

THE SIKH MUTINY

PRITAM BHULLAR

WORD: RAHUL SINGH

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By
PRITAM BHULLAR

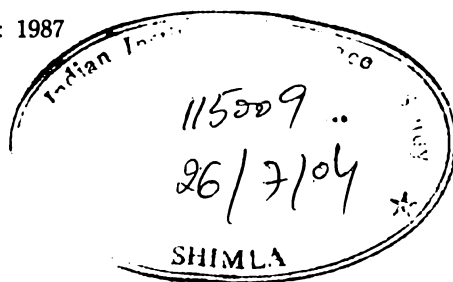


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*TO THE RELIABILITY AND STABILITYⁿ
OF
THE INDIAN ARMY*

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FOREWORD

PUNJAB and Sikh problem have constantly been in the news in the past four years. The rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, which coincided with the onset of terrorism, Operation Bluestar, the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi by two of her bodyguards, the horrific anti-Sikh riots that followed, the Rajiv-Longowal accord (still to be implemented), Longowal's assassination, the massive Akali victory at the polls, the Akali split — all this and so much else has been happening at such a furious pace that it is difficult to sit back and take dispassionate stock of the situation.

Yet, this is something that we must do if we are to find a way out of the mess. Unfortunately, very little that is reasoned and sober has emerged from the traumatic events in Punjab in the last two or three years. Which is why I welcome Colonel (retired) Pritam Bhullar's invaluable contribution to an understanding of one of these events: the mutiny of some Sikh troops straight after Operation Bluestar.

This was the first time after Indian independence that a mutiny on such a scale had taken place. How did it come about? What exactly happened? Who was primarily to blame? What are the lessons that we can learn from it? These are some of the questions that the author probes and to which he tries to find a satisfactory answer. I also understand that he had access to hitherto unpublished material.

The result is more than just an account of the mutiny. Indeed, the book provides an insight into the Sikh psyche, particularly the psyche of the Sikh soldier, by going into Sikh history and also by relating some of the glorious chapters of Sikh valour. There is also a useful section on the I.N.A. trials, since this provides the only parallel available.

The heart of the book, however, is the mutiny and desertion of some Sikh soldiers. The numbers were not very great — a tiny percentage of the total number of Sikhs serving in the armed forces — but it is important to understand why they behaved like they did, when they must have known, in their heart of hearts that they had no chance whatsoever, of success. For a handful of Sikh soldiers in Pune — to take but one centre of mutiny — to imagine that they could commandeer some vehicles and get to their beloved

Golden Temple in Amritsar, almost 1500 miles away, without being stopped was the height of foolhardiness, if one looks at it rationally. But their response was not rational and this is what the author sets out to explain.

His conclusion, that it was mainly the failure of the command structure that was responsible for the situation getting out of hand, cannot be disputed. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that such a thesis has been set out so forcefully in print. I do not fully agree with everything that the author has to say and some of his suggestions are likely to cause furious debate, not least of all within the army itself. But, then, reasoned debate based on facts and an understanding of history is what is badly needed at this moment. Pritam Bhullar's book, therefore, comes at a most opportune time.

RAHUL SINGH

PREFACE

The story of the 1857 Sipahi Mutiny and the I.N.A. trials (1945) is known to us, because there are myriad volumes on both — many of them rare — lying in our libraries.

Little did we know after attaining our independence, that we will see a repeat of the past and half-forgotten morbid happenings again in 1984.

Not to record the sad business of the 1984 mutiny of Sikh soldiers — though not widespread — will leave an unpardonable void in our history. I, therefore, took upon myself this arduous task, which I knew would not sit lightly on anyone capable of appreciating the magnitude of the events themselves and of many grave questions which they suggest.

What I considered necessary for this study was the back-drop of the problem, the religious moorings of an Indian soldier, the part played or not played by the various agencies in the hour of grief of the Sikh soldier.

The question that still continues to intrigue me is: how come the commanders had no premonition that the Sikh soldier's mind will be convulsed when his sanctum sanctorum is assaulted?

That the great regiment with a splendid and towering record of prowess and sacrifice, repeatedly set for the country, was caught in a bedlam and torn asunder, should cause anguish to anyone. In the wide range of inquiry embraced by the consideration of causes of the trauma, it was necessary that I should cite chapter and verse closely connected with the gruesome events, and use illustrative material more freely to obtain credence for my statements.

During my study of the subject, I have endeavoured to find parallels in history, which go to suggest the treatment that should be meted out to the participants of the 1984 mutiny, in the interest of fairplay and justice. In taking any such decision, the whole circumstances, past, present and future need to be considered.

Finally, what should remain uppermost in our minds is that we must preserve by all possible means, the reliability, stability and efficiency of the Indian Army.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I think of the help that I received for my work, I feel greatly indebted to Brigadier K.S. Gill, B.A., LL.B. (Retd.), a practising lawyer in the Punjab & Haryana High Court, Chandigarh, who was defence counsel in a number of general courts-martial held at Suratgarh to try 9 Sikh personnel. It would not have been possible to know in detail the desertion part of the story, connected events and the subsequent disciplinary action, had he not made certain material available to me for consultation, besides briefing me on the happenings.

I owe my thanks to Major Trilok Singh Grewal, B.A., LL.B. (Retd.), another practising lawyer in the Punjab & Haryana High Court, Chandigarh, who helped me with the details of the happenings in 18 Sikh and 171 Field Regiment.

Lt. Col. Ajaib Singh, B.A., LL.B. (Retd.), who took upon himself the task of defending the personnel of 171 Field Regiment in two general courts-martial at Alwar as also defending the personnel of 14 Punjab (Nabha Akal) at Pune, gave me all possible help. A browse over the material in his hands was greatly useful. Incidentally, he is an old officer of the Sikh Regiment.

To Colonel Bhagat Singh, another retired officer of the Sikh Regiment, I owe my sincere thanks for making available to me the material that was with him on the history of the Sikh Regiment.

Typing of the manuscript was not an easy job. And for this excellent and painstaking enterprise, my gratitude flows to Mr. K.R. Mittal of the Panjab University, Chandigarh, who completed it with keen interest and care.

I am deeply grateful to Mr. Rahul Singh, Resident Editor of Indian Express, Chandigarh, who was kind enough to go through the manuscript and write a foreword for the book.

CHAPTER — ONE

SIKHS : THE SAVIOURS

Going by their reputation handed down to them by history, the Sikhs are known as saviours of the oppressed. The title has been conferred on them from the days of Guru Hargobind, on whose shoulders fell — at the age of 11 — the responsibility of guiding the destiny of the people. That was the time, when Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru was executed in Lahore under the orders of Emperor Jahangir, on May 30, 1606

INVADERS FROM THE NORTHWEST AND THEIR RAVAGE

Beginning from the 9th century B.C., India has been repeatedly invaded from the northwest. Osiris, the king of Egypt was the first to enter this country, followed by Assyrians, Scythians and Macedonians. After them, came the Mohammadan invaders, notable among them being the Mughals and the Afghans.

A true picture of the macabre drama which was enacted in the country is only possible by flicking through the pages of history written by the Muslim historians themselves. To quote just a few instances of orgy: Qutab-u-Din-Aibak demolished all the Hindu temples of Meerut and Kalinger and erected in their places Moslem mosques. Reaching the city of Koil, now known as Aligarh, he asked all the Hindus to embrace Islam. Those who dared to refuse his orders were put to death. Ala-ud-Din Khilji had all the adult inhabitants of the city of Kambayat massacred. On going back home, he took alongwith him twenty thousand Hindu girls. Tur-mushrin Khan, after looting the areas of Gujarat and Sind, carried away thousands of young boys and girls as his slaves. Feroze Shah Tughlaq demolished all the Hindu temples of the city of Bhilsa, situated in Bhopal. He took care not to harm the idols held sacred by the Hindus. These idols were then placed in a square in front of the castle and were bathed every day according to the Hindu custom. The only difference was that, instead of water, the idols were washed with blood. Every morning, one thousand Hindus were murdered, their blood stored in large pans and later used for performing the bathing ritual of their idols.

EMERGENCE OF GURU HARGOBIND AND FORMATION OF A SMALL ARMY

That was the gory scene on which the infant Guru, Guru Hargobind descended. No sooner did he step on the spiritual throne of Guru Nanak, the young Hargobind proclaimed his new mission of transforming of the face of the country. He was fully aware, however, of the obstacles that he was likely to encounter in the realisation of his goal.

Undeterred by the adverse factors, the Guru with the help of his trusted lieutenants like Bhai Bidhi Chand, Bhai Langaha, Bhai Jetha, Paira and Pirana, formed a small force of 52 soldiers. Six months after the formation of the saint-soldiers, a band of five, hundred sturdy wrestlers hailing from Malwa and Doaba appeared at Amritsar and enrolled themselves in the Guru's army.

The passage of time saw the steady growth and development in the ranks of the saint-soldiers. For twenty years, the soldiers were given rigorous physical, mental and spiritual training by the Sikh Guru. Soon, they became self-confident and self-respecting individuals. The true estimate of the courage, fearlessness and morale of the saint-soldiers can be gauged by one incident that took place in mid-April 1629 A.D.

People from far and near had assembled at Amritsar to celebrate Baisakhi. While hunting, a few saint-soldiers from Amritsar and some Mughal officials from Lahore came close to each other, a bird appeared in the sky and both sides let loose their falcons. It so happened that the Mughal falcon alighted on the hand of a saint-soldier. But when the Mughal officials displayed their usual and overbearing attitude and ordered him to hand the bird over, he declined

GURU'S DUEL WITH MUKHLIS KHAN AND THREE BATTLES WITH THE MUGHALS

On their return, the Lahore officials complained to the Governor, Kuleez Khan, in these words: "Today it's our baz, tomorrow it will be our taj (crown). These Sikhs must be disciplined before it is too late." The Lahore Governor sent General Mukhlis Khan (who by virtue of his excellent record in the battle-field had to his credit the honourable title of a victor of the war) with seven thousand troops to Amritsar 'to discipline' the Sikhs. The latter, came out of the city limits to meet their foe. The battle was fought in May, 1629 A.D., just one mile south of where Khalsa College now stands. On the first day, May 15 both sides suffered heavy losses

and proved nearly equal in the contest. Till noon the following day, there were no clear-cut signs of victory on either side. At this point, Mukhlis Khan who had come to Amritsar with high hopes grew impatient. To put an end to the battle, he challenged Guru Hargobind to a duel. The challenge was readily accepted. The opposing armies stopped fighting to watch their masters in action. When Mukhlis Khan was sliced into two vertical pieces by the fatal blow of the Sikh Guru's two-edged sword, the Mughal soldiers took to their heels.

Who actually won or who lost in this battle, is not important. What is significant is, that those lifeless creatures, who not very long before, could not even dare to look into the eyes of the foreign-rulers, had now mustered enough courage and daring to show their mettle in the battle-field. To inspire a vanquished people, who for centuries had led an existence of abject servility and humiliation, with a new life of hope, confidence and dignity was the miracle of Guru Hargobind.

Three more battles were fought at Hargobindpur (Gurdaspur), Nathana (Faridkot) and Kartarpur (Jullundur) in September 1629, November 1631 and July 1634 respectively. Notwithstanding their numerical superiority, better weaponry and greater battle experience, every time the Mughals had to yield to the more zealous and better disciplined soldiers of Hargobind.

HINDU-SIKH NEXUS

History makes it clear that the Sikhs are more akin to Hindus than to Muslims. Due to their martial background, they have always taken upon themselves the role of saviours and protectors. And so have they been acknowledged by the Hindus. There has been, and still is, though to a lesser extent, a practice in certain Hindu families to make the eldest son grow hair and be named as 'singh' like the Sikhs, so that he takes upon himself the role of protecting the other family members. We can proceed with better understanding if we keep the background of the Hindu-Sikh nexus and the historic role played by the Sikhs in shaping the destiny of the country in mind.

CHAPTER — TWO

SIKHS BEFORE AND AFTER PARTITION

STATUS BEFORE PARTITION

Being the rulers of Punjab before its annexation by the British Crown, the Sikhs were granted special legislative weightage during the Raj-days. They were only one percent of the Indian population and 13% in the undivided Punjab. Yet, the British Government had allotted them 19% seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly and 25% seats in the Central Government. The Sikhs were widely recognised as a distinct minority in India with a separate entity. They were considered one of the three parties — Hindus and Muslims being the other two — in India, to inherit British power.

Not only the British Government but even the Congress attached great importance to the Sikhs and continued to placate them as their allies and partners, to inherit power. The Congress at its Lahore session in 1929, incorporated the Sikhs Colour (Kesri) into the Indian National Flag and adopted a formal resolution which stated: "The Congress assures the Sikhs.... that no solution thereof in any future constitution will be acceptable to the Congress that does not give them (Sikhs) full satisfaction".

While speaking in Gurdwara Sisganj at Delhi in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi declared: "Sikh friends have no reason to fear that Congress Party will betray them. For, the moment it does so, the Congress would not only thereby seal its own doom but that of the country too. Moreover, the Sikhs are great people. They know how to safeguard their rights by the exercise of arms if it should ever come to that." Speaking at the Congress Committee meeting at Calcutta in July 1946, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru declared: "The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set-up in the North wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom." Further, on December 9, 1946 at the opening session of the Constituent Assembly, Mr Nehru declared: "The various territories of the Union of India would be autonomous with residuary powers." And yet in another resolution adopted by the Congress Committee on January 5, 1947, it was declared: "By the British Cabinet Scheme of May 16, 1946, the rights of the Sikhs should not be jeopardised."

In a sense, indeed, it was only after receiving firm assurances and solemn promises from the Congress Party that the Sikhs decided to throw in their lot with India and did not press the British Government for an independent Sikh State at the time of partition. Not only did they whole-heartedly support the freedom movement, but also made great sacrifices of life and property (especially their very fertile land left in West Punjab) for the establishment of an independent and secular India.

PARTITION AND AFTER

Then came partition of the country on August 15, 1947. As soon as the dark clouds of suffering and holocaust disappeared from the partition scene, the Sikhs started eagerly looking up to the leadership of the country for the fulfilment of their much cherished aspirations.

Despite having crossed many mile-stones — Sachar Formula, Regional Formula 1957, Punjabi Suba Agitation, Dass Commission, Shah Commission, and Mrs. Gandhi's 1970 Award — they continued to harbour a feeling that they had achieved nothing. Although before partition, both the Hindus and Sikhs were very close to each other, after the partition, they started drifting apart. The root-cause of the drift was the fear psychosis on both sides. The Sikh estrangement began to grow from the non-fulfilment of the pre-partition promises made to them by the national leaders of no less a stature than Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru. They feel that the Congress Government has poured cold water on the warm promises made to them at the time of partition. They also strongly feel that they are likely to lose their identity if things do not change in their favour. In a pamphlet, sent by late Sant Harchand Singh Longowal to all members of Parliament explaining the Akali Stand, he wrote: "India is a multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multi-national land. In such a land a microscopic minority like the Sikhs has genuine forebodings that like Buddhism and Jainism earlier, they may also lose their identity in the vast ocean of the overwhelming Hindu majority."

ANANDPUR SAHIB RESOLUTION

Since partition, the Punjabi Hindus have gradually been discarding their Punjabi "ethos" culminating in disowning their mother-tongue in the 1961 Census; perhaps partly due to the fear of Sikh dominance. Ironically, the "historic census" of 1961 contrasts sharply with the 1931 census, in which, almost all the Hindus living in

undivided Punjab declared Punjabi as their mother-tongue. The 1961 census, which provided the basis for the formation of a truncated Punjabi speaking State (Punjabi Suba) in 1966, pushed the Sikhs to a State of helplessness, resulting in the Akali Dal Working Committee outlining the Sikh demands in the shape of a resolution, adopted in 1973 at Anandpur Sahib and known as the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. This resolution was later partially modified and adopted at the open session of the 18th All India Akali Conference held at Ludhiana on October 28-29, 1978, under the Presidentship of Jathedar Jagdev Singh Talwandi.

By this resolution, the Akalis planned to carve out an autonomous state of Punjab including Punjabi speaking areas which were left out at the time of formation of a Punjabi Speaking State, but leaving the principal controlling instruments — Defence, Foreign Affairs, Communications and Currency — in the hands of the Centre. Perturbed by the scope of this document, the Central Government treated it as an instrument of secession. Thus the stage was set for a fresh confrontation, between the Centre and the Akalis.

The Akalis drew up demands based on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in September 1981, which were revised and reduced in number from forty-five to fifteen in October 1981. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, first met the Akali Dal leaders in Parliament House on October 16, 1981 and resumed her talks with them in April, 1982. Since there was no achievement in the parleys, Sant Longowal announced a movement to prevent the digging of the canal to link the Sutlej with the Yamuna. This canal is being built to provide Haryana with water for its irrigation from Punjab.

Meanwhile, Sant Bhindranwale emerged as a religious leader of some importance. So the Akali Dal managed to combine their movement with him. It was on August 4, 1982 that Sant Longowal launched his 'Dharm Yudh' (religious war) from the Golden Temple, to fight for the acceptance of Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Sant Bhindranwale also announced that his morcha for the release of his lieutenant Amrik Singh was merging with the Akali morcha.

The new Morcha awakened the Sikh masses to fight for their demands and proved a great success. The negotiations between the Akali Dal and the Centre continued from 1982 to 1984 without any tangible results. Surprisingly, it seemed at times that a settlement had almost been reached, but then some last minute hitch always scuttled it. Mr. Swaran Singh (former minister in the Central Cabinet) was deputed by the Centre to mediate between the centre and the Akali Dal. He came up with a formula which satisfied the

Akali Dal leaders as also Mrs. Gandhi's Cabinet colleagues. Swaran Singh was given to understand that Mrs. Gandhi too had accepted the solution suggested by him. But for some inexplicable reasons, she spurned the settlement at the last moment. That left Swaran Singh bitterly disappointed.

Meanwhile, Sant Bhindranwale who had found his clout in the Sikh Community, was now living in the Akal Takht and was ruling the roost in Punjab. Terrorism had gone much beyond the stage of finding its roots. The hit-lists were carefully prepared and the victims eliminated in their turns, administration and police watching the scenario as mute witnesses of the morbid drama. Gradually, the situation developed in which the moderates lost control. The Morcha Dictator, Sant Longowal, though much to his chagrin, started playing second fiddle to Bhindranwale, who was calling the shots. The petering out of the negotiations between the Centre and the Akali Dal created an impression on the masses that the Centre was not sincere in conceding the Sikhs their legitimate rights.

THE PRESIDENT'S RULE AND SITUATION BEFORE AND AFTER OPERATION BLUESTAR

President's rule was clamped on Punjab in October 1983 and the State was declared a disturbed area. Police and para-military forces were given vast powers. Mr. B.D. Pande, the Governor of West Bengal and one of the ablest retired civil servants was shifted to Chandigarh as Governor of Punjab. Talks with the Akali leaders were resumed on February 14, 1984. The same day the Hindu Suraksha Samiti called for a general strike in Punjab. In group clashes and rioting, fourteen people were killed during the strike. The next day, the Akali leaders walked out of the talks. Provoked by Mr. Bhajan Lal's speech made at Faridabad, that Hindu patience was running out and retaliation was not far off. Hindu-mobs burnt down a Gurdwara in Panipat, pulled Sikhs out of buses, forcibly shaved them and looted Sikh shops. Also eight of them were lynched that day. This was pronounced as the Hindu backlash, in retaliation of the excesses committed by the terrorists in Punjab.

Perched in the Akal Takht, Bhindranwale was becoming more militant with every passing day. It was a general belief that terrorists' killings were masterminded by him. The situation in Punjab had reached boiling point. President's rule started showing signs of failing. Killings became a daily affair. The morale of the police force and paramilitary forces was sagging.

How to get Bhindranwale and his men out of the Golden Temple? This question was worrying the government's mind. The

possibility of the police or para-military forces entering the Golden Temple was ruled out, because of the fortification inside the temple and stiff resistance they were likely to encounter. Longowal was fast losing his clout and could not take any decision against the wishes of Bhindranwale. A sharp contrast to the situation is provided by ferreting out an incident from 1924, when the Akali agitation was at its peak and several Sikhs wanted by the police took shelter inside the Golden Temple. Seeing this, a police posse told the temple authorities that it intended go in and arrest the wanted people. The Golden Temple authorities refused to let the police enter the complex. It was then, that Bhai Jodh Singh a veteran Sikh educationist intervened and said that while the police had no right to enter a place of worship, none wanted by the law had any right to take shelter in the temple. All those inside the temple were then made to surrender to the police.

