
Reconsidering Operation Blue Star and 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots: A Study of Vikram Kapur's *The Assassinations: A Novel of 1984*

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The Assassinations is the story of the horrible experience of 1984 anti-Sikh riots. It was a massacre which devoured thousands of people, especially the Sikhs. This novel captures the painful memories and turbulence of the 1980s and how this massacre tore apart people and communities. Vikram Kapur uses the postmodern narrative technique to tell the story of the novel. The story of the novel is being told from multiple viewpoints. The very first chapter of the novel reveals the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31st October 1984. Vikram Kapur divulges the tense atmosphere of Delhi before and after the assassination of Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. In the final chapter, the writer shows the real picture of Delhi after 20 years of the assassination of Indira Gandhi. My present paper tries to reconsider Operation Blue Star and 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

The atmosphere was tense. Bhindranwale told the Sikhs that they had been becoming slaves of Hindus in India. Bhindranwale, a religious scholar, advocated a return to Khalsa or a more orthodox form of Sikhism. He disliked the Hindus and the Sikhs, who cut their hair and consumed alcohol in equal measure. Bhindranwale

preached an angry sermon against Nirankaris because Nirankaris had become a threat to Sikhism. Nirankaris wanted to merge Sikhism into Hinduism. There was a clash between the Nirankaris and the Sikhs in April 1978 and around 15 people were killed in this clash. In April 1980, Baba Gurcharan Singh, a Nirankari leader, was murdered by someone. FIR filed against many people who were linked to Bhindranwale. In September 1981, Editor of Punjab, Kesri Lala Jagat Narain was written often against the formation of Khalistan. He was shot dead and the government suspected Bhindranwale for the murder of Lala Jagat Narain. Bhindranwale surrendered himself but was released from prison due to lack of evidence.

Bhindranwale started Dharam Yudh Morcha in 1982 and Akali Dal also took part in this civil disobedience movement. Deputy IG of police, A.S. Atwal was murdered when he was leaving the Golden Temple and many Hindu passengers killed by militants in 1983. Bhindranwale's followers intensified a reign of terror and murder in Punjab. They attacked police, frightened rural people and collected money from people by force. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale

took up residence inside the Golden temple gurudwara in 1983. Under the supervision of former General Shubeg Singh, Bhindranwale and his supporters fortified the Golden Temple. Indira Gandhi knew that Bhindranwale would help her in her political ends. She considered him as a valuable political ally because of his popularity. Even she did not take any action against Bhindranwale when he turned against her.

When Bhindranwale occupied the Golden temple complex, Indira Gandhi announced on national radio her decision to call out the army. Indira realised Indians were losing faith in her ability to act. To serve her own political ends, Indira Gandhi declared Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as anti-nationalist. The Golden Temple gurudwara was surrounded by the Indian Army. Bhindranwale held a press conference in the Akal Takht. Bhindranwale promised to give the army a fitting reply.

In the first week of June 1984, the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi gave the order to Indian Army to enter into the Golden Temple complex to force out the Sikh extremist religious leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his armed followers. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale had become a prominent political figure in Punjab. Many Punjabis became his followers and his followers were the source of his power. He forced the Indian government to pass the Anandpur Resolution. He wanted to form a separate state of Khalistan for the Sikhs. He managed to get support for this purpose. He set up a base inside the gurudwara Golden Temple complex, with ammunition and his supporters. The Operation Blue Star was started in the first week of June 1984 with the target of getting rid of Bhindranwale and his demands.

Bhindranwale strengthened his power in the Golden temple and its surroundings. Indira Gandhi consulted the Indian Army regarding the plan to flush him out. But Army Vice-Chief, Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha advised her that they should not attack the Golden Temple because it is a sacred place of the Sikh religion. The religious sentiments of the Sikhs are attached to the gurudwara. It is a central religious place for the Sikhs. Many innocent people would have to suffer from this assault. That's why S.K. Sinha did not in the favour of assault. He also became the victim of politics and replaced by General Arun Shridhar Vaidya as Chief of the Indian Army, who went on to plan and lead Operation Blue Star.

