



THE TWO IRON LADIES OF 1984: REMEMBERING THE POSTCOLONIALITY OF OPERATION BLUE STAR THIRTY YEARS ON

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June 2014 marks the 30th anniversary of Operation Blue Star, the code name for the Indian army storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India. Operation Blue Star, ostensibly designed to rid the temple complex of Sikh separatist militants, resulted in serious damage to many parts of the temple complex and in the death of between 400 and 3000 people (depending on sources), including worshippers, priests, and the ‘fundamentalists’ residing there. The outcome, as critics of the operation have widely highlighted, showed a lack of the Indian government’s and military’s respect for the sacred status of the shrine.

Indira Gandhi was subsequently shot at her residence by her two Sikh bodyguards, after which anti-Sikh ‘riots’, or ‘pogroms’, occurred across India, followed by nearly two decades of state repression and heightened religious sensibilities. However, the history of social control and religion goes much beyond Operation Blue Star and needs to be understood within a long historical backdrop of how empire and its postcolonial configurations have managed communities through the tools of social control of which religion continues to feature prominently.

Private Memos, Public Records: Amritsar Massacres in Collective Memory

Several documents were released in 2009, as part of the **UK Public Records Act**, 25 years after Operation Blue Star. The **recent January 2014 uncovering of two documents** held in the National Archives has brought to light a line of direct communication between then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in which the latter offered willing support to Indira Gandhi. Both documents also pose questions around to what extent the Thatcher government provided military assistance –arms and intelligence – to Operation Blue Star, and to what extent this shows a complicity between the Thatcher government and Indira Gandhi’s Congress government in how the operation was strategically planned and carried out. These questions were immediately **picked up by the Sikh diaspora community in the UK** who demanded an enquiry and apology by the current conservative-led coalition government about the actions of the previous conservative government.

Foreign Secretary William Hague **made a statement to Parliament** in February 2014 to this end. The title of his speech shows a clear distancing of the past and current conservative governments from any direct involvement in the operation. His “Statement on the Indian Operation at Sri Harmandir Sahib in 1984” not only declares it as an Indian Operation, but also invokes a more religiously respectful term for the Golden Temple – Sri Harmandir Sahib – in an attempt to show critics, in particular the Sikh lobby in the UK, that neither past nor present conservative governments played any direct role in the attack on the shrine. During Prime Minister’s Question Time, **MP Tom Watson asked** with regard to parallel allegations around British arms contracts with the Indian government during the time of Operation Blue Star:

On his Amritsar inquiry, instead of ordering the civil servant to investigate, why does the Prime Minister not just ask Lords Geoffrey Howe and Leon Brittan what they agreed with Margaret Thatcher and whether it had anything to do with the Westland helicopter deal at the time?”

The effort to distance British involvement from Operation Blue Star can be seen not only in David Cameron’s dismissal of Tom Watson’s question as “conspiracy theory”, but also in the **Cabinet report**, and in Hague’s statement in February 2014, all of which was aimed at appeasing the UK Sikh diaspora community for whom the Indian government of 1984 remains a target of historical anger, only remotely connectable to the figure of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the Congress party.

The backdrop to the events of 1984 go far beyond a mere military operation; both indirect and direct intervention are well established modes of the British government’s dealings with India, whether at the height of the British Raj or in its post-colonial encounters. A glance to Hague’s Conservative predecessor of the early 20th century, Lord Curzon, who served not only as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1919-1924) but previously also as Viceroy of India between 1899-1905 highlights some uncanny postcolonial moments of remembrance which cannot be so easily distanced. The most prominent event of that time in Amritsar’s collective memory is the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 in which fears by the local European population and British officials of growing mass civil disobedience across all communities contributed to the command by **General Reginald Dyer** to fire on an innocent crowd gathered at a public garden on the day of the harvest festival of Vaisakhi. Fifty troops under his command fired on his orders in enforcing martial law prohibiting any gathering of more than 100 people.

Clearly, the threat of mass protest to empire across religious and other social categories was far more dangerous to the colonial state than any single religious community itself could present. What followed was a period of “social reform” in which religious categories and communities mobilised in amassing support in competition with one another within the confines of the colonial state’s categories for representation within the colonial system of separate electorates. Religious boundaries and public cultures, which had previously been more fluid and overlapping, began to be erected as distinctive, identifiable, and often in conflict as competitors for political voice within the colonial regime’s system of social control through ‘representation’.