The Government continued to give assurances in Parliament that the Army will not enter the Golden Temple. But according to the grapevine, a model of the Golden Temple Complex was prepared at Chakrata near Dehra Dun, where commandos were being trained for an assault on the Complex, to liquidate Bhindranwale and his band of desperados.

The Sikhs as a community are known for their valour and sense of loyalty, though they have yet to have political subtlety. When the British showed generosity to them after defeating them in the middle of the nineteenth century, they became the most loyal soldiers of the British Crown. But the Sikhs have never had the good fortune of enjoying sound leadership after Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

In his book, 'Indian Mutiny of 1957', Volume I, Col. Malleon C.S.I. writes: "Lord Hardinge conquered the Sikhs. The Sikh army was overawed by the presence of the British battalions, and if the hour had produced the man — if there had been any wisdom, any love of the country, in the councils of the nation — the Sikh Empire might have survived the great peril of the British military protectorate. But there was no one worthy to rule; no one able to govern. The mother of the young Maharaja (Dhulip Singh) was nominally the Regent. There have been great queens in the East as in the West — women who have done for the people what men have been incapable of doing. But the mother of Dhulip Singh was not one of those. To say that she loved herself better than her country is to use in courtesy the mildest words which do not actually violate truth. She, was indeed, an evil presence in the nation. It rested

with her to choose a minister and the choice which she made was another great suicidal blow struck at the life of the Sikh Empire.

It may have been difficult in this emergency to select the right man, for, in truth there were not many wise men from whom a selection could be made. The Queen-Mother cut through the difficulty by selecting her paramour Lal Singh was unpopular with the Durbār; unpopular with the people; and he failed."

The Sikh leadership, in the pre-Bluestar days was disunited. Their front rank leaders, were administering oaths to the "Do and die squads" and bragging that they will "meet the government on the battle-field" and that the "Army will enter the Golden Temple over their dead bodies." For them, not to take their share of blame in getting the Golden Temple destroyed amounts to running away from the reality. Was it correct to fight a well equipped and well-trained army from inside the Golden Temple? If so, with what hope? Apart from losing thousands of invaluable human lives and damage to the buildings in the complex, the most irreparable loss was the Sikh Reference Library, where about 600 rare manuscripts were kept; unfortunately none of them was microfilmed.

Coming back to the pre-Bluestar era scenario. The situation continued to deteriorate; over 450 innocent people, both Hindus and Sikhs were gunned down till June 4, 1984. The Golden Temple complex was turned into a fortress by stockpiling the weapons and preparing defensive positions. After finalising the decision to storm the Golden Temple and other Gurdwaras in Punjab and deploying about half a dozen army divisions in Punjab, Mrs. Gandhi broadcast to the nation in the evening of June 2, 1984, blaming the Akalis for the failure of negotiations with the government and asking them once again to come to the conference table. The complex was surrounded by the army the same night. Hundreds of innocent pilgrims including women and children had gathered in the Golden Temple Complex before the army onslaught, to celebrate Saheedi Gurupurb (martyrdom day) of Guru Arjan Dev on June 3.

On the night of June 3, all communications from the rest of the country — rail, road, air-services, telex and telephone lines — with Punjab were cut off. A halt was called to all movement within the State; not even a bullock cart or a cyclist could move. Apart from the Golden Temple, the army encircled nearly forty gurdwaras in Punjab the same night.

The army launched its attack on the Golden Temple on June 4. Details of Operation Bluestar are beyond the scope of this book. It would, however, suffice to say that the resistance put up by the motivated and determined followers of Bhindranwale was alarmingly

stiff. That the Army generals could save the situation only after an unexpected and prolonged bitter battle fought over more than two days by bringing in tanks, artillery, and man-power from more than one infantry division was an eye-opener for all, whether dressed in uniform or civvies. But, alas, the cost paid was too high in casualties of both soldiers and the civilians. Apart from this, the Akal Takht, the seat of spiritual and temporal authority of the Sikhs since 1606 was completely destroyed. The Sikh Reference Library was reduced to ashes, Toshakhana was badly damaged and Harmandir Sahib was also damaged by bullets. Sant Harchand Singh, President of the Akali Dal and Morcha Dictator and Gurcharan Singh Tohra, President of the Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) surrendered to the security forces or *were perhaps captured* by them on June 6. On June 7, the bullet-ridden bodies of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Major-General Shahbeg Singh and Bhai Amrik Singh, President of the All India Sikh Students Federation (A.I.S.S.F.) were discovered in the Akal Takht.

The military action in the Golden Temple let loose a chain of protests from the Sikhs in the country and abroad. When the news of storming the Golden Temple reached the Sikh soldiers, they ran amuck and lost their emotional balance. And the country witnessed what is known as the 'Sikh Soldiers' Mutiny.'

CHAPTER — THREE

MUTINY AND DESERTION

RELIGION AND SOLDIERING

Religion is given great importance not only in the Indian Army but also in almost all armies of the world. When correctly channelised, the religious fervour of the troops can become a rallying point for the national cause. But a little hurt to the religious feelings can shake the national monolith.

By putting his hand on the holy book, a recruit pledges his allegiance and loyalty to the country, his unit, and his superiors. The oath-taking ceremony changes his status from a recruit to a sepoy. And from that day onwards, whenever he confronts a challenging task during his service, he is reminded of his sacred pledge.

Every unit in the army has its own mandir and or gurdwara depending on its class composition, which the soldiers visit daily — time permitting — to pay their obeisance. But in any case, a visit to the mandir or gurdwara by them on every sunday, on festivals and on the unit raising day anniversary is a must. Spiritual training, an important motivating factor, psychologically moulds a soldier to fight unstintedly in battle to uphold the pride (izzat) of his class and his unit. Great emphasis is laid on the spiritual training of the jawans by Army Headquarter, formation headquarters and units. In their annual training directives and annual training instructions, all formation headquarters and units touch upon the importance of this subject. It has been a custom in the army from the British days to include in the itinerary of a V.I.P. or V.V.I.P., a visit to the unit mandir or gurdwara, as applicable. I recall an incident of the late 70s, when a V.I.P. upon his visit to a regimental centre, declined to visit the religious institute, where arrangements, for a brief ceremony — a normal ritual for such visits — was awaiting him. This action of the V.I.P. was taken as an insult to his unit by the commandant, who had no hesitation in telling the V.I.P. that never before in the history of the unit was a visit to the religious institute declined by any visitor.

History proves beyond any doubt that religion plays an important part in a soldier's life. One finds that in the Indian Mutiny of

1857 too, its primary cause was religion. Story of the greased cartridges and ground bones (taken as an attack on their religion) was the main rallying point for the soldiers' uprising. To recall similar incidents, it so happened that when the Enfield rifle was introduced into service — it superseded the Brown Bess rifle — Damdamah was one of the three cantonments at which musketry schools for training in the new weapon were established. And it was in this cantonment that on one day, a low-caste lascar, magazine-man meeting a high-caste soldier asked him for a drink of water from his utensil. The Brahman scornfully objected to the request on account of caste. Upon which the lascar told the Brahman soldier that the caste difference will disappear soon and all castes will become the same, because cartridges smeared with beef-fat and hog's-lard were being manufactured at the depots, for use throughout the army. The perturbed Brahman conveyed this news to his comrades and it spread among all the soldiers at the depot.

It was also rumoured that the British Government under instructions from the Company and the Queen, had mixed ground bones with flour and salt, sold in the market. The rumours also had it, that they had adulterated ghee with animal fat; that bones had been burnt with common sugar of the country; and that not only bone-dust flour, but the flesh of cows and pigs, had been thrown into wells to pollute the drinking water. All these stories made it manifest to Lord Canning that the worst suspicions were deeply rooted in the Sipahi Army. There were also indications that these suspicions were not only confined to the army, but had also affected the minds of the civil population.

According to the record left by Lawrence in his own hand-writing, he wrote to Lord Canning on May 9, 1857; "I had a conversation with a jamadar of the Oudh Artillery for more than an hour, and was startled by the dogged persistence of the man, a Brahman, of about forty years of age, of excellent character, in the belief that for ten years past Government has been engaged in measures for the forcible, or rather fraudulent, conversion of all the Natives." There were even then some dawning apprehensions in the British mind that, with the best possible intentions, serious mistakes might have been committed in the past, and that the tree of benignant errors was now bearing pungent fruit.

A man forgets but history doesn't. It is in this context that rumination of the events leading to the sad mutiny in the Sikh units is necessary so that we learn from our own mistakes, to preserve our army in good shape in future.

MUTINY AND DESERTION IN THE SIKH REGIMENTAL CENTRE

To come to the fateful happenings, a wave of rage struck more than half a dozen Sikh units when the news of the storming of the Golden Temple reached them. The Sikh Regimental Centre at Ramgarh in Bihar was the scene of the worst tragedy, where over 1400 men went berserk. The jawans started asking for mass casual leave soon after the rumours of massacre of Sikhs, including women and children, began trickling in. No efforts to pacify the jawans were made by their Commandant, Brigadier, S.C. Puri, or other officers and junior commissioned officers (J.C.Os) at this stage.

The bulk of the troops boycotted the evening meal on June 9, 1984, which evidently constituted the offence of mutiny in terms of Military Law. But even at this late stage, neither the Commandant, nor his next two senior officers Col. Jagdev Singh and Lt. Col. H.S. Cheema showed any anxiety. They played their usual round of golf that evening. The assembly of troops in the gurdwara on June 10 (Sunday) was the proverbial last straw in the emotionally surcharged atmosphere. From the gurdwara, they ran to the barracks to change into uniform. The armoury (kote in military parlance) was the first target.

Incidentally, on June 10, the Commandant spent some time in his office before returning home at 9.00 a.m. with his daughters, who were left in the school for a function that morning. A few minutes later, his staff car came speeding back with the officiating Subedar Major, who brought the news of the mutiny. In desperation, the Brigadier rushed to the Centre, picking up his number two and three enroute. In a bid to talk to his jawans, he immediately drove to the armoury. But they had already crossed the bounds of sanity. Seeing the car, they opened up. The first shot hit the driver. And then a volley of bullets tore through the body of the car and Brigadier Puri slumped dead in his seat, while his number two and three sustained injuries.

The mutineers picked up their arms, loaded ammunition in the Centre vehicles, established road-blocks and commandeered about 25 buses, looted two petrol pumps and deserted in a convoy. Soon afterwards army units in Bihar and U.P. swung into action to engage them. Many deserters were shot dead in encounters, while others either surrendered or escaped. According to a press report, 35 soldiers and recruits were killed in preventive action (most of them in a skirmish near Jaunpur).

Sadly, the story of the other units where mutiny followed by desertion took place is broadly similar to the Ramgarh scenario. Many command shortcomings were exposed by the events which caused the mutiny. Some of the simple and routine procedures laid down in the army, if properly followed leave nothing to chance. To quote a few: There is a time-worn system of giving "Sab achha" (all correct) report by the Subedar-Major to the unit commander and by the senior J.C.Os to the company commanders twice daily. This informative report covers welfare, morale and discipline of troops. Apart from this, there are two other channels of reporting by the duty officer of the week and duty J.C.O. of the day, whose job it is, to report any abnormal happening to the Commanding Officer — through the Adjutant or even directly — if it is of a serious nature.

Besides other interactions, the officers are supposed to take part in sports with their troops (a neglected practice these days), which is a good way of getting to know them and sense their feelings. Another well established custom for the officers is to attend the mandir and or gurdwara — as applicable — with their troops on certain festivals and on the units' raising day anniversaries. Some of them also pay obeisance at these religious institutions on Sundays. And even the British Officers, when they were in the Indian Army took great pride in following this custom. How come none of the officers (not even the duty officer of the week) was present in the Sikh Regimental Centre gurdwara on that Sunday?

What the troops needed was timely and sympathetic advice by the commandant and other officers in their hour of grief. Knowing the religious sensitivity of his jawans full well, the commandant should have held a 'Sainik sammelan' (known as durbar in the military jargon) to explain the decision taken by the government. This was one occasion when the leadership was on test. But, alas, it failed.

The army top-brass too seemed to have over-looked an important psychological factor (the reaction of Sikh troops) while planning Operation Bluestar. The Defence Services Regulations for the Army para 332, lays down: "Officers will take special care that none of their acts, or of their subordinates wounds the religious feelings of a person or violates the sanctity of any place held sacred." Were not the religious feelings of the jawans wounded and wasn't the sanctity of a place held sacred violated? No instructions seemed to have been issued from the Army Headquarters to the units for preparing the Sikh jawans psychologically to withstand an onslaught on their sanctum sanctorum.

The government assurances in both houses of Parliament not to enter the Golden Temple, left many people — including the army — mentally unprepared to face the event when it came. The army did not get more than two to three weeks notice to launch the offensive. When and where to use the army has always been and well rightly remain a political decision. But if, the task allotted impinges on the inherent structure of the army, repercussions of which the politicians may not be able to fathom, it is then the bounden duty of the army top-brass to faithfully apprise the government of the unfortunate repercussions. Moral courage on part of the higher hierarchy to spell out the imponderables would have saved the army from the gory tremors that it had to go through.

It is a pity that a regiment with an unflinching loyalty, the highest tally of gallantry awards, a glorious fighting record and an undaunted spirit of vanguarding was torn apart by an emotional upsurge in the face of an onslaught on its sanctum sanctorum — an uncanny mental shock which the minds of jawans were not designed to digest. Never before had our army to undertake such a sensitive task.

Offences of mutiny and desertion are covered under the Army Act 1950, Sections 37 and 38 respectively, Section 37 lays down: "Any person subject to this Act who (a) begins, incites, causes or conspires with any other persons to cause any mutiny in the military, naval or airforces of India or any forces cooperating therewith; or (b) joins in any such mutiny; or (c) being present at any such mutiny, does not use his utmost endeavours to suppress the same; or (d) knowing or having reason to believe in the existence of any such conspiracy, does not without delay, give information thereof to his commanding or other superior officer; or (e) endeavours to seduce any person in the military, naval or airforces of India from his duty or allegiance to the Union; shall on conviction by court-martial be liable to suffer death or such less punishment as is in this Act mentioned." Section 38 lays down: "Any person subject to this Act who deserts or attempts to desert the service shall, on conviction by court-martial,

if he commits the offence on active service or when under orders for active service, be liable to suffer death or such less punishment as is in this Act mentioned; or

if he commits the offence under any other circumstances, be liable to suffer imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years or such less punishment as is in this Act mentioned."

The Sikhs hold the Harmandir Sahib and the Akal Takht in the highest esteem. For them, including those who are not so religious, nothing in life is more sacred than their sanctum sanctorum. It was for this reason, that when they heard the news of the army entry into the Golden Temple, they lost their equilibrium and in a bid to reach Amritsar left their units. The happenings in all the units where mutiny or desertion took place were almost identical.

While the sequence of the tragic events leading to the mutiny in the Sikh Regimental Centre Ramgarh (Bihar), which trains the Sikh recruits before attesting them into sepoys and drafting them to the various battalions of the regiment, has already been covered; an account of a few other units affected by the malady is presented in the subsequent narration.

18 SIKH

The unit at the time of mutiny, was located in J & K at Miran Sahib near Jammu and its Commanding Officer (C.O.) was Lt. Col. D.S. Sekri. Listening to the news on June 7, the jawans felt gravely perturbed and sullen. A mixed crowd of Sikh citizens including truck-operators, and some women came outside the unit-lines on the 7th morning and instigated the jawans. The ladies brought bangles and 'dupattas' (a piece of cloth used to cover the head by the ladies in Punjabi dress of salwar-kameez) for the jawans to wear them and sit in the unit lines like females, when the army had destroyed the Golden Temple and killed thousands of pilgrims including women and children, who had gathered in the Complex for the 'Shaheedi gupurb'.

Copies of a pamphlet in Punjabi (Gurmukhi script) alleged to have been sent by Sant Bhindranwale were also thrown inside the unit. The English translation of the pamphlet is:

"Sant Bhindranwale's appeal to the Sikh soldiers:

You religiously devoted Sikh soldiers.

Waheguru ji ka khalsa waheguru ji ki fateh.

Remember your incestors, who sacrificed their lives and bore untold battering and atrocities for the freedom of India. But now see what treatment is meted out in India to those devoted Sikhs, who gave the sacrifice of Guru Teg Bahadur for the Hindus and freed their wives and sisters from the clutches of foreign invaders. Bhai Mani Singh and Taru Singh got their each limb cut bit by bit and their skulls chopped off without uttering even a murmur. And then, when the Harmandir Sahib was desecrated, Masse Ranghar was beheaded to avenge the

unholy act of desecration. Today to ruin the brave Sikhs, Harmandir Sahib is being attacked by the Indian army by using an assortment of weapons including MMGs and artillery. A few devoted Sikhs are fighting fearlessly by proving true the guru's words 'sava lakh se eak laraon.'

'I will make each Khalsa fight a strength of 1.25 lakh.'

I want to ask you one question at this point of time: when some one decides to destroy our home and threatens to remove our father's turban, should we continue to obey the same enemy? If so, the sons of this kind should drown themselves in a pinch of water filled up in their hands. Because we cannot safeguard the honour of our daughters and sisters and we are incapable of keeping our father's turban intact. If you want to preserve your service and chair by presenting your daughters and sisters to the enemies, then death should be preferable for you. You all have to think about this at this juncture.

If the instinct of self-respect is not dead in you and if you want to behold your mother's milk and Punjab water in high esteem, then obey the waheguru and march towards Amritsar to save the Harmandir Sahib. In uniform and in your own vehicles. No one will interfere with you.

What more can I say, except this, that you are up for an acid test and the hour wants you not to let down your mother's milk and your father's turban during this worst Sikh catastrophe.

Decide now, whether you value you mother's milk or you want to mortgage your daughters and sisters for the sake of your service.

Guru fateh.

Faithful sevadars of Khalsa Panth
Fearlessly fighting soldiers against
the Indian army from inside the
Harmandir Sahib."

Copy of this document is attached to the Court martial proceedings.

Surprisingly, no instructions before or during Operation Blues-tar were transmitted to the unit for taking any precautions or to pacify the jawans sympathetically and tactfully, so that they did not create an uncontrollable situation after their psyche was hurt.

However, the Commanding Officer informed the Brigade Commander about the unrest in his unit. The latter then addressed the officers of the unit. The Commanding Officer, Col. Sekri also talked to the officers and JCOs the same day. These activities went on till 6 O'clock in the evening. Col. Sekri did not hold any sainik sammelan to counsel or to soothe the hurt-feeling of the tormented jawans. No roll-call (a parade held every evening to announce important orders for the following day and to check presence of unit personnel in the lines) was held on the 7th evening. However, there was a party in Major H.S. Toor's house which was attended by Col. Sekri among a few other officers accompanied by their wives. That a party was held on a day when the situation was fast slipping out of hands, shows total unconcern of the C.O. and the other officers for their unit.

At the first parade of physical training (P.T.) on the 8th morning, the jawans exhibited indiscipline by disobeying the orders issued to them by their superior officers by word of mouth. Thereafter, the jawans started raising slogans. These actions — collective insubordination and slogan shouting — made it manifest that mutiny had started.

Incidentally, two platoons from the unit (with their arms and ammunition) were despatched to the border on the 8th morning to strengthen the border out-post (B.O.P.), manned by the Border Security Force (B.S.F.). Grippled by the emotional trauma, 150 men from the unit gathered at one place, and then left in military vehicles and trucks provided by the civilians towards the B.O.P. Reaching the B.O.P., they collected arms and ammunition from two platoons of the unit that had left unit location in the morning and were already there. The Company Commander with those two platoons, Major Surinder Singh, tried to dissuade the defaulting jawans from resorting to desertion. But disregarding his advice, they started moving towards Amritsar.