The Golden Temple complex was attacked by the Indian Army. The Indian Army used artillery, tanks, and helicopters to drive out Bhindranwale and his group from gurudwara. President's rule was imposed on the Punjab state. Curfew was imposed on Punjab State and all ways of communication and travel were stopped. The journalists were bundled out of Punjab. Water and electricity supply to the Golden Temple was also stopped. CRPF was patrolling in Amritsar. The battle between Indian Army and Bhindranwale became a massacre. Bhindranwale was killed by the Indian Army. Many innocent people, military soldiers, and the militants died in this attack. Akal Takht building was heavily damaged. The floor of the gurudwara was filled with corpses and blood. The library was burnt. Sikhs heavily criticized the attack on the Golden Temple gurudwara. Many Sikhs, who were working for the government, resigned their posts. They thought that if they could not save their religion then how they would protect their

country. To sending the army into gurudwara, it was an act of sacrilege according to Sikh religion. It was a tough challenge for the government to handle the outrageous Sikhs. The government played with the Sikhs' religious sentiments. After a few months of Operation Blue Star, two Sikh bodyguards of Indira Gandhi, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh assassinated her. For them, it was an act of vengeance of desecrating the holy shrine of Sikhism the Golden Temple.

After the assassination of Indira Gandhi, anti-Sikh riots started in Delhi and spread to other parts of the country. Gurudwaras became the target of anti-Sikh attacks. The Sikhs were killed by the blind mob intoxicated with religious frenzy across the country. The aim of riots is not only to kill the Sikhs but also to teach the Sikhs a lesson so that they do not oppose the anti-national policies of Congress Party. Congress leaders incited riots against the Sikhs. After the death of Indira Gandhi, the government censored the press and rumours were spread against the Sikhs. Congress Party workers brought villagers from villages and armed them with iron rods and gasoline. The police did not interfere in this matter because the police were under the control of Congress Party. Leaders were not arrested by the police because they were leaders of ruling party.

Mark Tully and Satish Jacob describe the bloody and devastating consequences of the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi in their book *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*:

In the capital for two days gangs of hooligans, often led by local Congress Party workers, roamed the streets, killing, burning and looting at

will. In some cases the actively joined in the mayhem, in others they turned a blind eye. Reports of Sikh railway passengers being butchered were ominous reminders of the holocaust of Partition. Deliberate rumour-mongering by some Hindus created further confusion designed to inflame feeling against the Sikhs. Exaggerated stories of Sikhs rejoicing at Mrs Gandhi's death were spread, although there is no doubt that in some cases Sikhs did infuriate Hindus by celebrating her assassination (5).

Women were being raped by Congress workers during the riots. Thousands of Sikhs were being murdered by the supporters of Indira Gandhi while the police were watching it silently. The police did not take any action against the killers of the Sikhs. The blind Mob attacked Sikhs' homes, gurudwaras, and other buildings. The Sikhs were being looted and killed by them brutally. Houses, gurudwaras, and shops were looted and burnt. The great number of vehicles including buses, trucks, cars, and scooters were burnt. Many people were injured and others were killed.

Colonies, slums and villages were burnt. People were killed brutally in Delhi particularly Trilokpuri, Kalyanpuri, Mangolpuri, Sultanpuri areas and many villages nearby Delhi. Hundreds of men and young boys were beaten, stabbed and burnt to death. Many women were raped and kidnapped. Many people were reported missing. Congress leaders masterminded the killings of the Sikhs. They incited their supporters to kill and crush the Sikhs. Jagdish Tytler, Sajjan Kumar, MLA's of Congress Party and Mr H.K.L. Bhagat,

Minister of state, were major leaders involved in leading the mob to kill the Sikhs. Rajiv Gandhi also gave a statement against the Sikhs. The police played the role of passive spectators and they also participated in violence against the Sikhs. When the Sikhs went to complain and file FIR's, police refused to record their complaints. It was an act of genocide. The police encouraged the mob to kill all the Sikhs. The police did not stop the killings of the Sikhs. Children were dropped out of schools because of the horrible experience of the massacre. People, who have witnessed massacre, are still suffering from depression.

DNA newspaper cited Jagmohan Singh Khurmi's views about 1984 anti-Sikh Riots which published in *The Tribune*:

Such wide-scale violence cannot take place without police help. Delhi Police, whose paramount duty was to upkeep law and order situation and protect innocent lives, gave full help to rioters who were, in fact, working under the able guidance of sycophant leaders like Jagdish Tytler and H.K.L. Bhagat. It is a known fact that many jails, sub-jails and lock-ups were opened for three days and prisoners, for the most part, hardened criminals, were provided fullest provisions, means and instruction to "teach the Sikhs a lesson." But it will be wrong to say that Delhi Police did nothing, for it took full and keen action against Sikhs who tried to defend themselves. The Sikhs who opened fire to save their lives and property had to spend months dragging heels in courts after-wards (DNA newspaper).