The most blatant result, of course, was the partition of India which severed the region of Punjab across religious lines. Religious ambiguity or composite practices and spheres, which is a rich part of the syncretic culture of the region, was of no use to the colonial state and was thus replaced in favour of distinct categories which were given political meaning.

Thus, the request to Margaret Thatcher by Indira Gandhi for intelligence assistance in 1984 in tackling Sikh separatists seems less of a leap from the early 20th century than it does a continuation of the uses of religious categorisation and machinations through indirect rule, only employing direct rule when armed response is deemed necessary in maintaining control. The Sikh militants who had been based inside the Golden Temple prior to Operation Blue Star were a creation of the postcolonial Indian state’s requirement during the late 1970s and early 1980s to win votes in a state whose electorate was swaying away from Mrs Gandhi’s Congress after her widely criticised “emergency” (in effect, martial rule). Her negotiations with the Sikh separatist leader Sant Bhindranwale exposed her attempts of undermining electoral competitors in favour of playing groups off against one another in a politics of recognition.

Source: [http://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/in-pics-30-years-of-operation-blue-star-122871-8.html]

The politics of recognition through religion in both postcolonial India and Britain has led to the demise of secular, cross-community mobilisations and the rise of religious identities, parties, and organisations. Religion in the region was indeed given a new lease of life through the events of 1984 in which a politicised Sikh identity became pronounced and conflictual with Hindu identity which was viewed as synonymous with Indian nationalism, while the Golden Temple became an even more emblematic site of representation of the highly visible but numerically small Sikh global community (1).

The Congress Party’s lingering demonisation for the acts of 1984 can be seen in the rise of the dominant **Akali Dal party in Punjab** which, though viewed as a party of Sikh assertion, has a **close working alliance with the Hindu right wing BJP party** which won the **Indian national election in May 2014**. Hindu nationalism and Sikh regionalism ironically now form a partnership which has moved beyond the era of the centralised Congress and Conservative parties’ communications of 1984. The May 2014 Indian election result shows a politics of canvassing religious identity for electoral purposes and new modes of electioneering framed by neo-liberal economic alliances and political interests

Religion beyond identity: Heteropraxy at the Golden Temple

Beneath the events of 1984 is a much deeper analysis of how the state and other modes of control and rationalisation have attempted to disrupt popular notions of pluralism rather than to foster them (2). The Golden Temple as a site containing multiplicity is often overlooked in favour of the singular communal approach towards religious identity in relation to such iconic sites which are labelled representatively. By un-privileging the colonial project’s agency in the construction of religious identities (3), a more probing view of the practices of devotional seekers at the Golden Temple today shows that they are not bound by religious categorizations of identity in their practice, and pilgrims and visitors to these shrines are multifarious in motivation and identification. What people ‘do’ at the Golden Temple rather than how they are defined shows how many of the devotional practices that go on in the complex cannot be so neatly placed within the available religious categories of Sikh, Hindu, Muslims, etc, despite the management of the shrine being clearly formally and institutionally ‘Sikh’ (4). Indeed, rituals of devotion as practiced by worshippers in the sacred space of the Golden Temple contain practices and idioms which highlight heteropraxy rather than orthodoxy, despite its emblematic ‘Sikh’ status and the regulation of official, proper conventional practices.

It is here that the Golden Temple highlights two contradictory on-going processes. The first is that it serves the iconic purpose for centring Sikh religious identity around a site of pilgrimage. The second is that it persists as a site of heteropraxy where multifarious devotees and devotional practices continue to exist.

If the intention of the Indian state was to curb ‘fundamentalism’ by ousting the militants who were residing in the complex, then the impact of Operation Blue Star has been a rebuilding of a bounded Sikh identity, with its electorates, practices, and communities which can be mobilised around the martyrdom of the pilgrimage site where the army raid took place in 1984 (5) (6). On the other hand, by rereading the events of 1984 through a postcolonial lens, the exchanges between the two ‘iron ladies’ are underscored by a deep historical backdrop of how centralised governance creates religion in a categorical sense in order to utilise it as a tool for social control while reserving the right to discipline when it threatens state authority.

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