Some of them (about eighty) succeeded in reaching village Bholla in Dina Nagar in Gurdaspur district of Punjab. A battalion of the Bihar Regiment intercepted them there; disarmed them and brought them back without any clash. Another party was intercepted by a battalion of the Madras Regiment near Kathua. The total number involved in the march to Amritsar was 149. Out of them 120 were tried by Summary Court-Martial by the C.O. and awarded punishment upto six months. Twenty five were tried by General Court-martial in four batches for mutiny and desertion. One havaldar (Hav. Kewal Singh) was awarded four years rigorous

imprisonment; while others were awarded rigorous imprisonment varying from two to three years. And one got only three months imprisonment.

In the first trial by General Court-martial (G.C.M.) of 8 jawans of 18 Sikh, which was held at Jammu with effect from August 13, 1985, Major Trilok singh Grewal (retired), a practising lawyer in the Punjab and Haryana High Court was the defence counsel. When the Court assembled for the trial, Major Grewal took umbrage at the accused being tried by a Court whose members' minds had already been biased. An application signed by all the accused was, therefore, submitted by him to the Court under Army Act Section 130 and Army rules 44 and 51. His objection, which seems valid, could have created serious problem for the army authorities, because its acceptance even at one place, would take all the accused (who deserted or mutinied after Bluestar) out of the army's jurisdiction.

Ironically, the objection stemmed from the statements made by Lt. Gen. T.S. Oberoi, G.O.C. -in-C. Southern Command and Gen. A.S. Vaidya, Chief of the Army Staff, (who was 2 years later assassinated) which were given wide publicity by Doordarshan and all India radio, besides having been published in the newspapers on June 13, 1984 and July 2, 1984 respectively, Lt. Gen. T.S. Oberoi said: "The deserters who have surrendered will be court-martialled and punished." In his broadcast to the nation, Gen. A.S. Vaidya exhorted: "I would like to give an assurance that those who acted in a mutinous manner will be dealt with severely under the law as enacted for the army, so that those who remain with us in the army and have the honour of bearing arms for the country, would be a proud and disciplined body of soldiers."

Admittedly, the above statements by the top army hierarchy left no choice whatsoever to the courts, except to punish all the accused severely. It was in this context that the defence counsel mentioned in the objection application: "A plain perusal of these statements indicates that the so-called deserters will be punished by the court-martial and no leniency will be shown to them. This amounts to a directive to all courts under the Defence Act to only punish the so-called deserters/mutineers, merely on an allegation without considering the evidence, facts, law, equity or anything else in favour of the accused brought before such courts leaving no discretion to any member of the court as such. Hence under the circumstances, it is obvious that the accused will not get any justice under the law from any member or court as such. Therefore, the

court loses its jurisdiction to proceed with the trial as the said statements have not been controverted so far. This situation will prevail in any court constituted under the Defence Act/Rules so long as the framers of the policy, reflected in the above-said statements of Lt. Gen. T.S. Oberoi and Gen. A.S. Vaidya remain at the helm of affairs of this Army." The defence counsel went on to say: "It is, therefore, prayed that this trial may kindly be stopped in the interest of Justice and the accused released from custody, as they have already suffered for about one year in an agony without any proper trial, nor is there any possibility of a fair trial in view of the above submission."

Ignoring the objection of the defence counsel, the Court proceeded with the trial; charging all accused under Section 37B of the Army Act for joining in a mutiny in the Military Forces on 8th of June, 1984. The second charge against all the accused was under Section 38 (I) of the Army Act i.e. deserting the service. Besides these charges, Naik Kewal Singh and Sepoy Chanan Singh were also charged under Section 63 of the Army Act, the former for carrying an unauthorised message to Subedar Gurcharan Singh at Karotna Khurad post and to Hav. Piara Singh at Suchetgarh border outpost and the latter for distributing an inflammatory leaflet and not reporting this to the superior authority. Sep. Pur Singh was charged under Section 52A of the Army Act for committing theft of ammunition.

In his closing address, the defence counsel also brought out: One, when the unwarranted army action took place at Harmandir Sahib with effect from 3.6.84 and the Sikh community was denied their fundamental right of worship in the highest revered place of worship for more than a fortnight, Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India stood gravely violated. The right to worship is the fundamental right of every citizen of the country at all times. To say that this action was meant to flush out the terrorists is absolutely baseless, when examined against the background of the statement of Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha (Retired) published on July 16, 1984 issue of the 'Spokesman' and reproduced in the Sikh Review of June, 1985. Two; it was well known to the C.O. and the Brigade Commander on the morning of 7.6.84 that the civilians in trucks moving around the unit lines were inciting the jawans; yet they did not take any action to insulate the unit personnel from the civilian crowd, which had nefarious designs. Nor did they stop the movement of civilians around the unit-lines with the help of district authorities. Three, when the first leaflet (translation reproduced

earlier) was discovered at the unit gurdwara gate at lunch time on the 7th, it was obvious that trouble was brewing. Despite this, neither the C.O. nor the Company Commanders bothered to talk to their men by holding Sainik Sammelans (durbars) at their respective levels. That the C.O. kept himself aloof and even attended a party that evening showed his complacency and smacked of his unconcern for his men. Four, it is surprising that no information or instructions were passed to the unit from Army Headquarters for taking any precautions at the time of Operation Bluestar. Five, even on the morning of June 8, the C.O., instead of controlling the situation personally, left on the pretext of informing the Brigade Commander and never came back till most of the jawans had left the unit-lines.

Further, while pleading for leniency, the defence counsel brought out the magnanimity shown by the Commander-in-Chief of India, Field Marshal Auchinleck, in the I.N.A. trial by a General Court-Martial of Captain Shah Nawaz Khan, Captain R.K. Sahgal and Lt. G.S. Dhillon of the Indian National Army. Wherein, while confirming the proceedings, he remitted the sentence of transportation for life. Major Grewal also read out the letter written by the Field-Marshal to all GOs. C-in-C commands, giving reasons for the remittance of punishment. Besides this, he also touched upon the proclamation of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria after the mutiny of 1857. In her proclamation issued on November 1, 1858, the Queen desired that the people of India should freely breathe under the feeling of generosity, benevolence and religious tolerance.

While concluding his closing address, the defence counsel said: "The 1857 mutiny was the result of false rumours that the cartridges contained the grease made from the cow's and pig's flesh. This was enough to offend the religious feelings of the Indian troops who resorted to one of the worst known mutinies of history. Ironically, now the same very mutineers are treated as national heroes. U.P. is not only trying to claim credit for having started the struggle for independence but a mutiny memorial has also been erected at Meerut. In the case of Sikh soldiers, however, after gravely hurting their religious feelings, they are being subjected to severe punishments."

9 SIKH

9 Sikh, in June 1984, was located at Lalgarh Jattan. At the codeword 'Hawabaz' the unit was required to leave the cantonment by the shortest route, in minimum time, ~~and concentrate in two~~

groups at two different points on road Lalgarh Jattan - Ganganagar. The rehearsal for this move was carried out a number of times before June 7, 1984. On receipt of the codeword, various guards in the unit were to be relieved by the personnel who were to stay in the rear party. And the troops were required to move with their personal weapons and ammunition. Thus the unit at the time of the mutiny was on 6 hours notice, while some elements of the unit were on two hours notice to move to the exercise location.

On 7th June at about 6.30 p.m. Naib Subedar Gulzar Singh (the duty J.C.O.) reported to Major A.S. Sambyal, who was the duty officer, that all guards for the night had been duly posted at their respective posts in the unit. At about 10.00 p.m. the duty J.C.O. again reported to the duty officer that the medium machine guns (MMGs) which were out for night firing, having come back, had been deposited in the kote. According to the statement of Major Sambyal before the Court, he was woken up by his orderly Lance naik Vali Singh around midnight on the 7th to inform him that he had heard firing and some noise from the direction of 9 Sikh location. The Major came out of his room and his ears confirmed the report given by the orderly. Being the duty officer, Major Sambyal then hurriedly dressed up and rushed to the unit. Before leaving, he also told the guard commander at the single officers' quarters to tell captains Nambiar and Thomas to come to the unit lines.

On reaching the unit, the duty-officer noticed some other ranks scurrying around in the unit lines. He also saw one vehicle moving towards the outgate, to which he signalled to stop but in vain. The other ranks sitting in the vehicle were shouting, "Bole so nihal sat sari akal". (This is the war-cry of the Sikh regiment). Major Sambyal, then went to the quarter-guard, kotes and magazine, but did not find any sentry there. He was also informed by Hav. Gurmej Singh that there was no vehicle in the Mechanical Transport (M.T.) lines. After that he went to the Commanding Officer's house where he also found the second-in-command and the Subedar Major. Sambyal reported the matter to the C.O.

Major K.K. Sharma 'C' Company Commander 9 Sikh, in his statement before the General Court-martial of Naik Jarnail Singh and 6 others who were on guard duty at the magazine on the night of 7th; stated: "All the seven accused are from my Company and their character has been exemplary. Accused number 1 is an athlete of Command level and has represented the unit in cross-country. Accused No. 2, Sepoy Malkait Singh is a Kabaddi player of repute

and has gone up to division level. Accused No. 3 Sepoy Jagtar Singh is a very good boxer and has gone up to Corps level. Accused No. 7, Sepoy Ranjit Singh has represented the unit in the Republic Day Parade. I don't know any instance where any of the accused persons defied my orders. I always felt proud of commanding them. Given an opportunity, I will again accept them under my command. My unit was on six hours notice for internal security duties, while platoon No. 7 of my Company was on two hours notice to move. I had no knowledge if tapes of Sant Bhindranwale were played in my company. It is within my knowledge that on the night of June 7, a video film was shown in Headquarters 180 Infantry Brigade. The film was procured by Captain George Thomas of my unit."

At the time of mutiny, 9 Sikh was being commanded by Lt. Col. I.S. Sabherwal. The troops in the unit were sullen over the Golden Temple action. In the absence of any comforting counsel from their officers, they became a vulnerable target of the propaganda machinery and media, to which they stood thoroughly exposed. As in other Sikh units where mutiny took place, in 9 Sikh too, the officers were not very concerned about their troops in the hour of their grief and bewilderment and kept themselves aloof. That the unit officers watched a video film on 7th night is a classic example of their blatant unconcern.

It was on the fateful night of June 7 that about 387 other ranks (O.R.), including many non-commissioned officers, deserted from the unit lines in vehicles with their arms and ammunition. As was the case with the other mutinying Sikh units their destination was Amritsar. While hatching their plan one J.C.O., a Company Havaladar Major and one Havaladar of 'C' Coy who refused to participate were beaten up and locked up in a room by the jawans. The other army units which were ordered to block the route of the deserters, apprehended 17 other ranks near Ganganagar. Thirteen other ranks were killed, 20 injured and 78 surrendered near Abohar. 224 other ranks went up to Kohli where 214 surrendered, 29 went to Fazilka. Besides those accounted for above, there were a few stragglers.

9 Sikh was disbanded after the mutiny. A number of General courts-martial were held from June, 1985 to January 1986, which tried one J.C.O. and 51 other ranks. The punishments awarded ranged from four years rigorous imprisonment to life imprisonment.

Surprisingly, the officers were caught unaware when the desertion took place. This goes to prove that they were far detached

from the minds and hearts of their troops. Because if they had any nexus with them (troops), they would have got an inkling at the same time that the idea of the mutiny was taking birth in the minds of their jawans.

Like most of the other officers' statements, the statement of Capt. R.M.R. Nambiar, who was officiating adjutant of 9 Sikh (at the time of mutiny) before the general courtmartial, makes interesting reading: "On the night of 7/8 June 1984, mass desertion with arms and ammunition took place in my unit. At about 10.30 p.m. on that night, I received an all correct report about the unit telephonically from Subedar Major Kulwant Singh." Reading this makes one feel that many wrong procedures have been started in the army, which, if anything, break the correct channel of smooth functioning. As per the time worn custom, Subedar Major should give all correct report to the Commanding Officer and to no one else in the unit. It should have been the Naib Subedar Adjutant to report to the Adjutant and not the Subedar Major. However, to continue with Captain Nambiar's statement. "At about 2.00 a.m. on the same night, I was woken up by Captain George Thomas, who informed me that he had heard a lot of firing from the direction of our unit-lines. I tried to contact the Commanding Officer 9 Sikh and the duty clerk telephonically but the telephone was out of order. I alongwith Captain Thomas came out of my room to ascertain the direction of the fire. We put on our uniforms and rushed to the unit. Near the officers' Mess of 27 Madras, we were stopped by Lt. Col. G.P.S. Rawat, Commanding Officer, 27 Madras, who instructed us not to go to 9 Sikh unit lines but to the Adjutant 27 Madras. After some time Naib Subedar Gulzar Singh of my unit came to the Adjutant 27 Madras and in my presence reported to him that Lt. Col. I.S. Sabherwal, Commanding Officer, 9 Sikh and our Subedar Major Kulwant Singh had gone to the Commander 180 Infantry Brigade and had asked for me and Captain George Thomas there. I alongwith Captain Thomas and Naib Subedar Gulzar Singh, then went to the residence of the Brigade Commander, where I met the Commanding Officer, Major K.K. Sharma and the Subedar Major. All of us then left for our unit lines. Upon reaching there, we found the barracks giving a deserted look. The lights and fans in the barracks were still on."

Captain Nambiar's statement amply brings out the casualness of 9 Sikh officers. That Nambiar and Thomas were stopped by the C.O. 27 Madras, and sent to the office of 27 Madras Adjutant shows that 27 Madras officer came to know about 9 Sikh desertion

much earlier than the 9 Sikh officers. Otherwise, 9 Sikh officers were pretending not to know about it till the troops had already departed from the unit lines. Ruefully, the C.O. Second-in-Command and Subedar major of 9 Sikh were at the residence of the Brigade Commander at a time, when their unit was in flames. A very strange example by any standard. In war or any other crisis, the C.O. never leaves his unit to go back to report to the Brigade Commander, until he has suitably tackled the situation in hand or has been removed from his command. It is for the Brigade Commander to either come to the unit himself or send one of his officers or get a report on the telephone, rather than encouraging or allowing the C.O. to leave his unit. The C.O. and his officers, it seems, were not only mentally detached from their troops but, to put it politely, were also afraid of them. How could they then command them in the real sense of the word? And what action, if any, has been taken against these ineffective officers? Are they still providing their hackneyed leadership to the troops some where in the army? If so, it will certainly not be in the interest of the army.

The codeword "Hawabaz" on which the unit was to move out straightaway was used as a ploy by the planners of the desertion, so that all those who were unwilling to join them could also be taken alongwith them on their odyssey. That this trick worked is evident from the way the move was carried out.

After the desertion, the task of apprehending 9 Sikh other ranks (who had gone towards Kot Kapura with the intention of reaching Amritsar) was given by the General Officer Commanding of the division to Brigadier A.S. Bains. For this he was allotted three infantry battalions, a company of armoured personnel carriers (A.P.Cs.) from a mechanised battalion and a troop of tanks. Brig. Bains reached Kotkapura at 4.00 p.m. on June 8. The troops placed under his command started joining him from 4.30 p.m. onwards. According to the information given by the Kot Kapura police, the deserters had proceeded towards village Panjgirain Kalan.

On reaching Panjgirian, the police contingent stationed there, informed the Brigadier that army personnel in about ten vehicles had gone towards Aulakh village. From this village he got the information that the deserters had proceeded towards Kot Sukhia. The column under Bains then proceeded towards Kot Sukhia. A quick recce at 5.45 p.m. revealed that the deserting boys of 9 Sikh had taken positions at Kot Sukhia gurdwara (or to be more correct dera of a sant). The gurdwara was, therefore, cordoned off with two companies, A.P.Cs and recoilless anti-tank guns (R.C.Ls). It

was at about 6.30 p.m. when the gurdwara's Santji came to the Brigadier and requested him not to open fire. He also conveyed to the Brigadier that the 9 Sikh boys wanted the senior most person from the column to go to them to carry out negotiations. Bains did not accept their proposal; instead he told Santji to inform them to send their senior most representative to him.

After about twenty minutes, a company quartermaster Havaladar, Dalbir Singh, alongwith another person came to the Brigadier. The latter told them that they were surrounded and had no chance of escape. Bains also told them that if they made a false step, the surrounding column would open fire at them. Dalbir Singh, then requested the Brigadier to accept their surrender. The request was accepted by Bains.

After the surrender, all the personnel of 9 Sikh were ordered to collect at one place without their weapons, ammunition and vehicles. The number of personnel who surrendered, their weapons and vehicles was as under:-

- (a) Personnel - 214 other ranks.
- (b) Weapons
 - (i) Rifles 7.62 mm : 161
 - (ii) Carbines 9 mm : 35
 - (iii) Light machine guns : 22
 - (iv) RCL guns : 2
- (c) Vehicles
 - (i) Lorries 3 ton : 3
 - (ii) Trucks 1 ton : 4
 - (iii) Jeeps RCL : 2
 - (iv) Jeep GS : 1
 - (v) Jongsas : 2
 - (vi) Water truck : 1
 - (vii) Water tank 3000 liters : 1

At 11.00 p.m. on the same day, Brigadier Bains took the personnel of 9 Sikh with their weapons and ammunition to Bhatinda and handed them over to Lt. Col. R.S. Dhaliwal, C.O. 15 Garhwal Rifles for their onward journey to Suratgarh, for handing them over to the brigade there as per the orders from the higher army authorities. The surrendered vehicles were also moved to a unit on the next day.

In his statement before the general courtmartial, Lt. Col. Dhaliwal said: "None of the said 214 personnel defied my orders. Rather they were co-operative. Their behaviour towards me and

my personnel was correct and soldier-like throughout the time when they were with me. It was so even at the time of handing them over to 15 Bihar. Enroute, I gave them a break for an hour for the morning call of nature and they returned to the vehicles at the scheduled time. I neither chained them nor tied their hands. No one tried to escape from my custody. No one was violent. They were submissive. They obeyed all my orders in a soldierly manner."

Brigadier K.S. Gill, B.A., LL.B. (Retired), Advocate Punjab and Haryana High Court, Chandigarh was the defence counsel in this as well as in a few other General Courts-martial held to try 9 Sikh personnel. When the names of the presiding officer and members were read out in the hearing of all the seven accused persons and when they were asked individually by the presiding officer, Col. Vijander Bhandari, whether they had any objection to being tried by him or by any other member of the court, they all objected to the whole court. Again when asked, what was their objection, each one of them said: "On July 1, 1984 General A.S. Vaidya, PVSM, AVSM, MVC and Bar, ADC, the Chief of the Army Staff had announced on the radio that the persons who had acted in a mutinous manner would be dealt with severely under the Army Act. Since this court-martial has been assembled under his powers and orders, it is already in the minds of the Honourable members of the courtmartial to give severe punishment and it is feared that justice will not be done unless the trial is held after the retirement of the present chief of the Army Staff or I am tried by a court outside the purview of the Army Act."

The objection raised by the accused persons was disallowed by the court on the advice of the judge-advocate; who was of the opinion that the G.C.M. had neither been convened by the C.O.A.S., nor was he to confirm the proceedings. The judge advocate also mentioned that an extract from a newspaper standing by itself is not admissible in evidence.

Col. Bhandari in his reply to the objection said: "The statement of the Chief of the Army Staff will have no bearing, whatsoever, on my judgement which shall solely be based on evidence produced before the G.C.M." Whether what the C.O.A.S. said in his broadcast influenced the minds of the court is a matter that can be better considered by the legal experts. But for a common man, it should suffice to know that the C.O.A.S. is the head of the Army which is a well disciplined and well-knit organisation; and where every junior has to go by the dictates of his superior. Logically

speaking, anything that affects the mind, also affects its thinking and judgement. It is interesting to note that the punishments awarded by the courts-martial upto July 1985 were more severe than the punishments awarded by the court-martial after the Rajiv-Longowal accord on Punjab signed on July 24, 1985.

All the seven accused persons in this particular G.C.M. had given the name of Major Ranjit Singh of 6 Sikh Light Infantry as their defending officer. But major S.C. Thakan of 2 Grenadiers was detailed as their defending officer, though the latter was not acceptable to them. Major Ranjit Singh was not made available due to the exigencies of service. Mr. Ram Jethmalani, one of the most eminent lawyers of the Supreme Court of India in his article, 'Innocent till found guilty' which appeared in the Indian Express on May 31, 1986 has this to say on the right of an accused: "So important is the right of an accused to have the services of a lawyer that the Constitution-makers were not satisfied with the rights created by the successive codes of criminal procedure. The Constitution makers introduced in it the Fundamental Rights chapter so that no tyrannical regime could curtail or destroy the right of the accused to be defended by a legal practitioner of his choice."