Prem is the main character in this novel. Operation Blue Star made the great impact on Prem's mind. Prem's parents were suffering from horrible experience of Operation Blue Star. Prem had many questions in his mind about the attack on the Golden Temple complex but he kept his questions to himself. However, he had no interest in politics and he had no knowledge about politics. Even he had no interest in religious activities. What was happening in India, was beyond the comprehension of Prem. Moreover, if he picked up the newspaper, he read the only sports page and read about recent movies. He visited gurudwara occasionally. Even he did not know the Sikh gurus' names.

Prem was going to meet his fiancée Deepa by bus. He had disgusting travelling experience of the bus. The passengers were talking about the assault on the Golden Temple gurudwara. They were abusing the Sikhs and were saying that the Sikhs certainly needed to be taught a lesson. The bus stopped at a bus stand and the Sikh man was about to get on the bus, the driver forwarded the bus and the man fell headlong onto the road. The driver and the passengers laughed at the Sikh man. The Sikh was an old man and surely he was hurt by the fall. This incident affected Prem's psyche badly. Prem was shocked how the people made fun of the Sikh man in the name of religion. This incident took Prem to close his Sikh Religion. He started to visiting gurudwaras. He started to wear a shirt, trousers, and turban. He started to disguise his appearance.

Surjit, the Sikh militant, followed Prem before he met him. Surjit knew that Prem was a well-educated young man and he would help him to bring militancy in the

Capital of India. The other militants were illiterate and belong to rural areas. Surjit told Prem how he had suffered at government's hands. He told him the horrible experience of his life. He persuaded Prem to become a militant. He wanted that Prem should work for him. Prem started to live quiet. He never shared his ideas and his experience of the attack with anyone. He was acting strangely. Savitri, Deepa's mother, told Deepa that she should talk to Prem about Operation Blue Star. Prem had changed completely after the attack. He had grown his hair and beard and start to visiting gurudwaras. He began to meet people whom Deepa did not know. When Deepa asked him about it, he became angry. He told her that his mother was suffering from aberration since the Indian Army attacked the Golden Temple complex. He told her about his mother's rants and nightmares, about his father seeking solace in drink. He seemed angry with society, police, and foolish actions of government. He referred that bus driver as damn Hindu. Prem represents such young Sikhs who had become militants due to the experience of such terrible incidents.

Religion has become the reason of ill-will, animosity, and hatred between the Hindus and the Sikhs. When Surjit met Prem after a few days and asked him about joining the militancy, he refused to join his group. Prem said him that he could not become a militant because he is going to get married and his fiancée is a Hindu girl. He loves her unconditionally. That's why he cannot do what Surjit wants from him to do.

The news of Indira Gandhi's assassination spread like a fire in India. Prem was going back home after meeting his friend Irfan in Trilokpuri. His identity of being the Sikh could become the reason of

trouble for himself. The road was blocked with concrete pipe. There were four young men, including a police constable in the khaki uniform, stood next to the pipe. They had lathis and Hockey sticks in their hands. Prem was beaten by them brutally because Prem was a Sikh. The constable was saying, "You thought we were idiots. We wouldn't know you are a Sikh, maaderchod" (90). These lines show the inner hatred of the police against Sikhs in 1984 riots. The policeman used abusive words for Sikhs. The police secure the lives of people but here security system became the danger for the lives of Sikh People. When Irfan carried injured Prem to the hospital for treatment, but doctor denied him to admit Prem in the hospital because Prem was the Sikh man. It was the time when people had lost their grip on their humanity.

Irfan was seeing a local Congress leader along with a police constable and several supporters were carrying machetes, lathis, and hockey sticks and cans of kerosene oil. They were finding the Sikhs. The constable said, "Today those maaderchod are cutting their hair and having their beards, just like that saala with the car. Didn't look like a Sikh at all" (101). Prem recovered from his injuries quickly. When Prem reached the gurudwara, he found it razed to the ground. Prem saw "the boundary wall was scarified with hate graffiti calling the Sikhs all kinds of names while predicting dire consequences for them if they didn't 'behave' themselves" (136).

