestar. As soon as Phase I was over Phase II was launched which was to capture and clear off the terrorists from Punjab countryside. This Operation is still in progress and three or four infantry divisions have been employed on it. To begin with the *modus operandi* was to have the troops located down to *thanas*. Their job was to carry out searches of suspected houses or villages to locate extremists/terrorists. The suspects were taken to interrogation centres and persuaded to confess. Those who were considered innocent were sent back to their villages. Others were handed over to the police custody. Unfortunately; the only method of persuasion appears to be physical coercion. This has led to many hair-raising stories.

It is believed that the army units have now been drawn back to *tehsil* headquarters and most of the searches are being conducted by the police or paramilitary forces. Army units still carry out frequent patrolling of the disturbed or suspected areas.

This prolonged stay of the army on internal security duties has made it rather unpopular amongst the Sikh population. There are frequent complaints of high-handedness and excesses. There is no doubt that the army action against the Golden Temple and other gurdwaras in Punjab, and its subsequent employment in the rural areas for apprehending the terrorists has caused almost complete polarization between the two communities. The death of Sant Bhindranwale came as a relief to the Hindus but the destruction of Akal Takht was a shock to the Sikhs. Whereas the Sikhs, specially in the villages, want the army to be withdrawn immediately the Hindus are apprehensive that violence against them would start again once the army leaves. There appears to be no meeting ground on this issue. Continued stay of the army in the state cannot solve it. Eventually the two communities have to realize that they have to learn to understand and appreciate each others' fears and susceptibilities. They must let bygones be bygones. This is where the healing touch is required. Who should take the initiative?

Unfortunately the sectarian leadership and the press has been apportioning the blame, rather than promoting unity. The government's attitude and actions have worsened the situation. The official media continues to claim what a wonderful job has been done; that the Golden Temple has been saved which would otherwise have been destroyed; that minimum possible damage was inflicted and the sacred temple, which had been desecrated by the extremists was cleaned up. It is now necessary to ensure that the extremists do not come back to the temple and for this continued employment of the army for its protection is necessary. Neither the SGPC nor the Sikh community as a whole can be trusted to ensure that such a situation will not recur. Without any regard for the Sikh sentiments *kar seva* of Akal Takht has been entrusted to Baba Santa Singh of Budha Dal who hardly represents the Sikh community. All kinds of steps are being taken to boost his image and gather people from various places and groups to show how popular the *kar seva* is. In the meantime devotees are permitted to visit the Golden Temple from 4 to 6 in the morning only. If the *kar seva*, as being carried out now, is acceptable to the majority of the Sikhs where is the need to take such strict measures to ensure that devotees and the people doing *kar seva* are kept segregated? After having declared that on no account fire arms would be permitted inside a place of worship it is surprising to see that the followers of Baba Santa Singh toting rifles while doing *kar seva*. This is certainly not the way to apply the healing touch and assuage the injured feelings of the Sikhs. On one side it is repeatedly claimed that the action was not against the Sikh community but a few extremists who had taken to violence; on the other hand majority of the Sikhs are being hindered from doing *kar seva* to rebuild the Akal Takht with their own hands as labour of love and devotion. It may be mentioned that during the Mughal times when Jahangir offered money for the building of Takht Sahib, Guru Hargobind declined the offer, saying that building of this Takht was the privilege of the community as their personal contribution to the faith. The present method of doing *kar seva* is one sure way of creating differences within the Sikh community which will further destabilize the already unstable situation in the state.

It is a part of the role of the army to help the civilian administration in maintaining law and order if the situation gets out of hand. It is not the sort of role that either the army or the other armed forces would like to undertake. Taking punitive action against your own people is not a pleasant task; but when the need arises it has to be done. However, care should be taken to ensure that the army is not kept deployed on internal security duties for a minute longer

than is necessary. Armed forces should command the respect and affection of the civil population. This is a valuable asset during war when the country is facing foreign aggression. If the army is involved in taking punitive measures against its own people for a long time this respect and affection can turn into hatred and belligerence. The use of the army during this episode in Punjab has been extensive and all-embracing. Police had become ineffective and the administration was told not to interfere. The army was given total freedom of action to carry out arrests and investigation. It was permitted to establish its own interrogation centres. People were picked up and kept in custody without giving reasons. By and large the army has acted humanely and with due care. There have been, however, certain incidents where excesses have occurred either due to ignorance or due to over-zealousness on the part of junior leaders. This unfortunately has led to many inflated rumours which have sullied the army's reputation.

In this particular case there is a further danger that it may cause dissensions within the army itself as the majority of the troops employed in this task have been non-Sikhs and the action has been taken against the families or relatives of Sikh soldiers while they are away on duty.

Today, corruption has become a way of life in civil administration but the armed forces are comparatively free of it due primarily to a lack of opportunity and of course discipline. Continued exposure to the civilian method of working and behaviour can have adverse effect on the state of discipline and morale. The Armed Forces of India have so far remained totally apolitical and a model of national and emotional integration and free of communal disharmony. They are the steel frame holding the country together. Their solidarity must not be jeopardized on any account.