The charge under Army Act Section 37 (b) against the accused was 'joining in a mutiny in the military forces of India, in that they together, at Lalgarh Jattan, on the night 7/8 June, 1984, when serving with 9th Battalion, The Sikh Regiment, in company with a number of other personnel of the said unit, left the unit in a mutinous spirit, with arms and ammunition belonging to the government.'

The defence counsel, Brigadier K.S. Gill (Retired), during the cross-examination of Major A.K. Mishra Of 15 Bihar (who was assisting his commanding officer in running the 9 Sikh detainees' camp), asked him, whether the 'living conditions in cage 1 were different from cages 2 & 3 and camp 'B' in that there were no electric fans in cage 1, whereas personnel staying in cages 2 and 3 and camp 'B' were provided with electric fans and other facilities? At this point, the judge-advocate asked the defence counsel to apprise the court with the relevancy of his question. While answering, Brigadier Gill brought out that the question asked was relevant under Indian Evidence Act (I.E.A.) 146.

The defence counsel further brought out that the question was asked, because the witness had been associated with the management of the detainees' camp (from the time of its inception on June 8, 1984), where all the personnel of 9 Sikh who allegedly left their

unit lines on the night of June 7/8, 1984 were lodged. And of them 319 have been dealt with by summary courtmartial (SCM); given lighter punishment and retained in service. Some out of them have been picked out to depose against the others. But 60 other ranks have been selected to be tried by G.C.M. on a charge under Army Act 37, which is punishable with death. Therefore, the inhuman living conditions and other internecine sufferings inflicted on the detainees of cage 1, go to make this question relevant. The witness in his cross-examination has shown hesitation in replying to simple questions about organisation of the camp and the living conditions in cage 1, where the accused (being tried by this G.C.M.) have been detained. The pick and choose method of trying some other ranks under the very severe Army Act Section 37, and others under a lenient Army Act Section 63 has been done to build the prosecution case by the stick method against the one group and the carrot method against the other. But Brigadier Gill was, not allowed to cross-examine the witness by the court, because they felt that the living conditions in the detainees' camp or cages were not relevant to the issue.

In his closing address, Brigadier Gill brought out that the prosecution has examined eleven witnesses in support of the charge. Considering as a whole, the quality of evidence is not of that high order, and not sufficient to bring home the charge against the accused persons. The witnesses have made many contradictions and improvements from their earlier statements at the court of inquiry and summary of evidence. Hence, their credibility as witnesses has been impaired and should, therefore, be graded low. Their testimony is to be considered with great caution and care, calling for discarding those pieces of evidence which have appeared as improvements, contradictions or embellishments.

The defence counsel went on to say that witness No. 1 and 2 Major A.S. Sambyal and Naib Subedar Gulzar Singh were the duty officer and duty J.C.O. of the unit respectively on the night of June 7/8. They were duty bound to ensure the security and safety of the unit that night. Although, they have claimed in their statements before the court to have seen men and vehicles moving about in the unit lines, yet they made no effort to raise an alarm to get the unit to fall in with a view to regaining control.

Brigadier Gill also brought out that witness number 1, Major A.S. Sambyal, witness No. 2, Naib Subedar Gulzar Singh and witness No. 6, Captain R.M.R. Nambiar are the key witnesses and central figures for the prosecution to establish their story in so

many disciplinary cases, as also at the court of inquiry and summary of evidence. They act like well tutored witnesses with stock answers, all preplanned and worked out to cover each other. Each subsequent trial finds them more confident and well prepared to give ready explanation in support of the concocted improvements introduced by them. That they took no normal corrective action as per military procedure to control the situation when they noticed a commotion in the unit, goes to further prove their quality as witnesses.

In regard to the statement of Captain Nambiar, the defence counsel asked: "Could it be believed that C.O. 27 Madras would withhold him and another officer (Capt. Thomas) of 9 Sikh from going to their unit when the situation as alleged by the prosecution warranted the officers' presence in the unit? Capt. Nambiar did not even ask him (C.O. 27 Madras) as to why he was not allowed to proceed to his unit."

This particular G.C.M. which commenced on August 5, 1985 and was concluded on September 18, 1985, awarded reduction to ranks, rigorous imprisonment for 12 years and dismissal from the service to Naik Jarnail Singh; 10 years rigorous imprisonment and dismissal to Sepoy Malkiat Singh; 7 years rigorous imprisonment and dismissal to Sepoys Jagtar Singh, Avtar Singh, Charan Singh and Ranjit Singh. And 5 years rigorous imprisonment and dismissal to Sepoy Gurmez Singh.

14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL)

14 Punjab (Nabha Akal) is another unit, which reverberated with the tremors of mutiny. It is a mixed class unit with 75 per cent Sikhs and 25 per cent Dogras. The Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Ayyappan Pillai, Vishwanathan, having served with the unit for 20 long years, knew the unit inside out. He had been commanding Nabha Akal since September, 1982. The Subedar Major Hony. Lt. Piara Singh was on leave for one month at the time of the happening and Subedar Tara Singh was officiating in his place. The unit was located at Pune.

Col. Vishwanathan held his monthly sainik sammelan (darbar) on June 6, 1984, during which, he informed his troops about the general situation in Punjab. Knowing full well that both rail and road traffic to Punjab was suspended, he unwittingly told his jawans in the darbar that any one wanting to go on leave to Punjab could put up his request.

Lt. Gen. T.S. Oberoi G.O.C.-in-C Southern Command (located at Pune) called the C.O. 14 Punjab to his office at 9.30 a.m. on June 8 to give him a briefing about the situation in Punjab. In his briefing, the General emphasised certain important points: "one; the army has taken the correct action in entering the Golden Temple to catch hold of the extremists and suffered heavy casualties. Two; we cannot allow our country to disintegrate. Three; take your officers and JCOs into confidence and advise them that the men should not be allowed to be swayed by the rumours and false propaganda."

On returning to the unit, the C.O. passed on the points to the officiating Subedar Major for passing them on to the JCOs. He also told Sub. Tara Singh that he would like to speak to all the JCOs on the evening of 9th in the JCOs' mess. Col. Vishwanathan, then called all the officers of his unit and passed on Army Commander's points to them. He also cautioned them to keep a discreet watch on the activities of their men. To the JCOs in the JCOs' mess on 9th, he told what he had told the officers on the 8th. An army commander is too senior an officer to brief a battalion commander. The mere fact that General Oberoi considered it necessary to talk to the C.O. personally on this subject, shows that he did not want the latter to leave any stone unturned to prevent mutiny or desertion in his unit. From the trend of things in the unit on 8th and 9th, it seemed that Gen. Oberoi's advice was not followed in letter and spirit. Col. Vishwanathan's idea of talking to the JCOs in their mess was most bizarre and dissipated the importance of such a serious subject. A mess, whether of officers or of JCOs, is a forum for informal gatherings and not for discussing a matter of such a serious nature.

On June 10 (Sunday), C.O. attended the Gurdwara in the morning; where about 250 jawans were present. Dogra jawans of the unit attended the mandir function at the same time. The gurdwara function was over by about 10 O'clock. If it was presumed by the C.O. and other officers that all was well in the unit, they should, to put it mildly, be graded very poor leaders of men by any standard. This is one unit, where mutiny should not have occurred, because no less a person than the Army Commander had cautioned the C.O. personally and that too well in advance. Besides this Col. Vishwanathan had the advantage of serving with the unit for over two decades and knowing his men well. But, alas, the events proved that his hold over his men, if anything, was non-existent.

According to Col. Vishwanathan's own statement made before

the court: at about 9.15 p.m. on June 10, he received telephone call from the officiating Subedar Major, Sub. Tara Singh that about 50 men from the unit lines had rushed towards the unit quarterguard and he (Tara Singh) had requested him (C.O.) to come to the unit soon. He then rushed in his car to the unit and saw 50 to 60 men in the rear verandha of the quarterguard shouting slogans. Firing of a few rounds was also heard from the quarterguard area. He also noticed 50 to 60 men in the magazine (a building where ammunition is stored). And heard them shouting 'bole so niha!' and firing a few rounds.

Seeing the scenario in the unit, the C.O. (according to his statement) rushed to fetch his second-in-command (2.I.C.) Maj. Ram Krishna. Strangely, he considered it necessary to go himself to fetch the Major rather than sending word to him (2.I.C.) through someone. By resorting to this unconventional method of summoning an officer, he lost valuable time and perhaps the last chance to forestall the macabre drama that followed. But for such an action, no doubt, a commander has to have guts and an indomitable personality, which the Col. unfortunately, did not seem to possess.

After fetching his 2 IC, the C.O. rushed with him to the unit lines. "I asked him to assist me in preventing the men from going out," Col. Vishwanathan told the court. "On reaching the Mechanical Transport (M.T.) park main gate, I parked my car. I observed that the first four vehicles were already loaded with the men who were firing in the air and raising slogans like 'Bhindranwale Zinda-bad', 'Bole so niha!', Indira Gandhi murdabad' and 'Sat sari akal'. I and my 2 IC tried to stop them. I shouted at the top of my voice 'mat jao, sab pakre jayenje' (don't go, you will all be caught). They in turn, shouted, 'charha do kar ke upar aur mar dalo (mount the vehicle on the car and kill him). Immediately thereafter, the vehicles started moving out of the M.T. gate one by one. About nine vehicles had gone out from the M.T. gate. I then got the report that 127 men had deserted with arms and ammunition.

At about 5.30 in the morning on June 11, I received a message from the Brigade Major (B.M.) Headquarter 76 Infantry Brigade that one group of 61 men had been apprehended near Thane by 13 Mahar personnel with six vehicles, while the remaining group had proceeded towards Ahmadabad. I was also informed that during an exchange of fire three men of 14 Punjab and one man of 13 Mahar were killed.

Subsequently, while carrying out my preliminary investigations, I was told by Sepoy Ran Singh who was present in the gurdwara in

the evening of June 10, that 40 to 50 men had gathered in the gurdwara in the evening and were briefed by Hav. Baldev Singh. In his briefing, the NCO told the men about the Punjab atrocities and massacre by the Army in the Golden Temple. He then told them that he would do 'ardas' and they must reach Amritsar." Col. Vishwanathan told the court. When the court asked him, why he did not control 133 men, who had gone berserk, with the help of other men of the unit, his answer was: "I did not consider it necessary to control the situation with the help of other men."

When asked in his cross-examination by the defence counsel, Lt. Col. Ajaib Singh, B.A., LL.B. (Retired) why he promised leave to the jawans, when all trains to Punjab had been cancelled, Col. Vishwanathan had no answer. He also divulged to the defence counsel: "On June 6, my only information about Operation Bluestar was whatever was reported in the newspapers or on T.V. or radio. I had no official information about the operation." To another question his answer was: "Army Commander had informed me on June 8 that certain units had deserted in western command and he (Army Commander) did not want that to happen in his command. I assured him that nothing of the sort will happen in my unit." Yet while answering another question he said: "I did not address the men, because I did not consider it necessary. I did not expect an unfortunate thing like this to happen in my unit." It seems the C.O. was hesitant and jittery. For that reason, he left the unit to fetch his second-in-command.

Unfortunately in almost all the units where mutiny took place, the leadership structure, as brought out in the evidence, was weak and totally incapable of handling the troops in a crisis. The C.O. while answering a question by the court said: "Although 133 men of my unit were in such an activity, yet I did not consider it necessary to control the situation with the help of other men from my unit." The officers of the unit started coming to the unit only after the men had already left.

In his statement to the court, Major Ram Krishna, second-in-command of the unit said that the men in the departing vehicles were shouting: "sadda dharam nahi rehea (our religion is no more). Asi Amritsar Jana hai (we have to go to Amritsar)" That four other ranks left their families behind in the station and one of them (wives) was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, proves how mentally upset they were. They not only kept their wives in the dark about the impending desertion, but they did not even divulge the plan to their close relations serving in the same unit. Surprisingly,

eight orderlies of officers/JCOs also deserted without the latter having any inkling about their plan.

Major B.M. Channan of 14 Punjab, who was the duty officer on June 10, said in his statement: "I was living in the officers' Mess. I saw the C.O. coming to the Mess and picking up the second-in-command. I also went to the unit immediately on my scooter." He adds that though he tried to locate the C.O. in the unit lines, he did not find him there until 11.00 p.m.

In their encounter with 2 Kumaon, 14 out of the deserters were killed, 29 injured and 25 apprehended. Eleven other ranks (4 NCOs, 7 Sepoys) were tried by this General Courtmartial under Army Act Section 37 (b) and 36 (d). Their trial commenced on June 19, 1985 and was concluded on July 10, 1985.

In his closing address, the defence counsel emphasised that the accused are charged under Army Act Section 37 (b), 'joining a mutiny in the military forces of India, in that they together, at Pune on 10 June 1984, in company with a member of other NCOs and sepoy of their unit, in a mutinous spirit, and carrying arms and ammunition, marched out of unit lines in Government vehicles, towards Amritsar. The second-charge under Army Act Section 36 (b) against one accused is leaving his guard without orders from his superior officer, in that he, at Pune, between 2100 and 2200 hours, on 10 June 1984, when on guard duty at quarterguard of the unit, quit his guard without orders from his superior officer.'

The defence counsel brought out that in applying different yard stick to punish personnel of the same unit, Article 14 of the Indian Constitution has been totally violated. He then read out the provision of Article 14 which he said says, that the State shall not deny to any person equality, before the law within the territory of India. He further said that the Article is contained in Part III- Fundamental Rights (Articles 14-16) Right of Equality. He also explained that equality before law, of course, has to be within a particular distinctive group. And is aptly applicable to the 14 Punjab disciplinary cases where some personnel were being tried by G.C.M. while others who had committed the same offence under Army Act Section 37 (b) were being tried by summary courtmartial or being dealt with summarily.

Noting 'inequality' in the application of disciplinary action against the deserting jawans, the defence counsel pointed out that while eleven accused charged under Army Act Section 37 (b) are being tried by this general courtmartial, 63 have already been tried by summary courtmartial, 61 out of them under the same Army Act

Section i.e. 37 (b) and one each under Army Act Section 37 (a) and 37 (d). All of them have been awarded punishment ranging from 2-10 months. A Havaldar, who has been tried under Army Act Section 37 (a) much severer section than Army Act Section 37 (b) has been awarded only ten months and 15 days rigorous imprisonment. Yet another forty one have been dealt with summarily by the Commanding Officer under Army Act Section 63 and four of them have been awarded 28 days rigorous imprisonment, while 37 men have been awarded only 14 days detention. The personnel dealt with leniently, include havaldars, naiks and sepoys who were on guard and other important duties. No reasons for invoking double-standard for dealing with the other ranks in the same unit (who have committed the same offence) have been explained. This equivocal action, thus, brazenly violates the provisions of Article 14.

Col. Ajaib Singh, thereafter, quoted and read out the letter written by Field Marshal Auchinleck to GOs.C-in-C commands and senior British officers after commuting the sentence of transportation awarded to Capt. Shah Nawaz, Capt. Sahgal and Lt. Dhillon in the INA trials. He also quoted Queen Victoria's proclamation issued after the mutiny of 1857 and pleaded for a lenient action against the accused, all of whom had very good record of service but unfortunately, were caught in a turmoil not of their own creation. This plea was taken by defence counsels in almost all the courtmartial.

The General courtmartial, however, awarded punishments ranging from four to 12 years to all the eleven accused.

171 FIELD REGIMENT

In the first week of June 1984, the regiment was located at Siliguri, but its advance party after having moved to the new location of the regiment, was located at Alwar (Rajasthan). Major Rao second-in-command of the regiment was the advance party commander at Alwar. The commanding officer, Lt. Col. Ashish Dubey arrived at Alwar after nearly five days of the occurrence of the ugly incident of mutiny.

The personnel of the advance party were perturbed on getting the news of curfew in the entire state of Punjab and curtailment of all communications including postal. The rumours about the security forces committing atrocities on people in the villages helped in snowballing the weird situation created by storming of the Golden Temple by the Army. Although Maj. Rao came to know that the troops were feeling restive and sullen on June 7, he or the other

officers with the advance party did not try to assuage their hurt feelings by talking to them.

The situation continued to deteriorate from 7th onwards. Late in the evening on June 8, a party of unit athletes joined the advance party at Alwar. It seems this party had picked up wild rumours during their journey about the happenings in Punjab. The rumours were spread in the unit on 9th and 10th. The news of 9 Sikh mutiny, perhaps, was the proverbial last straw in the already deteriorating situation. And then late in the evening on June 10, the walls of the kote as well as the room in which ammunition was lying were broken to make an opening with the help of crow bars. Arming themselves with nineteen 7.62 rifles, 25 stenguns and a large quantity of ammunition, 27 other ranks left the unit in two 3 ton vehicles with the intention of reaching Punjab. They were, however, apprehended by the civil police at Viratnagar and Palsana village in Rajasthan. One havaldar out of them, Hav. Sital Singh, was killed in firing, 15-20 bullet marks were found on his dead body.

Four separate General courtsmartial were held at Alwar to try the mutineers. While Lt. Col. Ajaib Singh was the defence counsel in two G.Cs.M., Major Trilok Singh Grewal defended the other two. The charge in three general courtsmartial was framed under Army Act Section 37 (b) for joining in a mutiny in the military forces of India, and 19 other ranks were tried by these courtsmartial.

Interestingly, Lt. Col. Ashish Dubey, C.O. 171 Field Regiment volunteered to appear as a defence witness in one G.C.M. which tried four of his jawans. He stated before the court: "I know (1) No. 14456074L Gnr. (L/Nk) Mohinder Singh, (2) No. 14452631K Gnr. (L/Nk) Balwant Singh, (3) No. 1266206X, DMT (L/Nk) Nazar Singh and (4) No. 14347403A DMT, Satvir Singh of my Regiment, whom I identify as accused 1,2,3, and 4 respectively; present before the court.

I know accused 1 and 2 intimately. Accused 1 was a member of the mountaineering expedition to FREY-PEAK in West Sikkim. He was one of the soldiers who finally climbed the peak and brought laurels to the unit. Accused 2 is an exceptionally gifted athlete. Because of him, my unit did well in the Division athletics championship. He was also a member of the cross-country race (Khad Race) and due to our performance in the Corps, the unit received special commendation from the G.O.C. of our Mountain Division. He is one of the best light machine gun (LMG) shots of

my Regiment and due to him, the unit won the shooting competition.

Due to the performance of accused 1 and 2, the unit received the trophy of the Mountain Artillery Brigade.

Accused 3 and 4 are also hard working and due to their hard work at high altitude and in the uncongenial climate area, the unit received special commendation both from the brigade commander and the G.O.C.

Accused 1 and 2 are above average in their professional skill."

The statement shows that Col. Dubey had great appreciation for the good work of his troops. From his statement one is led to think that his troops must be liking him, because of his love for them. It was bad luck for the unit that he was not at Alwar when his troops mutinied. Had he been there, it was quite possible that he would have dissuaded his jawans from leaving the unit for Punjab, by counselling them sympathetically.

The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi wrote a letter to Sepoy Satvir Singh (accused No. 4). The English translation of the letter which was in Hindi is as under:-

Prime Minister's House,
New Delhi
16 Oct., 1984.

Dear Shri Satvir Singh,

I am sorry to know that you got hurt during the recent military operation. As you know, this act was done to maintain the integrity of our country and to keep sanctity of our religious places.

The Nation is proud of young people like you; who faced so many dangers with bravery. I wish and pray to God that he should give you strength and courage to fight the hardships. Get well soon.

With best wishes,

Sep. Satvir Singh,
No. 14347403
171 Field Regiment
c/o 56 APO.