Prem was ready to protect the Sikhs and to become a militant. There were several reasons why he wanted to become a militant. First, he had been beaten up by the Hindus because he belonged to the Sikh religion. He had no his own fault of being Sikh.

Secondly, the riots were organised by the ruling Congress Party. The mob was aided and abetted by the police. They were killing innocent Sikhs. The Sikhs had no their own fault for being Sikhs. Some people were happy because they were feeling that the Sikhs are getting well-deserved treatment. Thirdly, The people, who organised and involved in these riots, deserve to pay for what they had done to the Sikhs. Prem knew if he did not take any action, it would happen time and again.

Surjit assigned him the duty to deliver a package. It was actually a transistor radio wrapped in the box. Prem collected the package at Oberoi's reception desk. He was supposed to drop it off on a bus right after his work. He seemed anxious and scared before delivering the package but he was also excited because this task had given him some purpose to his life. "He was part of something bigger and more important than himself; the idea filled him with sense of purpose he had never known before" (158). He placed the radio box on the floor of the bus and got himself off the bus at the bus stop. It was actually a time bomb. His fiancée Deepa was on the same bus. The bomb was exploded and all the passengers died in this explosion. Prem and Deepa also died in this blast. Bombs had gone off in twelve buses all over the city. There was a time bomb in each transistor radio.

Surjit is another important character in the novel. He was very close to the militants and he was recruiting youngsters for them. He wanted to recruit Prem because he was the well-educated young man and he would help militants to bring militancy in Delhi. He told Prem about Indian Army's attack on the Golden Temple. The Golden Temple was burnt down by Indian Army.

Innocent people were murdered by Army. He told Prem that he had given thirty years of his life to this country. He had spent thirty years in the army. His only son, Gurjeet, was murdered by the police on the suspicion of being a militant. When he went to the courts, government officials and ministers for getting justice, but nobody listened to him. These circumstances made him a militant and now he has stood against the injustice and the wrongdoings of government officials. He knows that the real power has lain in the Hindus' hands. This is the Hindu government and they are determined to humiliate the Sikhs.

Punjab was destroyed during Partition and now they want to destroy the Sikhs so that Sikhs never raise their heads. The people, who died in these riots, were Sikhs' mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and relatives. They had lost their lifetime earnings. Surjit says:

What do these people think we are? Idiots? If this doesn't prove that the riots were organised by the government then what does. First, they decided we needed to be taught a lesson and sprang those goondas on us. Once they thought we'd had enough, they pulled the goondas off and dumped them back into the very hole from which they had fished them out (140).

The government had waged war on the Sikhs. Surjit and Prem have become militants due to the injustice were done to them by government and society. Several youngsters became militants due to worse circumstances in Punjab at that time.

People were debating Operation Blue Star everywhere. Everyone was defending his/her own religion. The character of

Kishneet represents the psyche of every Sikh person who has experienced 1984 anti-Sikh riots. It was the horrific experience for them. People had lost their mental stability. Kishneet, Prem's mother, reacted to the Operation Blue Star with an outbreak of ranting and raving against Mrs Gandhi. She was worried about her family. She was a Sikh and she imagined all kinds of terrible scenarios for her family. She was suffering from paranoia. She forced her husband Amarjeet to shave his beard off. She had panic attacks when someone in the family was late coming home. She was suffering from nightmares and found it hard to sleep. Amarjeet prescribed her sleeping pills to help her sleep better. Kishneet's health failed to improve. She began to lose weight and her appetite waned. It was the time of insecurity. The novelist discloses the scenario of 1984 anti-Sikh riots clearly through his writing:

It was morning unlike any other. There were no milkmen. No newspaper delivery boys either. No one was jogging or walking or even so much venturing out of their front doors. The building looked forlorn. The trees hung their heads. The birds clustered as silently as a group of morose-mourners, while the dogs went about with their barks stuck in their throats. A blooming silence, of a kind that is not heard in Delhi even in the dead of the night, greeted the new day speaking itself across the sky, as bright red as a freshly inflicted wound. It was a ghoulish silence that packed death and grief in it... (110-111).

Kishneet wanted to leave India as soon as possible because everyone was equated

them with the killers of Indira Gandhi. She was forcing Amarjeet to leave India.

Amarjeet represents many other fathers who have lost their sons during the 1984 riots. He could not save his son from death. The situation was such horrifying that he could not prevent his son from choosing the path of militancy because he had nothing in his hands. This thing hurt him extremely. He was seeking a solace in drink.