It may be worthwhile to consider why the situation in Punjab deteriorated to such an extent that respect for the authority disappeared and a group of extremists were permitted to hold the government, administration, people of Punjab, and even the leaders of Akali party, to ransom. It would be naive to believe that Sant Bhindranwale's fundamentalism was responsible for it. In fact the rise of Sant Bhindranwale and his fantastic hold over the Sikh masses in the rural areas is a phenomenon which needs investigation. There is little doubt that for the last ten years or so the civilian administration everywhere in India has become increasingly ineffective. People are losing faith in getting justice by legal means. Political influence, money power and muscle power are necessary to

succeed. Moral deterioration in public life has discouraged people of quality from taking active interest in the country's politics. Party interests and even individual interests take precedence over national interests. The battle of the ballot has become the most important factor while taking decisions on social, political and economic matters affecting the future of the country. No doubt, therefore, that justified grievances of common people are not redressed for a long time. This state of affairs breeds violence. People, especially the hot-headed young ones, lose patience and try to resolve problems by force. This is wrong and reprehensible but to eradicate this tendency repressive measures alone are not enough. The root of the dissatisfaction has to be found and eradicated. Symptomatic treatment at best provides a temporary relief. At the time of election all norms of decency and fairplay are forgotten. Passions are aroused on communal, social, sectarian, caste, creed or any other ground to defeat the rival and get elected. Capturing of booths by strong-arm methods, using money to buy votes misusing authority and preventing people by physical force or violence from casting votes is all acceptable. After the battle of ballot is won how is it possible for people to start obeying and respecting the law of the land and become good citizens? Disrespect for the law of the land has become an all-India issue. The politicians are the biggest defaulters. They are in league with moneybags and criminals who want to hold the country in thrall. Lust for power for self-aggrandizement is the only aim. The youth of the country has, therefore, scant respect either for the elders or for the law of the land. Such a state of affairs is fertile ground for mountebanks, charlatans and fanatics to lead astray the dissatisfied youth.

Democracy grants every individual the right to express his views without fear and favour. If his views differ from those of the party in power the individual does not become unpatriotic or antinational. In fact an opposition party is considered necessary for a stable democratic country. Why is it that whenever the opposition parties disagree with the party in power today they are dubbed as antinational? Similarly if a minority community demands a greater voice in its own affairs it becomes suspect. There cannot be two standards, one for the dominant party and the other for the minorities, similarly one for the party in power and the other for the opposition. In spite of whatever has happened and is happening the vast majority of the Sikhs do not want Khalistan and are not asking for it. The pronouncements from the government media as well as much of the national press keeps on stressing that the timely action by the army has just been able to defeat the machinations of the Khalistanis.

Though the army action in the Golden Temple was completed within a week or so, the army is still in occupation. Nearly two months have elapsed and phase II of the Operation Bluestar is still in progress. Special ordinances have been passed to deal with the extremists and terrorists. A large number of people have been taken into custody. No one knows what their fate will be. More arrests take place every day and terrorists' acts still occur. Fear grips the entire state. Periodic pronouncements take place about foreign powers trying to destabilize the country. No foreign power can destabilize a well-knit, contented and cohesive society. They can only fish in troubled waters. Admittedly, India is a complex society and poverty and burgeoning population has made it impossible to give everyone a satisfying portion of the cake. This should not, however, normally turn people against their own chosen country. One can imagine disgruntled people becoming antisocial but very few will become antinational.

The fact is that in spite of all the bloodshed that has taken place and damage caused, both physical and emotional, the solution to the political problems of Punjab is no nearer than it was before 5 June 1984. In fact it is a bit further away. The Akalis cannot accept less than their original demands and the government is unwilling to give now what it was willing to give before. In the meantime, purely repressive measures are increasing the divide between the Sikhs and the Hindus not only in Punjab but also in the neighbouring states. The atmosphere in Punjab is ripe to promote extremism and terror but a big stick has never been able to eradicate any insurgency which has popular support.

The ultimate solution lies in compromise and giving the minority community a sense of belonging and trust. It must be accepted that the entire Sikh community is hurt and grieved. But the healing touch applied so far has only increased their anguish. Had the *kar seva* been entrusted to Baba Khari Singh, the process of healing would have made a start. Now it has become the biggest irritant. An average Sikh feels that he is looked at with suspicion by law-maintaining authorities and is quite often treated rudely. He wonders if he has the same rights and privileges as other nationals of this country. The intellectuals are singled out for having failed to rise to the occasion. When were intellectuals ever consulted or asked to give their advice or views about solving the problem before 5-6 June 1984? Even today all efforts of the public-minded people are put to nought because they go against the political interest of the ruling party.

The situation today is no less fraught with danger than before. In fact it is far more delicate and fragile and requires consummate skill in handling. The

government of the day owes it to the people to take definite steps to create a favourable atmosphere where, to begin with, every Sikh does not feel like a culprit. The government should accept the Punjabi political and economic demands unilaterally which will contribute greatly to normalize the situation.

What has been and is happening in Punjab is not the concern of the Punjabis only. It concerns the entire nation. Had a solution been found in time, and it was feasible to do so, this catastrophe need not have occurred. Had the nation as a whole been taken into confidence the sense of alienation that the Sikh community is now suffering from need not have taken place. Finally, is it fair to place an entire minority community in the dock for the sins of a few and to divert attention of the country from the failings of the administration?