Sd/ x x x
(Indira Gandhi)

The character of almost all the accused as noted in their conduct sheets — produced before the court — was found as exemplary. In the three courtmartial which tried 19 other ranks, nine OR were awarded twelve years rigorous imprisonment with dismissal, while dismissal and rigorous imprisonment for ten years

was awarded to the remaining ten. In the fourth G.C.M., Hav. Baldev Singh was charged under Army Act Section 37 (a) for inciting mutiny. But he was acquitted. A revision of the trial was ordered; in which acquittal was maintained. These general court-martials were held in April-May 1985. Most of the accused were not allowed to meet the defence counsel until they named him. Some of them did not even know that they could be defended.

Major Trilok Singh Grewal, defence counsel in two G.Cs.M., at Alwar attributes severe punishment (10 to 12 years) awarded by the court-martial at Alwar to two factors. First, the lawyers defending the accused were not that well prepared in April 1985. Secondly, the Rajiv-Longowal Punjab accord did not exist at that time.

SOME MORE DETAILS

It was gathered from Maj. Grewal that nearly 50 trials were held to try the Sikh jawans at various stations in the country. Namely Allahabad, Alwar, Bareilly, Jammu, Jabbalpur, Pune, Rajouri, Siliguri and Suratgarh. And in addition to the defence counsels already mentioned in this book, Mr. R.S. Sodhi and Mr. Hardev Singh, both practising lawyers at the Supreme Court and Col. N. S. Bains were among those who covered certain trials of the army jawans.

It is reported that in 8 Sikh at Rajouri, Major Khanna was shot at. In one of the artillery units at Dehradun, the jawans held an Akhand path (non-stop recital of the Sikh religious book) for Bhindranwale. For this act, four to five men were tried by summary court-martial and awarded rigorous imprisonment for one year.

In yet another unit, 3 Sikh, it is reported that after the news of Bhindranwale's death came on the radio, the officiating commanding officer, Major Malhotra assembled the unit for his address. While informing the jawans about the army's success in the Golden Temple, he showered choicest epithets on the dead Bhindranwale and sarcastically told the jawans that any one out of them who did anything untoward, will meet the same fate as Bhindranwale. Once the assembly was dispersed, the jawans took to their arms and one of them shot down Major Malhotra. The battalion which was located in the eastern sector was then surrounded by the other army units and disarmed.

Letters are now coming to the imprisoned jawans that Army Headquarter have decided to take a compassionate view of all those, who were convicted. They can, therefore, put up petitions

for remission of punishment. The author saw one such letter dated March 27, 1986 addressed to Sepoy Bhag Singh of 18 Sikh now undergoing imprisonment in Burial jail near Chandigarh.

CHAPTER — FOUR

A GLIMPSE OF THE SIKH REGIMENT

ORIGIN AND HISTORY

To know the past record of a Sikh Soldier, it is essential to delve into the history of the Sikh Regiment.

The Sikh Regiment is one the oldest infantry regiments of our Army with a glorious tradition of 140 years, earned with undaunted courage, bravery, discipline, loyalty and supreme sacrifice for the nation. The regiment derives its roots from the ideals propounded and bequeathed by the "Ten Gurus", particularly Guru Gobind Singh, who administered the baptism of sword to the Sikhs.

1 Sikh and 2 Sikh — the first two Sikh Battalions — were raised in 1846 from the remnants of the old Khalsa Army at the close of the first Anglo-Sikh war. They were first named as Ferozepore and Ludhiana regiments respectively; but were later changed to 14th (Ferozepore) Sikh Infantry and 15th (Ludhiana) Sikh Infantry. Subsequently 45 Rattrays Sikh (1855), 36 Sikh (1887) and 47 Sikh (1901) were redesignated as 3rd, 4th and 5th Battalions of the Sikh Regiment in that order. 35 Sikh (1887) was converted into a training battalion and located at Nowshera in 1922, whereas the other Sikh battalions were amalgamated and designated as the 11th Sikh Regiment in the same year (1922).

In 1945, the training battalion was renamed as the Sikh Regimental Centre. It moved from Nowshera Cantt to Ambala Cantt in August 1947 and then to Meerut Cantt in 1952. In 1976, it moved to Ramgarh in Bihar. The class composition of the Regiment is mainly Jat Sikhs; but some of the battalions did have Punjabi-Muslims and Pathans, who went over to Pakistan after the partition. In exchange, the Sikh companies of the two regiments (Punjab Regiment and Frontier Force Rifles) which went to Pakistan's share were transferred to the Sikh Regiment.

HIGHEST TALLY OF GALLANTRY AWARDS IN THE INDIAN ARMY

The Sikh Regiment has an enviable and inspiring battle record. It has an impressive array of 76 battle/theatre honours and an equally distinguished record of gallantry with 9 Victoria Crosses

(VC) and 34 Military Crosses (MC) awards of prepartition days. Its tally of awards after independence, is 2 PVC, 12 MVC and 56 Vrc, making a total of 70 which is the highest in the Indian Army. The next highest award winning regiment is the Punjab Regiment with a tally of 17 MVC and 44 Vrc; a total of 61. The number of posthumous award winners of the Sikh Regiment which is 31, is also the highest in the Indian Army. Not only that, out of the Indian Army units again, 1 Sikh towers with a tally of 31 awards (PVC-1, MVC-9, Vrc-21). The next unit in the order of merit is 1 Patiala (RS) Infantry (now merged in Punjab Regiment) with a tally of 26 (MVC-8, Vrc-18). These figures are taken from the Encyclopaedia of Soldiers with Highest Gallantry Awards published by City House Journals and Encyclopaedias, Publishers of The Defence Review, New Delhi.

An impressive War Memorial made of white marble and red stone symbolising the “QUOIT AND KHANDA” traditional weapon of the Khalsa, which was unveiled by the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on April 14, 1958 at Meerut and subsequently re-erected at Ramgarh Cantt, bears testimony to the supreme sacrifice and devotion to duty of the Sikh soldier.

A mention of some of the customs and traditions from which the soldier of the Sikh Regiment draws inspiration seems essential. The custom of keeping the beard and hair unshorn dates back to 1699, when the tenth Guru issued a “Hukamnama” asking his followers to converge at Anandpur Sahib for the festival of the first Baisakhi. Similarly, the greetings “waheguru ji ka khalsa wahe guruji ki fateh” (The Khalsa are chosen of the God, victory be to our God), was first uttered by Guru Gobind Singh. The five emblems for the Khalsa — kesh, kanga, kachh, kara and kirpan — were introduced by Guru Gobind Singh. The Guru raised an army of soldier-saints (Sant-Sipahi) that would wield arms only for a righteous cause. This remains the ideal of the Sikh Regiment till today.

REMINISCENCES OF BRITISH OFFICERS

Interestingly, the regiment still maintains venerable ties with the British officers and erstwhile states of Patiala, Kapurthala Nabha and Faridkot. Sikh Brigade Dinner is held every year in London at which a toast is drunk to the regiment. A Sikh Brigade news letter is published every year to maintain the links with the glorious past.. This relationship can be best described in the words of Lt. Gen. Harbakhsh Singh, Vrc, Padma Bhushan. “In the

Malayan Campaign in early 1942, I was serving with five-eleven Sikhs and General Barstow, an ex-British officer of the Sikh Regiment was our divisional commander. During the last stages of the retreat towards the island of Singapore when the troops were none too steady in defence, Gen. Barstow ordered the battalion to hold on to the vital point in the defensive system, until further orders. Having given this order, he returned to his Headquarters and in due course the situation became such, that the battalion was completely surrounded by the enemy, and all communications with the divisional headquarters had broken down. At this stage, General Barstow decided to order our withdrawal, but could not find anyone to deliver the message, as the enemy were everywhere. Knowing the Sikh troops would never withdraw without an order, and having a special concern for the welfare and safety of the Sikh troops with whom he had at one time served, he decided to deliver the message himself. Jumping on to a railway trolley with his General Staff Officer grade I (GSO-I) and his Sikh orderly (Sep. Deva Singh), he started towards our besieged battalion. But he never reached us, as on the way, he was ambushed and killed."

Besides professional competence, the only other secret to command men with dignity and respect is to hold them in high esteem. Yet another example of love and deep affection of an officer for his men is reproduced in the words of Lt. Gen. Sir Reginald Savory recorded by him on February 8, 1968 in India:-

"I joined the 14th Sikhs fifty four years ago in 1914, when I was only just twenty years old.

"Now in 1968, when I am nearly seventy four, you ask me for my reminiscences. They are too many for me to re-capitulate in any detail. In fact, I have already written some of my memories of Gallipoli (1915) in the annual newsletter and there is little that I can add to them.

"If I may say so, my main memory of my life in the Indian Army, particularly during my service with the colours of the Sikh Regiment, is one of a relationship between officer and man which has seldom, if ever, been achieved in the history of any army, and it is this, which I will always remember. Let me give you one instance.

"Only this morning (8th February) Lance Naik Bhola Singh of the 14th Sikh, who had been wounded in Gallipoli in 1915, took the trouble to come all the way from his home to call upon me; and after 52 years we saw each other again. I was deeply touched, not only at having the great pleasure of seeing him again, but also at

the thought of all the trouble he had taken to come and see me. When he was wounded he and I were both young men. Now he is a "chitti dari walla" and I am old and bald; but although we have both grown so much older, yet our affection for each other and our mutual pride in our old Regiment stays as young as ever. Long may this continue

Wahe guru ji ka khalsa
Wahe guruji ki fateh"

Sd/- x x
(R.A. Savory)
8 February, 1968.

Significantly, this is what Maj. Gen. B.W. Key, CB, DSO, MC, another ex-British Officer writes from Naini Kent (U.K.) to the Sikh Regimental Centre. "I have just finished the 'History of the 14th K.G.O. Ferozapore Sikhs' for the 8th time. It is wonderful reading and should be read by every officer in the Regiment, not that the other battalions have not distinguished themselves equally, but owing to the war and white ants etc., my other histories have disappeared. It illustrates leadership at its best — the evacuation and defeat in Burma and the victorious return under appalling conditions.

"I continue in good health. I motored to my family in Scotland by myself some 1500 miles altogether. I spent 2 nights with Col. and Mrs. Neep (15th) and two nights with Brig. and Mrs. Dinwiddie. There were much talks about the good old days — what a mess the world is now in. I think it is the spirit of the Regiment which keeps me going and still to play golf and garden. My fatehs and best wishes to you all and again my thanks for 'The Sikh' and all it contains."

'The Sikh' is a publication of the Sikh Regimental Centre.

SPEECH OF ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET THE EARL MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA IN HONOUR OF THE 500th BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY OF GURU NANAK

"I am very glad that I and my two daughters can be here tonight to join in the tribute to Guru Nanak on the 500th anniversary of his birth and at the same time to pay a tribute to all the Sikhs

"The Archbishop of Canterbury has stressed the religious aspect so I thought it would be best if I were to talk about the role of the Sikhs in the Services.

"But first I would like to talk about the 15th century in India when Guru Nanak was born. This was dark period when the Indians were divided among themselves and demoralised. They worshipped many Gods and were shackled by superstitions. Then Guru Nanak came and proclaimed 'There is but one God, whose name is truth — the Creator, devoid of fear and enmity, immortal, unborn, self-existent, great and bountiful'.

"What a wonderful creed to preach. Although it is accepted by the Government of India, we all know that the problem of untouchability still remains a problem in practice. Guru Nanak dealt with it when he said 'There is only one Father, the Father of us all, and we are all his children — recognise that all the human race is one.'

"In those days women were vilely treated and regarded largely as the chattel of men. Guru Nanak proclaimed the equal status of women with men. He said 'Men are born of women, nourished by women, wedded to women, why do they revile women? How can women be called inferior when they give birth to Kings and Prophets?'

"Now to deal with the Services, and the Navy first. During my time as Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, the Sikhs serving in the Royal Indian Navy increased by 70 percent, which was the highest percentage increase of any community in India. Sikh soldiers fought alongside the Naval Brigade in 1858. The Sikhs have been recognised by the Navy in that a torpedo boat built in 1888 at Cowes for the Royal Indian Marine was christened the "Sikh". The second ship to be called "Sikh" was a destroyer built by Fairfields 30 years later in 1918. She served at the end of war in the Dover patrol.

"The third warship to be called "Sikh" was a very large destroyer of nearly 2,000 tons, built by Alexander Stephen 20 years later in 1938. This fine destroyer had received seven battle honours in World War II before she was finally sunk off Tobruk in September, 1942 after having fought for three years in war.

"Now to deal with the Army:

"The Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, founded in 1699 the Khalsa as they had to fight to protect themselves. 147 years later, in 1846 new Regiments were raised from the remnants of the Khalsa who were given the title of the 14th Ferozepore Sikhs and 15th Ludhiana Sikhs.

"In 1856 the 45th Rattrays were raised and these three Regiments formed the Sikh Brigade. In 1887 two more battalions were

raised, the 35th and 36th, and in 1901 yet another battalion, the 47th Sikhs. These three formed a second Sikh Brigade which fought in World War I. They received nine battle honours for fighting in France and 11 for fighting in the Middle East.

"During the time I was visiting India with the Prince of Wales in 1922 I remember the Indian Army reorganisation took place. Two Sikh Brigades were amalgamated and new battalion numbers were issued. For example, the 14th Sikh became the 1st Battalion of the Sikh Regiment and the 15th became the 2nd battalion.

"In World War II the Sikh Regiment and the Sikh Light Infantry distinguished themselves greatly as did the many Sikhs serving in the Gunners, Engineers and in Signals.

"I remember after the victory of Imphal, going round to congratulate the various troops who had fought. I came across a mountain battery from the State forces of Patiala. I noticed that the men all looked at me with a particular veneration and in rather a special way. I said to the Major in command 'Why do your men appear to have such an extra regard for me?' He replied 'Sahib, they think you are Lord Mountain Battery'.

"I should now like to take an opportunity of saying how very pleased I am to see my old friend the Maharaja of Patiala here. It is a great thing that the Government of India have sent him officially to represent the Sikhs at this celebration in London. He is of course a Lt. Gen. in the Indian Army. Incidentally, I would like to say that I recently saw the Maharaja of Kapurthala who is a serving Major in the Indian Army and at present doing the course at the Joint Services Staff College at Latimer. The Commandant recently told me, His highness was doing very well there.

"The Sikh Regiment achieved no less than 65 Battle Honours and they celebrate as Battle Honour Day the 12th September which they call Saragarhi Day to commemorate the heroism of 21 Sikhs who fought to the death in 1897 in a fight with the Orakazi tribe in the North West Frontier.

"The first person to win a Victoria Cross in the Sikh Regiment was a very distinguished young British officer now Brigadier Sir John Smyth, I am very glad, indeed, to see he is at the Dinner tonight and I hope we shall hear from him later.

"In the Abyssinian campaign in the second world war, 2nd Lt. Prem Bhagat, an engineer, won the Victoria Cross. He is now Lt. Gen. Prem Bhagat, V.C. Havildar Umrao Singh won the V.C. as a Gunner, fighting under my command in the Arakan. He retired as a Subedar Major. Naik Nand Singh of the 1st Sikhs put up a wonder-

ful feat of gallantry in March 1944 fighting at Buthidaung where he captured three Japanese trenches and bayoneted six Japanese machine-gunners single-handed. Naik Gian Singh also won a splendid V.C.

"The recently retired Chief of the Indian Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh, won the first Distinguished Flying Cross in Burma and I had the privilege of investing him with the ribbon at his Air Station.

"On the 4th May 1946, the 1st Sikhs trooped the Colours to celebrate Centenary of their formation, at Kuala Lumpur. I went up with my elder daughter, Patricia, to take the salute and I must say I have never seen the Colour trooped better by any body of men even our own foot Guards in London.

"Today I believe there are fourteen battalions of the Sikh Regiment and ten battalions of the Sikh Light Infantry as well as Sikhs in other arms of the army and, of course, serving in the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force.

"Sikhs formed the mainstay of my Bodyguard when I was Viceroy and then Governor General, and if any of you have seen Programme 9 of the television series of my life and times you will see what a prominent part they played in this programme when I went out of India in 1967.

"I went all round the Far East and to different parts of the world where events had occurred of interest in my life. I spent a week in Malta because, of course, I had spent so many years there with the Mediterranean Fleet. I was asked by the local T.V. station if I would grant a T.V. interview and I agreed. The interviewer said to me 'Lord Mountbatten, I understand you are here in connection with the making of a television series entitled The Life and Times of Lord Mountbatten. Is this correct?' I replied, 'Yes'. The interviewer then said 'Lord Mountbatten, would you mind telling me what role you are playing in this?'

"Finally I would like to say that the last Guard of Honour I received in India in June 1948 was from the Sikh Regiment when I finished my term of office as the First Constitutional Governor-General.

"So you will see the Sikhs are closely identified with my time in India and Burma and I shall forever be grateful to them for their gallantry and support. I admire the Sikhs very much and I should like to take this opportunity of wishing them all very well."

BATTLE OF SARAGARHI, A UNIQUE EXAMPLE OF BRAVERY

Out of the myriad examples of bravery is the Battle of Saragarhi, 1897. It is a story of twenty one heroes who thought nothing of their lives when it came to devotion to duty. Each one of them preferred death of surrender.

Saragarhi was a small communication post on Samana Ridge in the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP). The post commander was Hav. Ishar Singh and he had 20 men under his command. On September 10, 1897, the tribals started gathering and by September 12, their number rose to 25,000. They started attacking the Fort from early morning. The Sikhs fought valiantly. Charge after charge was repulsed. Many alluring promises were made to them by the Chief of the Tribesmen. But Ishar Singh and his men spurned them disdainfully. They preferred to fight to the last.

Finally, the number of the defenders dropped to a single man. And that was Sep. Gurmukh Singh. Shouting "Wahe Guruji ka Khalsa Wahe Guruji ki Fateh" he fought like a ferocious tiger till he fell to join his comrades in death.

This memorable act of rare bravery and reckless courage evoked a plethora of public appreciation. All the newspapers in the country praised the sacrifice of the Saragarhi heroes. Three memorials, at Ferozepore, Amritsar and Saragarhi were raised in their memory from the funds collected through popular contributions.

The British Parliament gave a standing ovation when this act of unprecedented bravery was narrated to it. An immediate award of IOM to each of the Saragarhi heroes was announced.

In appreciation of the unmatched prowess of the twenty-one, September 12 was declared by the government, as a Regimental holiday for all the regiments enlisting Sikhs. The dependents of the Saragarhi heroes were granted an award of Rs. 500 and two morab-bas (one morabba is 4840 square yards) of land each.

The Saragarhi day continues to be celebrated by the Sikh Regiment.

TWO MEMORABLE BATTLES AGAINST PAKISTAN

No writer will find it easy to pick out any battle for narration, because any battle that one pores over, seems recordable. However, two famous battles of the post-Independence era against Pakistan, one in 1948 in J&K and the other in 1965 in Lahore sector stand out. The battle of Richmar Gali was fought in J&K. After the capture of Tithwal on May 23, 1948, 1 Sikh was ordered to occupy

Richmar Gali — a key feature. Encountering heavy opposition and difficult terrain, the Gali was secured by first light on May 28 and was then held in the face of determined counter-attacks by the enemy. Meanwhile, the remainder of the battalion occupied a ridge on the flank. On May 29, the assault on pt. 7802 and Miri Kalsi ridge commenced. The ridge being vital for the defence of Richmar Gali was held in strength by the enemy. But the Sikhs, after a dogged and bloody battle, vanquished the enemy.

Not reconciled to being thrown out from Miri Kalsi ridge, the enemy launched a fierce counter-attack on June 4. But 'A' Company of 1 Sikh repulsed the attack. There was only a probing attack by the enemy again on July 20, which too was beaten back. Thereafter, a lull prevailed till October 13, 1948.

To arouse his troops by giving a religious touch, Brig. Atta promised to present Tithwal as an 'ID' gift to Pakistan. Not to leave anything to chance, a brigade of the enemy was launched against the Sikh battalion. It seemed to be a very well-planned attack aimed at the capture of Richmar Gali as a prelude to bypassing Tithwal and advancing into the Srinagar valley over the Nas-tachun pass.

Between 6.00 a.m. and 4.00 p.m. on October 13, the enemy launched eight determined attacks. The battle hung in the balance time and time again. The enemy over-ran the forward posts resulting in hand to hand battle. But as soon as his momentum petered out, our small ably led groups, at times as small as a section, pounced upon the enemy in a desperate counter-attack. Seemingly, the audacity of these suicide groups carried the day and the enemy retreated after very heavy casualties.