Seema, Prem's sister, is another innocent character in the novel. She represents such children who have experienced the awful situation of 1984. Children did not know why this was happening. Seema has become the victim of terrible 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The man threatened to kill them on the phone. This phone call was constantly creating fear in her mind. She was grappling with a different demon. Most of the Sikh boys at school shed their patkas and turbans. They cut their hair and shaved off what beard they had. The Sikh teachers did the same. It was strange for Seema to see so many familiar faces suddenly had become unfamiliar. Whenever Seema stepped out of her house people stared and pointed fingers at her. They say, "Khooni ki bahen, khooni ki bahen" (180). She has to hear these lines everywhere in neighbourhood, school, and car. She seemed unable to handle it. At school, no one was willing to speak to her. Even her friends stopped to speak to her. They seemed taken aback when they saw her. Even the teachers were looking at her as if they had seen a ghost. Seema told Deepa's brother Rakesh about her experience of riots:

They shout it out whenever they see me: Khooni ki bahen, khooni ki bahen... It got so bad that I stopped going out altogether. That didn't

stop them. They came home and rang the bell at the gate. The moment Daddy would come out, they would scream all kinds of names at him. Daddy got rid of the bell and boarded the windows that face the street. Then they stuffed our mailbox with hate mail. He even had the mailbox removed. They began making anonymous phone calls. Finally, Daddy got the phone disconnected (184).

Seema visited Delhi with her daughter Manpreet after twenty years. She went to America after 1984 anti-Sikh riots. When Seema visited her old home it reminded her atrocious experience of 1984. Whenever she went into the old home, she found herself at the deep end of the nightmare following Indira Gandhi's assassination and Prem's death.

Jaswant, Deepa's father, is the important character in the novel. He was worried about her daughter's marriage. He knew about the worse situation in the Punjab state. He knew that it was impossible to marry her daughter to a Sikh man. After the Partition, the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Sikhs have become the enemy of one another. They turn against one another. There is a conflict between the Hindus and the Sikhs. He tells Savitri that the Hindus are fleeing Punjab because of the Sikh militants. Sikh militants are killing policemen, journalists, and political opponents. Savitri gives the examples of intermarriage between the Hindus and the Sikhs. Then, Jaswant gives his consent to marry Deepa to Prem. But he was still worried about Deepa's future life:

... his unease returned stronger than ever as the news from Punjab grew

worse. Bombs were going off practically every day. There were shootouts between the militants and the security forces. As the dead body piled up, so did the bitterness and anger. The calls for retaliatory attacks against the Sikhs grew louder as more and more Hindus were forced to flee Punjab (33-34).

Pritam, Jaswant's friend, told him about grim situation of the Punjab state. "Punjab state was cut off from the rest of the world, with rail, bus, and air services suspended, the telex and telephone lines cut, the border with Pakistan sealed..." (37-38). People were saying that Operation Blue Star was long overdue, the nonsense in Punjab had gone on long enough. Mrs Gandhi's order of attack would create more extremists than secessionists. The writer displays the horrible scenes of 1984 riots:

Dead bodies lay about in the gutters, in the alleyways, in the balconies of flats. Smoke still came off the burnt corpses scattered on the ground, while an ashen cloud hovered above the neighbourhood, blocking the sun. Hair lay piled up next to the corpses. The shrieks of the vultures swooping down for their feast rent the air, drowning out the wails of the mourners (118).

Deepa represents the women who have lost their would-be husbands in these riots. Deepa has to suffer without her own fault. She died in the bomb explosion. Irfan is the only Muslim character in the novel. He managed to save his own life during the riots in Delhi because he was a Muslim. He saved Prem's life during the riots. He found "the goondas had bludgeoned people to death, burnt them alive, looted their homes, raped their women" (117).

Vikram Kapur's Novel reveals the terrible reality of Operation Blue Star and 1984 anti-Sikh riots. How the religion has become the cause of hundreds of deaths, hatred, and animosity between the Hindus and the Sikhs. The people, who were living together peacefully, became suddenly enemies of one another. A friend turned against his own friend, neighbour killed his own neighbour. People had gone mad completely. Nothing mattered to them- not friendship, not age-old relationships, not even basic human decency. When riots ended, it had left nothing except hatred and inhumanity.

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