In one day's battle, the ground battalion won one Param Vir Chakra and that was by L/Naik Karam Singh, MM; seven Vir Chakras and 13 Mention-in-Despatches. Of the eight attacks (by the enemy) mentioned above, the fifth was so determined that two of the attackers, who were outside Karam Singh's trench, could not be engaged by fire. Seeing this, he jumped out and bayoneted them to death. Not only that, Karam Singh dominated the scene throughout. The divisional commander General K.S. Thimayya (later Chief of the Army Staff) described the battle as a "Uniquely magnificent fight."

Coming to the other battle with Pakistan, on September 10, 1965, 4 Sikh was given the task to capture village Barki in Lahore sector. The village is located on the eastern bank of the Ichhogil canal on the Khalra-Lahore axis. The enemy positions around the

village were formidable, containing a chain of over a dozen concrete-pill-boxes, with about four feet thick walls. Each of them had a medium machine gun, a light machine gun, a rocket launcher and a few riflemen to man them.

The attack was launched at 8.00 p.m. No sooner had the attack started, the enemy opened up with mortars, artillery and automatic fire. The fire was so heavy that the assaulting companies could only move with great difficulty and that too in short spurts. They closed in on the objective by sheer grit and determination in the face of the raining bullets from the enemy. But seeing our troops closing on him, inspite of his showering bullets, the enemy got demoralised and panicky. On hearing the Sikh war cry a sizable number of the Pakistani troops ran back from their defences, while those in the pill-boxes froze from fright.

The attack continued despite heavy fire, from the pill-boxes south of the road and some other positions.

When 'B' company moved east of Barki, the enemy suddenly became alive in two pill-boxes. Showing presence of mind and undaunted courage, Subedar Jaswant Singh crawled forward and lobbed a grenade in the pill-box, killing all the three enemy inside. The other pill-box was surrounded by Subedar Gurdev Singh with two jawans and the enemy jawans inside were asked to surrender, which they promptly did.

Thus, the 4 Sikh captured Barki and enabled the Indian Army in Lahore sector to reach the Ichhogil canal. The casualties suffered by 4 Sikh were 2 officers wounded, 2 JCOs and 21 other ranks killed and ninety-four wounded. The battalion was awarded one Mahavir Chakra, 3 Vir Chakras, three Sena Medals and four Commendation Cards in the Barki battle.

Mahavir Chakra (posthumous) was awarded to Subedar Ajit Singh. He was given the task of destroying a gun emplacement which was holding up the attack. Totally disregarding his personal safety, he charged the emplacement single-handed. Although wounded in the chest by a burst of medium machine gun fire, he pressed home the attack and destroyed the post by lobbying a grenade through a loophole in the emplacement. This gallant act of the JCO not only silenced the enemy machine gun, but also inspired his comrades to destroy the enemy position. Subsequently, Subedar Ajit Singh succumbed to his injuries.

PARAM VIR CHAKRA (P.V.C)

The highest gallantry award of our country is the P.V.C. It is

awarded for most conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice in the face of the enemy. The award is what the Victoria Cross (V.C.) was during the pre-partition days. The Victoria Cross, the highest British award for valour, was instituted in January 1856. In 1911 the right to receive the Victoria Cross was extended to Indian soldiers. During World War II as many as 31 VCs were won by officers and men of the Indian Army as compared to 11 won during World War I.

SOME OF THE AWARD WINNERS

Late Naib Subedar Nand Singh, MVC, VC. The late Naib Subedar Nand Singh had the rare distinction of winning both the highest British award for valour, the Victoria Cross, during World War II, and the second highest gallantry award (Mahavir Chakra) of our country posthumously.

In March 1944, though six times wounded in an assault, Nand Singh, then a Naik, led the leading section of his company against Japs entrenched on a steep hillside in the Kalapanzin Valley in the Arakan. In the words of another Company Commander, "he literally carried the position single-handed", killing seven and capturing three trenches. He led his men up a very, steep Japs' knife-edged ridge. Although wounded in the thigh, he dashed forward and took the first trench single-handed at the point of the bayonet. He then crawled forward alone under heavy fire. A grenade busting in front of him wounded him in the face and shoulder, but he pushed on and took the second trench again at the bayonet point. A few minutes later, the whole of his section having been killed or wounded, Naik Nand Singh charged on to a third trench, captured it and killed the occupants with his bayonet. For this conspicuous act of bravery, he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The posthumous award of the Maha Vir Chakra was awarded to the Victoria Cross winner Naik Nand Singh less than four years later. On December 12, 1947 at Uri, when his battalion met the enemy in strength, occupying previously prepared bunker position and at the same time, carrying out an encircling movement. The fire was intense and his men were falling left and right of him, yet he pressed on and his men followed him, shouting cries of 'Sat Sri Akal', and closed-in on the enemy. A fierce and violent hand-to-hand fighting ensued. The band of brave stalwarts threw themselves on the enemy in rage, shouting war cry after war cry. This born leader, Nand Singh was the first to draw blood with his bayonet. Although wounded, he killed five of the enemy. By this

fine example his men were inspired to a frenzy of bayoneting the enemy on the right or left. The enemy broke down and fled, but very few of them could escape.

This brave JCO had captured his objective. But as he stood there on top of the bunker a burst of enemy LMG hit him in the chest and killed him on the spot.

L/Nk. (later Hony. Capt.) Karam Singh, Param Vir Chakra, M.M. L/Nk. Karam Singh already a recipient of the Military Medal, was awarded the Param Vir Chakra for outstanding courage and resourcefulness in beating back eight successive attacks during the J&K operations in 1948.

On October 13, 1948 he was commanding an outpost in the Tithwal area when an attack began after heavy shelling. Though outnumbered by 10 to 1, L/Naik Karam Singh kept his ground and beat off the attack.

There was a second attack shortly afterward. L/Naik Karam Singh's ammunition was running out, he himself and another in his Company had been wounded. There was no hope of any help coming to them owing to heavy enemy fire. Despite the heavy shelling, he brought back his men to the main position after a hand-to-hand grenade fight with the attackers.

At this stage, there was a further attack which was so fierce that not a single bunker in the main position was left intact; even the crawl trenches were filled up. Here, L/Naik Karam Singh fought the attackers whenever they came forward and moved from bunker to bunker encouraging those who were still unhurt.

By midday, there had been four attacks, in one of which L/Naik Karam Singh was wounded a second time.

The 5th attack was so determined that two of the attackers were just outside Karam Singh's trench. When they could not be engaged by fire, the L/Naik jumped out and bayoneted them.

There were eight attacks in all before the action was broken off, and Karam Singh dominated the scene throughout. In the words of the official citation, "He was an inspiration to his comrades and a terror for the enemy".

Subedar Joginder Singh, Param Vir Chakra (Posthumous). The posthumous award of Param Vir Chakra to Subedar Joginder Singh was given for the most conspicuous gallantry displayed by him in the fighting against the Chinese invaders in NEFA in 1962.

Subedar Joginder Singh was the commander of a platoon of the Sikh Regiment holding a defensive position at a ridge near Tong Pong La in NEFA. At 5.30 a.m. on October 23, the Chinese

launched a very heavy attack on the Bumla axis with the intension of breaking through to Towang. The leading battalion of the enemy attacked the ridge in three waves, each about 200 strong. The Subedar and his men mowed down the first wave, and the enemy was temporarily halted by the heavy losses it suffered. Within a few minutes, there was another wave of attack and this was also dealt with similarly. But the platoon had by then lost half of its strength.

Even though the Subedar was wounded in the thigh, he declined to be evacuated. Under his inspiring leadership, the platoon stubbornly held the ground and refused to withdraw. In the meantime, the position was attacked by a third-wave. The Subedar himself manned a light machine gun and shot down a number of enemy troops. They, however, continued to advance despite heavy losses. When the situation was becoming impossible, Joginder Singh and the few men left in the position, fixed their bayonets and rushed out towards the advancing Chinese and bayoneted a number of them before he and his comrades were over-powered.

"During this action, Subedar Joginder Singh throughout displayed devotion to duty, inspiring leadership and courage of the highest order," says the citation.

The Sikh soldier excels not only on the battle-field but also on the sport-field. By his skill, physical fitness, endurance and indomitable tenacity, he has brought laurels to his regiment, the services and the country in the world of sport, both at home and abroad. The latest tally is not readily available. But from independence till 1968, the Sikh Regiment had the distinction of winning for the country, as many as, 10 gold, 9 silver and 4 bronze medals.

The reader may, with a bated breath, like to ask an intriguing question at this stage: How come after a splendid performance for over a century and a half, the Sikh Soldier revolted in 1984?

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT CAUSED THE MUTINY?

THE INFLUENCES ON A SOLDIER'S MIND

To expect that the rank and file in the army will not be affected by the happenings in the country or in the state that they hail from, would be a fallacy. The Sikh troops, therefore, were not in the dark about the happenings in Punjab right from 1981. Besides this, today's soldier is quite well-informed about the political situation in the country due to his exposure to the burgeoning media coverage made handy to him in the unit lines — newspapers, magazines, radio and television.

Only a small percentage of jawans can bring their families to the station of their posting even in a peace station. In Infantry units only 14 percent jawans are authorised married accommodation in a peace station. On allotment of married accommodation to him, a jawan can live with his family only for one year, after which he has to vacate the accommodation to give a chance to others on the waiting list. When his spouse and children are away from him, which is a commonplace, barring a few exceptions as explained above, a jawan is naturally worried about their security and welfare. The only link that he has with his separated family is through letters. It is for this reason that the officers and JCOs are required to check whether a jawan writes letters home regularly and receives letters from his home regularly. This is an essential welfare point that the commanders are required to watch. During the days of the British, one of the commonest question that an officer would ask a jawan was "ghar se chithi aya" (have you received a letter from home?). If the answer was in the negative, a letter from the unit was promptly flung to the District Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen Board, to find out and report back the welfare of the jawan's family. Although this practice is still in vogue, not much importance is attached to it by the officers these days.

During his annual leave of 60 days in a year which he spends at home, a jawan meets his relations and friends, whose thinking and problems are bound to affect his mind. To think that the Akali morcha of 1982 and the subsequent events did not pour their fall-out on the Sikh jawan's mind, would be a facile assumption.

That a soldier — more so an Indian soldier — is deeply religious is undeniable. When we know that by putting his hand on the religious book, he is made to pledge his allegiance and loyalty to the country, his unit and his superiors at an attestation parade, which changes his status from a recruit to a sepoy on completion of his recruit training, how can he then be expected to pedal patience and sobriety, when the same religious book is being desecrated?

RELIGIOUS HURT AND LEADERSHIP FAILURE

It was in this context that the present chief of the Army Staff General Krishnaswami Sunderji who spearheaded the attack on the Golden Temple, said in an interview with 'India Today' in February 1986: "I don't think any other class of soldiers has passed through such a traumatic experience. Some people in the country — and in the service — speak loosely about Sikh loyalty and their need to re-establish their credibility. But the Sikhs have been through fire and have come out flying high. What hurts them are these kinds of patently unjustified doubts. The Sikhs don't need to make any further demonstrations (of loyalty)."

The hurt caused by the Golden Temple action was enormous. To expect the Sikh soldiers to withstand such a nightmarish shock without any preparation to face the trauma was an aberration on part of the commanders at various levels. In the same interview as cited above, Gen. Sunderji commented: "I'd attribute the primary cause to poor leadership in these units. There was a failure of command. The second reason was the unprecedented emotional trauma and pressures under which all Sikh troops were when the Golden Temple was entered."

The onslaught on the Golden Temple was too big an event. Religiosity of an Indian soldier can be gauged from the very small and insignificant happening like the one related by Lt. General R.S. Dayal, who conducted operation Bluestar under the overall command of Gen. Sunderji. "In the 1965 war with Pakistan, we went into an objective. There we saw some cows grazing. Suddenly the shelling started. One cow got hurt by a shell and I saw a jawan pulling out his field dressing and applying it to the cow."

Enough has already been said about the leadership failure at the unit level. But failure of the higher echelons of the Army has not been exposed. If, anything, their share to cause the mutiny was equally discernible. That the psychological factor of the Sikh troops' reaction to entry into the Golden Temple was not taken into consideration while planning the operation, was the biggest gaffe

which future historians will not lose sight of. The ostensible hiatus in not maintaining a link with the Sikh troops, when they were in peril besides being too obvious is unpardonable.

General Sunderji who was G.O.C.-in-C Western Command at that time said in the same interview referred to above: "From the outset it was a very sad thing. All of us hoped it would never come to this. But when I finally was charged with the mission I was convinced at that time that there was no other option. None. It was a duty to be performed." True, it was a duty to be performed and every soldier has to do that. Interestingly, however, Gen. Sunderji also said in the interview: "The very first battalion to enter the Golden Temple was the 10 Guards — half of its members are Jat Sikhs from Amritsar District. The fact that they went in and did such a magnificent job, notwithstanding the emotional turmoil within themselves, is the best indication of what army morale was like."

Taking Gen. Sunderji on his own statement, one would like to ask him that if Sikh soldiers of 10 Guards could be psychologically prepared to assault their sanctum sanctorum, how come the troops that were far away from the morbid scene could not even be prepared to a pitch, enabling them to take the disturbing news in their stride. If, anything, this amply exposes the failure of the higher commanders in their duty towards the troops.

What about the government failure? A politician can get away with his failure but not a soldier. Because the former is not in the habit of taking the blame for his doings. For the government to give assurances in both houses of the Parliament that the Army will not enter into the Golden Temple and then after only a few days ordering the Army into the Temple, put it in a very false position, apart from obfuscating its credibility in the eyes of the public.

Be that as it may, the necessity of ordering the Army into the Golden Temple would not have arisen if the Congress (I) Government did not play the game to cut the Akali Dal down to size by creating Bhindranwale. Ironically, when Bhindranwale became too strong and started posing a challenge to them, the Congress (I) Government was left with little option but to liquidate him. Sadly, the army jawans became the pawns in the power game.

There might have been very genuine reasons for cutting all communications between Punjab and the rest of the country during Operation Bluestar. But this affected the morale of the Sikh soldiers, because they could not travel to their homes even on leave. Lt. Gen. Harbaksh Singh (Retd.,) who has been Colonel of the Sikh Regiment for over twenty years had this to say: "They (Sikh

jawans) thought their villages were being attacked when they heard the announcement that the army was being deployed in Punjab." According to the General, the decision of the government to enter the Golden Temple at the time of the Gurprub (June 3) was ill-conceived. And this was one of the factors which led some soldiers to mutiny after the army action in the Golden Temple. In a statement to the press he said: "The martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev, being the epitome of supreme sacrifice in the face of extreme religious persecution, has a special significance for the Sikh soldiers."

Another retired General, Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha, who was superseded while he was Vice-Chief of the Army Staff to enable his junior General Vaidya to become Chief of the Army Staff said in a newspaper interview: "As far as the mutiny goes, I will squarely blame the officer corps, because they apparently did not know what their men, were thinking I am very clear in my mind on this issue. Officers must know their men better than their mothers. In this case, they obviously did not."

An officer's assurance to his men is always on these lines: "I assure you that I shall be with you in darkness and in sunshine in sorrow and in joy in suffering and in victory."

The court of inquiry conducted about the mutiny in the Sikh Regimental Centre Ramgarh brought out that there was no evidence of any attempt to subvert Sikh troops at Ramgarh by outside agencies. It placed the blame squarely on the officers and junior commissioned officers of the Sikh Regimental Centre. The fact emphasised by the inquiry was that it is impossible to isolate the troops from the influence at work in their towns and villages. It said: "The emergence of religious fundamentalism and linguistic chauvinism in many states, particularly in Punjab, would no doubt have its effect on troops hailing from that region, even when they are emotionally integrated, particularly in an organisation like the army."

After the officers in the various units were blamed by the courts of inquiry, the thinking at Army Headquarters started veering towards taking disciplinary action against them. While administrative action such as "censure" (displeasure or severe displeasure) has been taken against some officers, disciplinary action against a few others is yet to be taken.

In the Sikh Regimental Centre, where the Commandant, Brigadier S.C. Puri was killed by the deserting troops, disciplinary action against Col. Jagdev Singh, Lt. Col. H.S. Cheema, and at least nine

other officers (including seven officers of the rank of Major) is in progress. These officers were indicted by the court of inquiry. In 9 Sikh, where half a dozen officers were initially attached to other units, disciplinary action is pending only against the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. I.S. Sabherwal and the Subedar Major. Similarly, disciplinary action has also been initiated against the officers blamed for their lapses in 3 Sikh, 18 Sikh, 14 Punjab, 166 Mountain Regiment and 171 Field Regiment, where desertions took place.

THE RESTRUCTURING FACTOR

In an interview to the press after taking over as Chief of the Army Staff on February 1, 1986 General Sunderji emphatically denied that any sudden restructuring of the army was being undertaken after desertions in the wake of operation Bluestar. "Government policy is to have totally integrated all-caste units gradually," said the General.

True, in a democracy, martial class syndrome sounds rather facile. There seems to be no conceivable reason, why every class should not get an equal chance to contribute its mite to the country's armed forces. Since independence, a strong lobby among the politicians that want to bring about a change in the class composition of the army, has been at work. However, the old soldiers accustomed to one class regiments tend to feel that any change in the class composition of these regiments will dilute their old traditions, besides impinging upon their fighting efficiency.

Interestingly, a limited experiment of all class units was carried out in 1950, when certain one class infantry units were mixed up. The change, brought about almost all the classes together and most of them even in an infantry section — the smallest subunit. While fighting potential of this motley assemblage could be tested only in a war, different food habits of the jawans hailing from all over the country, did pose certain administrative problems in the new set-up.

Then, in the 1962 Indo-China war, when the new experiment of mixed class composition was put to test, it did not give a good account of itself. A British Brigadier who continued to serve in the Indian Army after the partition and was at the Army Headquarters then, remarked: "Now you know, why we did not go in for such a hotchpotch." Soon after the Chinese aggression, the mixed class units were reorganised on the zonal basis to put them on an even keel.

Stung by the national pride in the wake of the Chinese aggression, a minister from Punjab wrote to the Defence Minister that he

was pained not to find anyone from his tribe in arms to serve the country in the national emergency. This was enough to make the army's higher hierarchy pore over the records of the historical section to find out if that class had ever served in the army and if so with what results. Although, the recorded history did not lend credence to the exuberance of the enthusiastic politician, one company of his class did form part of a new raising.

While the administrative services' units did have mix of all classes even earlier, the combat units by and large, especially the infantry, continue to have a large number of one class regiments. Ironically, operation Bluestar not only lacerated the minds of the Sikh soldiers, but also made the political masters and army top brass sit up and think hard about the risks involved in having one class regiments in the army. Should the one class regiments be done away with to avoid a traumatic situation like the one created in the wake of Operation Bluestar? If so, would the mixed class units meet the requirement equally well during peace and war?

Indeed, in a sense, the mixed class units will be the answer during peace time to cater for all types of internal security situations. But before making up our minds, we must dig deep into the problem to ferret out the truth behind the odious mutiny; which was caused due to the hamhanded handling by the officers. It will, therefore, be a fatal miscalculation, if we take any decision to change the class composition by turning a blind eye to the gaffe of the officers who, to put it mildly, were the real culprits.

The question that needs to be asked is, which class composition will acquit itself more creditably against external aggression? Because the primary role of the army is to repel external aggression. A class composition which has stood the acid test and done the nation proud should not be shelved merely because it did not meet a particular internal security requirement. And that too, when we know the cause of the wrench which opened a pandora's box. In any case such requirements being of secondary nature should be met by raising all-caste para-military forces units.

All in all, while the present one class composition is a creation of our long battle experience, the proposed new one (all-caste) will be the creation of our crisis-ridden minds. We may, therefore, pause to mull over the problem before making a final resolve. What is perhaps needed is a laissez-faire approach by the politicians and a debate on the subject, punctuated by instances from the history, by a select committee of veteran soldiers.

In the final analysis, we must not forget that although religion

played an important part in inciting the 1857 mutiny, yet the Britishers did not entertain the idea of changing the class composition of the Indian Army. And with its one class combat units, our army fought gallantly in both the world wars, as also in the two Indo-Pak short wars after independence; proving undoubtedly to be one of the best fighting forces in the world.

SOME REFLECTIONS

It was a gross miscalculation on the part of the government that by liquidating or vanquishing Bhindranwale and his band of extremists in the Golden Temple, an end will be put to terrorism in Punjab. That the aim set by the government for itself was not achieved, is more than transparent today. The history will, therefore, mock at the planners for their ill-conceived aim. On the negative side, however, the damage caused by the operation was unprecedented not only in the loss of human lives, but also because it caused mutiny among the Sikh soldiers in particular and alienation of the Sikhs in general.

Coming to brass tacks of terrorism, history tells us that guerilla movements are in the habit of growing with external help. Many countries the world over (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Algeria, Malaya and Northern Ireland to name a few) have faced this nagging problem at one time or the other and our neighbour Sri Lanka is tasting it now must to its chagrin.

We, in this country too, had Nagaland and Mizoram experience, before we set ourselves on the path of tackling the problem of terrorism in Punjab. But it is a pity that we took no counsel from our past experience. One thing that we must be convinced about now is that no operation, be it "Bluestar", "woodrose" or "search" (police action of April 30, 1986) and for that matter even half a dozen more added to them will find any solution to terrorism. The only panacea that will cure the disease is a political solution. In retrospect, would it be correct to say that had there been no Bluestar, there would have been no mutiny?

MR. KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SPEECHES IN THE RAJYA SABHA

I now quote from the noted writer and historian Khushwant Singh's speeches in the Rajya Sabha.

"While paying my personal tribute to Mrs. Gandhi, I cannot overlook mentioning the fact that her killers were men entrusted to watch over her safety. They betrayed their sacred trust because

they were blinded by fanatic hate after what had happened in Amritsar in the first half of June.

"I have no hesitation in condemning this distardly act in the strongest of terms. I have on several occasions, described operation Bluestar as an error of judgement, and I am convinced that but for that one error of judgement we would not have had to pay so heavy a price as the loss of a Prime Minister, we all loved and respected and the loss of thousands of innocent lives that followed. Rulers have many hard decisions to take and Mrs. Gandhi must have weighed all the consequences before she made that fateful decision. However, I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that nothing would have hurt her more than to see that for a crime committed by two or more individuals, their entire community would be stigmatised. I fervently hope that our new rulers will honour the memory of our leader by seeing that the Sikhs are once again rehabilitated as trusted and loyal citizens of their motherland."

While speaking on Operation Bluestar and Punjab, Mr. Khushwant Singh said: "I have many unpalatable truths to tell Bear with me till I have finished, thereafter you will be more than welcome to refute them if you can. Although I am only a nominated member of this House and, therefore, the lowest of lower castes in this House, I make bold to assert that I speak on behalf of 14 million of your fellow citizens known as Sikhs. I go further; what you have heard and may hear from other Sikh members of the ruling party does not echo the sentiments of the community.

"We have had six hours of debate during which we have heard discourses on Punjab politics, Akali factionalism with a lot of recrimination between parties. There was total lack of a sense of gravity of the situation facing the country which is on the brink of an abyss, total absence of realisation that the country is breaking up, a total absence of any viable suggestion of what we should do.

"My heart is very full but I will be as unemotional and objective as I can. All I will say about the Army action is that it was a tragic error of judgement, a grievous mistake and miscalculation which will cover many black pages in the history of India, Punjab and the Sikhs. I will dwell in greater detail on how to retrieve the situation.

"Perhaps the best way of examining the thesis of the White Paper placed before us is to go backwards, to see the situation today and go back to the genesis of this sorry business. The situation today is that the religious susceptibilities of every single Sikh have been deeply wounded — 99 per cent of these Sikhs had

nothing whatsoever to do with Bhindranwale, Akalis, the government or politics of any sort. This action has humiliated the pride of a very proud people. A proud people do not forget or forgive very easily. You have divided Hindus and Sikhs: the wedge was driven by the Akalis, widened by Bhindranwale and made unbridgeable by you. Sikhs who till yesterday, regarded themselves as more than first class citizens, are now treated worse than third class citizens. Discrimination against them continues at airports and check points on rails and roads. It has created a sense of isolation and alienation among them. They are beginning to ask themselves: "Do Indians still regard us as one of them?"

"This being the situation, ask yourselves two questions. One, could any action which alienated the feeling of 14 million fellow citizens who form the backbone of our defence services, provide more than half the food for the country and live on the most sensitive border facing Pakistan be ever justified? Second, is it really true, as maintained in government's White Paper, that it had no choice except to mount military invasion on the Golden Temple?"

"My answer to both these questions is a categorical "No".

"The White Paper has much to say about the Akali intransigence, its constantly changing stance, making new demands and going back on points on which agreements had been reached under pressure of extremists. It says nothing about the government's own shifting of position and resiling from solemnly given undertakings. I will not go over them again but it must be recorded that after every breakdown of discussions the Prime Minister came out with the stock reply that some matters concerned neighbouring states which had to be consulted. Apparently, in two years such consultations were not concluded.

"The White Paper also makes no mention of the home minister's repeated statements in both Houses of Parliament and the P.M.'s assurances outside Parliament that the government had no intention to move the army into the Golden Temple. Nor does it tell us in any convincing detail how many men there were with Bhindranwale and how they came by the kinds of weapons the government now alleges they had with them.

"The major question which is left unanswered is whether or not the government had any alternatives other than sending in the army into the Golden Temple. I can suggest two neither of which has been mentioned in the White Paper. First was a commando action by men in plain clothes designed only to take Bhindranwale and his men alive or dead. This would have spared us the loss of

innocent lives as well as the massive destruction of sacred property. The second was for the army to cordon off the Golden Temple Complex, occupy the Guru Ka Langar, cut off the supply of food, fuel and electricity and force Bhindranwale's men to come out of the Akal Takht and the Paikarma to fight. The result would have been quite different. However, neither of these alternatives was given serious consideration and instead we had six army divisions moved into the Punjab (more than we had in the three wars with Pakistan), a force led by a Lt. Gen. and two Major Generals equipped with armoured personnel carriers, tanks, mountain guns — all to flush out no more than 300-500 men armed with nothing more than sophisticated LMGs, antiquated. 303 rifles, some handgrenades and a rusty bazooka.

"I visited the Golden Temple a month after the army action, interviewed many people who were in the complex at the time and saw the damage done with my own eyes. Let me tell you, and through you the rest of the country that this White Paper has grossly under-estimated the number of lives lost, overlooked mentioning that the dead included hundreds of totally innocent men, women and children. The government spokesmen have repeated ad nauseum that no damage was caused to the Harmandir; as a matter of fact it still bears fresh bullet marks by the score; a hand-written copy of the Granth pierced by a bullet; a blind raagi Amrik Singh was killed inside while doing keertan; the Akal Takht is a total wreck — and besides the entire archives consisting of nearly 1,000 manuscript copies of the Granth Sahib and innumerable Hukamnamahs bearing signatures of our Gurus gone up in flames. What is most painful about this vandalism is that it took place after resistance had been overcome.

"Now we are talking of the healing touch. The place of honour — in inverted commas — should go to the government controlled media — All India Radio and Doordarshan and abjectly subservient national press. For days on end the TV screen showed the Harmandir at a distance so that no damage to it could be seen; the destroyed Akal Takht was carefully kept out of view. At first the press told us that 13 women had been killed, then they have been killed by a grenade thrown by the extremists. That Bhindranwale had committed suicide, he had been killed by his own men — and ultimately that he had fallen in battle; that hashish, opium and heroin had been found — then that was found outside the Temple Complex; that women of loose character were with the extremists,

some of them pregnant. How more pregnant with lies can anyone's imagination be?

"It is evident that despite what you have done; you have not broken the back to terrorism."

What to talk of breaking the back; if anything, terrorism in Punjab today, has erupted with vengeance.

THE AKAL TAKHT

Mention of the Akal Takht, destruction of which caused an upheaval and in a big way contributed to the mutiny of the Sikh soldiers, becomes essential in this writing.

The foundation stone for the building was laid by the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind, who issued orders to his followers from there. With the rise of the Sikh power, the importance of the Akal Takht grew rapidly during the 18th century. When Maharaja Ranjit Singh came to power after establishing his absolute rule at Lahore, the Akal Takht's importance further rose. The Maharaja made Akali Baba Phula Singh, the famous Sikh leader, incharge of the Takht in 1799.

Akali Phula Singh once declared Maharaja Ranjit Singh guilty of having a Mohammedan courtesan. Although the Maharaja presented himself before the Sikh Sangat to receive the punishment, the sentence was not executed.

During the British rule, all the important movements were launched from the Takht, including the gurdwara reforms movement, Guru ka bag morcha and the famous Jaito morcha. The Sikh Gurdwara Act, which constituted the S.G.P.C. was enacted after the gurdwara reforms movement in 1925. After independence too, the Akali agitations were launched from the Akal Takht.

The Akal Takht is also a place of confession and penance for the Sikhs. For all offences in the eyes of the religion, the culprit has to present himself before the Takht in the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib. The head priest then fixes a 'tankhah' (penalty) according to the nature of the offence.

The Akal Takht, in the past, has been destroyed more than once. But it was quickly restored by the "Khalsa" every time it was pulled down. The building destroyed during army action, was built with pure white marble during the 18th century. The ground-floor was constructed in 1774 and the rest of the building was built during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The gold work of the dome was funded by the famous Sikh warrior, Hari Singh Nalwa, who contributed Rs. 1.25 lakh.

According to historians, the Akal Takht is larger than any of the thrones built by the Mughal emperors at Agra or at Delhi.

The Akal Takht reconstructed by the government by associating Budha Dal Nihang leader Santa Singh with it, after operation Bluestar, was pulled down by the All India Sikh Students Federation (A.I.S.S.F.), Dam Dami Taksal and United Akali Dal headed by the slain Bhindranwale's father Baba Joginder Singh in January 1986. The reconstruction which was taken in hand by them at a snail's speed came to a halt when the S.G.P.C. regained control over the Akal Takht after the police entry into the Golden Temple on April 30, 1986. This was the position at the time of writing.

THE OFFICER FACTOR

In his February 1, 1986 letter to the officers, the Chief of the Army Staff said: "As a whole the corps of officers has lost much of its self-esteem, pride and elan; it is becoming increasingly careerist, opportunist and sychophantic; standards of integrity have fallen and honour and patriotism are becoming unfashionable. I also notice that of late there has been a regrettable communication gap developing between officers and men. I attribute this primarily to selfishness on the part of the officers and not caring enough about the men ... Finally, some have perhaps unthinkingly developed a yen for 5-star culture and ostentation which flows from new-rich values in our society, where money is the prime indicator of success and social position."

What General Sunderji says in his letter aptly describes, what the officer of today is. But looking at his 'becoming rich' libido from a broader angle, we cannot blame him. Because he is living in a country where people make fortunes overnight. And on retirement from the service, an officer not only comes down to the mother earth, but his financial inadequacy also starts glaring him in the face, especially, when he sees people on his right and left living lavishly with their oodles and boodles.

Thanks to the extraneous influences, today's officer is a materialist and thus a mercenary. Gone are the days of the Chatwodeian motto, 'the safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last always and every time.'

The mutiny clearly brought out that today there is a very tenuous link between an officer and a jawan. And the former is least interested to remain in touch with the latter. As we have seen

from the happenings outlined in an earlier chapter of this book, the officers either had no inkling of the fateful happenings or turned a blind eye to them. Brig. S.C. Puri, Commandant of the Sikh Regimental Center, who was shot down by his mutinying jawans on June 10, 1984 spent some time in his office before returning home in his staff car at about 9.00 a.m., without having any premonition of the coming events. It was after only a few minutes of his arrival at home that his staff car came speeding back with the officiating Subedar Major, who brought the gory news of the mutiny. In 14 Punjab, as we have seen, the G.O.C.-in-C, had personally briefed the C.O. more than two days before his unit mutinied. Yet the C.O. did not make any worthwhile effort to remain in touch with his troops or counsel them sympathetically. And when the mutiny actually started, the C.O. left the scene on the pretext of fetching his second-in-command. Woefully, in almost all the mutinying units, the C.Os and other officers did not show up till the mutineers had left their units. The discernible vacuum that exists today between the officers and men, should be fast filled up and the officers lot improved to shoulder their prime responsibility as leaders of men. Lest the country finds itself in a lurch during a national crisis.

A RETHINKING

The courts of inquiry convened in various army formations have clearly brought out that besides the tremendous emotional stress, the Sikh troops had to undergo due to the Army action in the Golden Temple Complex, the lack of timely steps by the formation and unit commanders at different levels led to the mutiny and desertions.

Investigations reveal that while about 35 soldiers and recruits of the Sikh Regimental Centre were killed in preventive action (most of them in a skirmish near Jaunpur), 13 other ranks of 9 Sikh were killed near Abohar. Some personnel of 14 Punjab were killed in Gujarat on their way to Punjab. And at least one other rank of 171 Field Regiment was killed near Jaipur.

Although the courts of inquiry have opined that the death of the deserters (who died as a result of either cross-fire, accident or preventive action by the security forces) could not be attributed to military service, the Army Headquarters are now agreeable to granting them pensionary benefits by considering them "mis-guided".

However, in the case of those personnel, whose death has not been confirmed and who are still missing, no pension can be given

for seven years, after which they would be presumed as dead. It is known to the Army authorities that some of the deserters who are still missing, have crossed over to Pakistan. Balbir Singh of 22 Sikh (then located at Chandimandir), who deserted with his weapon, it is confirmed following interrogation of some infiltrators, is in Pakistan.

It is learnt that the Ministry of Defence have already taken a decision to reactivate 3 Sikh and 18 Sikh which were placed under suspended animation — in their original class composition. It seems the army authorities are also thinking of re-raising 9 Sikh, which was disbanded after it mutinied in June 1984.

CHAPTER — SIX

A PEEP INTO INDIAN HISTORY

Be it a government or an individual in supreme authority, while owning of a mistake redeems the situation, and sets the process of normalcy in motion, disowning it can reverse the process.

Even before and soon after the uprising, the British had realised that they had committed certain mistakes, which resulted in the mutiny of 1857. It was Lord Canning who said: "With the best possible intentions, grave mistakes might have been committed in past years, and that the tree of benignant error was now bearing bitter fruit."

And it was no less a person than the highest authority, the Queen of England who issued a proclamation expressing regret at the sad happenings of mutiny and not only owning up the sad mistakes, but also taking corrective measures in the general interest of the ruled and the rulers.

I now quote from the book 'History of Modern India' by Dr. Moti Lal Bhargava.

QUEEN VICTORIA'S PROCLAMATION

"It was admitted unequivocally that the hostilities which had been carried on in Awadh had rather the character of legitimate war than that of rebellion. And in the face of it Lord Canning had struck the mass of the inhabitants of the country with the severest of punishment. Ellenborough wisely opined that Government could not long be maintained by force in a country where the whole people were rendered hostile by a sense of wrong.

The unequivocal condemnation of Lord Canning was soon followed by the resolution of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, dated 31st August 1858, at the instance of the Parliament, agreeing to wind up their maladministration in India and surrender its government to the Parliament. The British Parliament decided to wind up the East India Company and stand forth itself as the paramount sovereign body for the Indian Empire. The East India Company protested but with no result. The new bill became law and was known as an Act for the better Government of India. It contained 75 sections. But most of these clauses, being abstruse

to the masses of India, remained unknown. The people of India only came in touch with the Queen's Proclamation issued on 1st November 1858. The Queen desired that they should freely breathe under feelings of generosity, benevolence and religious toleration.

Queen's Proclamation. To very great extent the proclamation witnessed the reversal of the policy followed in pre-1857 days. So far as the Taluqdars were concerned it meant complete surrender to their demands. It proclaimed: 'we know, and respect, the feelings of attachment with which the Natives of India regard the land inherited by them from their encestors, and we desire to protect them in all rights connected there-with, subject to the equitable demands of the State; and we wish that generally, in framing and administering the law due regard be paid to the ancient rights, usages and customs of India'.

The Queen's Proclamation did not only seek to accept all demands of Awadh Taluqdars and ruling princes, but it announced virtual reversal of the policy of the doctrine of lapse. It was clearly stated: 'We desire no extension of our present territorial possessions: We shall respect the rights, dignity and honour of native princes as our own.' It was announced from the housetops that with the cession of 1857 war, all engagements and treaties which had been made with the princes by or under the authority of the East India Company were accepted and would be scrupulously maintained."

I.N.A TRIALS AND FIELD MARSHAL SIR CLAUDE AUCHINLECK'S MEMORANDUM TO SENIOR BRITISH OFFICERS

Yet another major upheaval after the 1857 mutiny was the secession of the Indian Army officers and soldiers; and formation of the Indian National Army (I.N.A.) during the Second World War. Although the story of the I.N.A. is beyond the scope of this writing, its trials are of great significance in our context, because they bring out certain important lessons.

It is interesting though sad to note, how mishandling of a situation and wrong provocation can make a soldier lose his equilibrium. Notable in this respect is what Captain Shah Nawaz Khan said in his statement before the Court-martial convened to try him. ".....In short, I belong to a family in which loyalty to the Crown has always been a valued tradition."

For waging a war against the Crown and abetment of murder, Captain Shah Nawaz Khan, Captain R.K. Sahgal and Lt. G.S.

Dhillon of I.N.A. were tried in Red Fort Delhi by a General Court-Martial in 1945 and were sentenced to transportation for life.

When the proceedings of the G.C.M. went to the Commander-in-Chief of India Field Marshal (then General) Sir Claude Auckinleck who was the confirming authority, he sprang a surprise by commuting the sentence from transportation for life to cashiering. The sentence passed by the General Courtmartial and confirmation thereof by the commander-in-Chief was announced in a communique which was published in the Gazette of India Extra-ordinary on 3rd day of January 1946.

The following is the full text of the communique:-

Capt. Shah Nawaz Khan, Capt. Sahgal and Lt. Dhillon have stood their trial by Court-martial on charges against all three of waging war against the King-Emperor, Lt. Dhillon being also charged with murder and the other two with abetment of murder. The findings of the Court are that all three are guilty of the charge of waging war, while Capt. Shah Nawaz Khan is also convicted of the charge of abetment of murder, Lt. Dhillon is acquitted of the charge of murder and Capt. Sahgal of the charge of abetment of murder.

Having found the accused guilty of the charge of waging war, the Court was bound to sentence the accused either to death or to transportation for life: no less sentence was permissible under the law. The sentence of the court on all the three accused is transportation for life, cashiering and forfeiture of arrears of pay and allowances.

No finding or sentence by court-martial is complete until confirmed. The confirming officer, in this case, the Commander-in-Chief, is satisfied that the findings of the Court are in each instance in conformity with the evidence and he has, therefore, confirmed them.

The confirming officer is, however, competent to mitigate, commute or remit the sentences. As already stated in the press, it is the policy of the Government of India to bring to trial in future only such persons as are alleged, in addition, to waging war against the state, to have committed acts of gross brutality; and it has been announced that in reviewing sentences in any trials, the competent authority will have regard to the extent to which the acts proved offend against the canons of civilised behaviour.

Lt. Dhillon and Capt. Sahgal have been acquitted of the charges of murder and abetment of murder, and it has not been alleged that they were guilty of other acts of brutality. Although

Capt. Shah Nawaz Khan has been found guilty of abetment of murder and the acts proved against him were harsh, the prevailing circumstances have been taken into account by the confirming officer.

The Commander-in-Chief has decided, therefore, to treat all the three accused in the same way in the matter of sentence, and to remit the sentence of the transportation for life against all three accused. He has, however, confirmed the sentence of cashiering and forfeiture of arrears of pay and allowances, since it is in all circumstances a most serious crime for an officer or soldier to throw off his allegiance and wage war against the State. This is a principle which it is essential to uphold in the interests of the stability of any governments by law established, present or future.

While leniency shown by Sir Claude Auchinleck evoked pleasure and intense relief from the public in India, it perturbed the British Officers of the Indian Army. Field Marshal Auchinleck, therefore, considered it fit to write to all the senior formation commanders with a view to explaining the justification behind his action. Since his memorandum to the senior British Officers is an important document to show how impartial and forthright an officer at the level of C-in-C can be, it is reproduced below:

Strictly Personal and Secret
(Not to be passed through any office)
New Delhi,
February, 1946.

I have now been able to study a large number of reports from higher and unit commanders and other sources on the effect of the action taken in respect of the first "I.N.A." trial on the Indian Army as a whole.

It is most important that we should study and analyse carefully these effects, as they may influence very greatly our ability to maintain the solidarity and reliability of the Indian Army in difficult times which undoubtedly lie ahead of us. It is for this reason that I am writing this letter to you. I have considered the desirability of making a personal public statement in explanation of my action in commuting the sentences of transportation passed by the court on the first three accused, but I have decided that this would not be in the best interests of discipline or the maintenance of my influence and authority as Commander-in-Chief.

I feel, however, that we should do all we can to remove the feelings of doubt, resentment and even disgust which appear to

exist in the minds of quite a number of British officers, who have not the knowledge or the imagination to be able to view the situation as a whole, or to understand the present state of feelings in India.

2. As I see it, the commutation of the sentences of transportation on Shah Nawaz, Dhillon and Sahgal has had the following effects in India:-

- (a) On the general public, moderate as well as extremist, Muslim as well as Hindu.

Pleasure and intense relief born of the conviction that confirmation of the sentences would have resulted in violent internal conflict.

This feeling does not, in my opinion, spring universally from the idea that the convicted officers were trying to rid India of the British and, therefore, to be applauded, whatever crimes they might commit, but from a generally genuine feeling that they were patriots and nationalists and that, therefore, even if they were misled they should be treated with clemency, as true sons of India. In this connection, it should be remembered, I think, that every Indian worthy of the name is today a "Nationalist", though this does not mean that he is necessarily "anti-British". All the same, where India and her independence are concerned, there are no "pro-British" Indians.

Every Indian commissioned officer is a Nationalist and rightly so, provided he hopes to attain independence for India by constitutional means.

- (b) On the Indian Officers of the Indian Army.

Except for a few recovered prisoners of war who have suffered much at the hands of their fellow countrymen who joined the so called "I.N.A.", the vast majority, almost without exception, however, much they may like and respect the British, are glad and relieved because of the result of the trial. Most of them admit the gravity of the offence and do not condone it but practically all are sure that any attempt to enforce the sentence would have led to chaos in the country at large and probably to mutiny and dissension in the Army culminating in its dissolution, probably on communal lines.

The more senior and intelligent undoubtedly realise the implications of our having established in principle the seriousness of the crime of forsaking one's allegiance and the wisdom of meeting it with a heavy punishment such as "cashiering" which carries with it the stigma of disgrace.

They realise that if their future is to be at all secure, discipline and loyalty must be maintained, but they, too, are Nationalists and their feelings are much the same as those of the public at large.

(c) On the V.C.Os and rank and file of the Indian Army.

In very many units apparently little interest was displayed in the "I.N.A" trials, especially in the more illiterate and educationally backward arms of Service, such as the infantry and artillery.

In the technical units and amongst clerks, etc., however, interest was keen and wide-spread.

Some of the V.C.Os and rank and file had suffered like their officers at the hands of their former comrades who joined the "I.N.A." and perhaps feel correspondingly bitter and disgusted at the leniency shown. This is inevitable and cannot be helped, regrettable though it may be. This section of opinion is relatively small.

The great majority are, I think, pleased that leniency has been shown for a variety of reasons.

Many of them have relations and friends from the same villages amongst the "I.N.A." Many think that, as the war is over, bygones should be bygones and a fresh start made.

Others are genuinely nationalistic in outlook and have been affected by agitation and propaganda. The great majority feel, I think, that the whole episode is unpleasant and discreditable to them as a class and to the Army as a whole, and would wish it forgotten and decently buried as soon as possible.

Under all this, there is, I think, an uneasy feeling as to the future and doubt as to whether their interests will be as well watched in the days to come as they have been in the past.

(d) On the British Officers of the Indian Army.

As I have already said, the effect on many British Officer has been bad, and has led to public criticism which has not been in accordance with the traditional loyalty I am entitled to expect. To these officers, perhaps not always very perceptive or imaginative, an officer is an officer, whether he be Indian or British, and they make no allowance for birth or political aspirations or upbringing, nor do they begin to realise the great political stresses and strains now affecting this country. They are unable to differentiate between the British and Indian points of view.

Moreover, they forget, if they ever knew, the great bitterness bred in the minds of many Indian officers in the early days of "Indianisation" by the discrimination, often very real, exercised against them, and the discourteous, contemptuous treatment meted

out to them by many British officers who should have known better.

These facts constitute the background against which the decisions should be judged, always keeping before one the object, which is to preserve by all possible means in our power the solidarity of the Indian Army, and of the R.I.N. and the R.I.A.F. as well.

I have not specifically mentioned the two younger services, but everything I have said in this letter applies to them just as much as to the Army, and perhaps more so as the ratings or other ranks of these services are better educated and perhaps more political minded than those of the Army.

3. I would like you also to consider and to impress on others, especially those British Officers who have been upset by the result of the first "I.N.A." trial, the effect of the capitulation of Singapore on the Indian troops involved in it, from amongst whom the "I.N.A." was subsequently formed.

Those who have served for many years with Indian troops, as I have done, have always recognised that the loyalty of our men was really to the officers of the regiment or unit and that although there may have been some abstract sentiments of loyalty and patriotism to the Government and to the King, the men's allegiance for all practical purposes was focussed on the regiment, and particularly on the regimental officers, on whom they depend for their welfare, advancement and future prospects.

In these officers their faith and trust was almost childlike, as events have proved time and time again. It is true to say that in almost every case of serious discontent or indiscipline, and there have been remarkably few of them, which have occurred in the past fifty years, the cause could be traced to indifferent officers and bad man-management.

4. The terrible tragedy of Singapore following on the fall of Hong Kong must have seemed to the great majority of the V.C.Os and rank and file to be the end of all things, and certainly of the British "Raj" to whom the army had been used for so many years of war and peace to look to as its universal provider and protector, acting through their own regimental officers.

The British Officers were at once taken from them and they were at once assailed by traitors who had been kept in readiness by the Japanese to seduce them from their allegiance. Their Indian Officers in many instances proved false to their trust and used their influence to suborn their own men, skilfully aided and encouraged by the Japanese.

The strain and pressure to which these men, the majority of whom were simple peasant farmers with no cultural or educational background, were subjected is very difficult for any British Officer, however, experienced, to visualise. Nevertheless it is quite impossible for any British officer to judge them fairly unless he does try to visualise it and realise what these men must have thought and felt.

It is quite wrong to adopt the attitude that because these men had taken service in a British controlled Indian Army that therefore their loyalties must be the same as those of British soldiers. As I have tried to explain, they had no real loyalty and patriotism towards Britain as Britain, not as we understand loyalty.

5. So much for the rank and file. The officers who went over, present a much more difficult problem. Owing to their presumably superior education, knowledge of the world and experience generally, it is not possible to apply the same reasoning to them, except possibly to the very junior and to those who had been promoted from the ranks, whose background was more limited and whose knowledge was less.

There is no excuse for the regular officers who went over, beyond the fact that the early stages of "Indianisation" from its inception to the beginning of the late war were badly mismanaged by the British Government of India, and this prepared the ground for disloyalty when the opportunity came.

There is little doubt that "Indianisation" was at its inception looked on as a political expedient which was bound to fail militarily. There is no doubt also that many senior British officers believed and even hoped that it would fail.

The policy of segregation of Indian Officers into separate units, the differential treatment in respect of pay and terms of service as compared with the British officers, and the prejudice and lack of manners of some — by no means all — British officers and their wives, all went to produce a very deep and bitter feeling of radical discrimination in the minds of the most intelligent and progressive of the Indian officers, who were naturally nationalists, keen to see India standing on her own legs and not to be ruled from Whitehall for ever.

It is no use shutting one's eyes to the fact that any Indian officer worth his salt is a nationalist, though this does not mean, as I have said before, that he is necessarily anti-British. If he is anti-British this is as often as not due to his faulty handling and treatment by his British officer comrades.

It is essential for the preservation of future unity that this fact should be fully understood by all British officers.

No Indian officer must be regarded as suspect and disloyal merely because he is what is called a 'Nationalist', or in other words — a good Indian.

6. This aspect of the business, though it cannot excuse the action of these officers in going over to the enemy, must be considered as it does provide the background against which we must view the present and the future.

We have very full evidence of the mental processes which these officers went through and many of them hesitated for a long time before they finally succumbed to circumstances and the persuasion of the Japanese and their extremist fellow-countrymen. Many of them having joined the first so called "I.N.A." under Mohan Singh refused to join the second under Bose and spent the next three years as prisoners of war in the islands of the Pacific. This does not excuse their original lapse but does show that they were subjected to conflicting stresses and strains mentally.

7. There remains the matter of the decision to commute the sentences of the first three officers (Sahgal, Dhillon and Shah Nawaz) from "Transportation" to "cashiering". If, as we have admitted, they were guilty of the worst crime a soldier can commit, then it may well be asked — "Why be lenient with them?"

In taking the decision to show clemency, the whole circumstances past, present and future had to be considered and were so considered, most carefully and over a long period.

The over-riding object is to maintain the stability, reliability and efficiency of the Indian Army so that it may remain in future a trust-worthy weapon for use in defence of India and, we hope, of the commonwealth as a whole.

It was essential to establish the principle that falseness to his allegiance is a crime which cannot be countenanced in any officer under whatever Government he may be serving. By confirming the finding of the Court and the sentence of "cashiering" which carries with it the highest degree of disgrace to an officer, we have done this. To have added imprisonment to this sentence would not in any way have helped to emphasise the principle we were concerned to preserve.

On the other hand, having considered all the evidence and appreciated to the best of my ability the general trend of Indian public opinion and of the feeling in the Indian Army, I have no doubt at all that to have confirmed the sentence of imprisonment solely on

the charge of "waging war against the king" would have had disastrous results, in that it would have probably precipitated a violent outbreak throughout the country, and have created active and widespread disaffection in the Army, especially amongst the Indian officers and the more highly educated rank and file. To have taken this risk would have been seriously to jeopardise our object.

Always keeping before one the difference in outlook between British and Indian, which I have tried to explain in this letter. I decided, therefore, that, in the interests of the future of both India and Britain and because of the unprecedented circumstances of the case, the only proper course to pursue was to confirm the finding and so establish the principle but to show clemency in respect of the sentence. Some bewilderment has been caused. I believe, by the fact that Shah Nawaz who was found guilty of "abetment of murder" as well as of "waging war" received the same treatment as the other two accused who were found guilty of "waging war" only. Shah Nawaz's offence, which was committed by him as an officer of the "I.N.A." in the alleged execution of his duty, in that he ordered a sentence authorised by a higher I.N.A. authority to be carried out, did, in the circumstances, flow from his basic offence of "waging war" as a member of the "I.N.A." The punishment for this — the principal offence — was "cashiering" in the case of all three officers. Shah Nawaz did not himself commit any brutal or violent act against any person, but passed on the orders of a superior authority which he claims to have believed to have been properly constituted.

It is necessary also to remember that some 20,000 officers and men joined the so-called "I.N.A." and that, even if it were desirable, it would have been a physical impossibility to bring all these men to trial within anything approaching a reasonable period of time.

8. The situation now is that the principle that the forsaking of his allegiance by a soldier is a crime in any circumstances has been established, and that no further trials on this account alone will be held. Those against whom there is adequate evidence of murder and brutality will be tried and punished in the ordinary way.

In the second, third and fourth trials the charge of "waging war" has been included in addition to the other charges because these trials were commenced before the finding of the Court in the first trial was known. If the accused in these three trials are found guilty on this charge the court will pass the sentence of "Transportation for life" which is minimum admissible under the Army Act for the offence of "waging war".

When it comes to confirmation of the sentence, however, the facts in respect of other charges of brutality will be the guiding factor.

In any subsequent trials, the charge of "waging war" will be omitted as our object is now to punish those who may have been guilty of brutal acts towards their former comrades.

9. As to the great mass of rank and file of the so-called "I.N.A.", these are now being examined by Courts of inquiry as rapidly as possible with a view to finding out whether they are to be classified as "White", "Grey" or "Black". I realise very well and so does everyone else at G.H.Q. and in the War Department, the urgent need for disposing of these men at the earliest possible moment, so that the whole affair may have a reasonable chance of being forgotten, which is I am sure the ardent desire of the Army as a whole. At the same time, it is quite certain from evidence at our disposal that if this inquiry is not carried out with reasonable thoroughness, great injustice may be done to innocent men. The temptation, therefore, to discharge or dismiss all and sundry summarily and without more ado must be resisted.

10. There is one other criticism which is often made. It is said that we ought to have dealt with the accused summarily in forward areas; that if the men were to be brought to India we should have avoided publicity, and in particular trial in the Red Fort; and that we ought to have put out counter-publicity from the start. The answer to the first point is that we had to deal with 45,000 men, in one instance a whole I.N.A. division surrendering without firing a shot. It was obviously impracticable for forward areas to deal with men on this scale summarily and it was the obvious course to send them back to India where the records and Intelligence organisation existed for interrogation. As to publicity, I am sure it was right to decide not to hold trial in secret because it would have been thought that men were not getting a fair trial. Once it was decided that the trials could not be held in secret, it would have been wrong to tuck them away somewhere where defence counsel, relations, etc. could not conveniently attend; and the Red Fort was the most conveniently attend; and the Red Fort was the most convenient place from nearly every point of view. We avoided counter publicity because it was practically certain that a big publicity drive would be represented as prejudicing the accused in their trial; but in any event it is not possible for us to force papers to publish anything which they regard as propaganda and with which they do not agree. We have no control over them in this respect.

11. This letter has become very lengthy, but I make no apology for this as I consider it essential that the full facts of this sad business should be put before you, so that you in your turn can put them before the officers serving under you, as and when it appears necessary to you.

You should not, in explaining the matter to your officers, quote me as Commander-in-Chief but should use the material I have tried to give in this letter in any way you think suitable to the purpose as if it came from yourself.

12. Finally, let me again state the object; it is to maintain the reliability, stability and efficiency of the Indian Army for the future, whatever Government may be set up in India.

This can be done only if the British and Indian officers of the Army trust and respect each other and continue to work wholeheartedly together for the common cause as they have done in war.

It is your task to do your utmost to bring this about and I am sure you will: You have excellent material on which to work.

13. If you are still in doubt on any point or have any suggestions to make in furtherance of common object, I will be glad if you let me or the Adjutant General know.

By name to all:

Sd/- x x

(Claude Auchinleck General)

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CHAPTER — SEVEN

AMNESTY OR CLEMENCY?

A LOGICAL CONSIDERATION

Much rhetoric, in favour of amnesty for the mutinying Sikh soldiers, has been heard, yet virtually nobody so far, has claimed justification for recommending such a course of action for lack of sound reasoning. We have, therefore, to look for some parallels in history to guide us on the right lines.

In so far as the 1857 mutiny was concerned, it dawned on the British after or even before the rebellion came to an end, that they had committed many mistakes and for this reason there was unequivocal condemnation of Lord Canning. The British Parliament decided to wind up their maladministration in India and surrender its government to Parliament, resulting in the 'scrapping of the East India Company'. The new bill was passed and was known as an Act 'for the better government in India'.

In her proclamation issued on November 1, 1858, the Queen while referring to the people of India, desired that they should freely breathe under feelings of generosity, benevolence and religious toleration. The proclamation to very great extent witnessed the virtual reversal of pre-1857 British policy — called the policy of the doctrine of lapse. A great amount of leniency was, therefore, shown in dealing with the Natives by conceding all their demands and respecting their rights.

As regards I.N.A. trials, it needed a man of Field Marshal Auchinleck's boldness and impartial and broad vision to have summoned his head, heart and pen for the stability of the Indian Army and the well-being of the country at large. While confirming the findings on Captain Shah Nawaz Khan, Captain R.K. Sahgal and Lieutenant G.S. Dhillon, by commuting "Transportation for life" to "cashiering", he put life into the dead. As if this was not enough, he also ruled that in all future I.N.A. trials (this was the first of them), "waging war against the King" will not be taken as an offence and sentence will be passed in the normal manner only against those who committed murder or brutality. Apart from that, even abetment of murder in respect of Shah Nawaz was condoned.

And all this, as he says, in his Memorandum to the senior British officers, was done, "to maintain the reliability, stability and

efficiency of the Indian Army for the future, whatever Government may be set up in India."

Claude Auchinleck's leniency towards the Indian soldiers, who had, according to the Army Act, committed most heinous offences, came under severe criticism by the British officers. This, however, did not unnerve him, as can be seen from his Memorandum, in which he criticised them for their indifference and bad management. While pleading for the convicted Indian officers, he mentions: "They were patriots and nationalists and that, therefore, even if they were misled they should be treated with clemency, as true sons of India."

When we compare the 1984 mutiny trials and connected events with the I.N.A. trials, we find many dis-similarities.

Although some 20,000 Indian officers and men had mutinied and joined the I.N.A., Claude Auchinleck knowing full well that their action was condemnable, was sympathetic towards them. He did not disown them, nor did he suspect the Indian troops as a whole. His words to his senior commanders even after the uprising are noteworthy: "You have excellent material on which to work."

General A.S. Vaidya, Chief of Army Staff in his broadcast to the nation on July 1, 1984, virtually disowned those troops who had deserted their units after the Army action in the Golden Temple. "I would like to give an assurance that those who acted in a mutinous manner will be dealt with severely under the law as enacted for the army, so that those who remain with us in the army and have the honour of bearing arms for the country, would be a proud and disciplined body of soldiers." The words "So that those who remain with us" clearly indicate that he had counted the deserters out of his army before giving them a fair chance to defend themselves. Apart from this, his statement resulted in two pernicious ramifications — one visible and the other invisible. The visible one was the objection by the accused at almost all the courts-martial to the members of the courts on the grounds, that having been prejudiced by the Chief of the Army Staff's broadcast, they could under no circumstances do justice to them. The invisible ramification was the influence of General Vaidya's statement on the minds of the officers who constituted the courts. To say that they were not influenced by his statement will not be correct, because they could not afford to act against their Chief of the Army Staff's wishes. To prove this point, it would suffice to mention what General K. Sunderji, the present Chief of the Army Staff, said in his letter of February 1, 1986 to all officers: "I am very concerned about the increasing

sychophancy towards seniors which unless checked will corrode the entire system.... And finally, prospects of promotion in rank, being totally dependent on the reports of the seniors."

Field Marshal Auchinleck says in his Memorandum that one other criticism about his way of handling the cases was that if the men were to be brought to India for trials, "We should have avoided publicity and in particular trial in the Red Fort; and that we ought to have put out counter-publicity from the start." His answer to these points is: "As to publicity, I am sure it was right to decide not to hold trials in secret because it would have been thought that men were not getting a fair trial. Once it was decided that the trials could not be held in secret, it would have been wrong to tuck them away somewhere, where defence counsel, relations, etc., could not conveniently attend; and the Red Fort was the most convenient place from nearly every point of view. We avoided counter-publicity because it was practically certain that a big publicity drive would be represented as prejudicing the accused in their trial."

What Auchinleck said about publicity and counter publicity proved absolutely correct in our case. All India Radio started saying after Operation Bluestar that no bullets had hit Harmandir Sahib and that very little damage was done to Akal Takht. Doordarshan, as a proof of the government statement, started showing Harmandir Sahib repeatedly but gave only an obscure distant view of the Akal Takht. Again in the monthly newsletter 'Baat Chit' issued to all units by the Military Intelligence Directorate, Army Headquarters; it was said in the July 1984 issue: "Any knowledge of the Amritdharis (baptised Sikhs), who are dangerous people and pledged to commit murder, arson and acts of terrorism should immediately be brought to the notice of the authorities." Incidentally, the monthly newsletter is read by the unit commanders to their troops in the monthly Sainik Sammelan (darbar). Imagine the effect of this statement on the minds of the Sikh troops.

Now think of the secret trials held in Punjab under the National Security Act (N.S.A.) and shifting of the All India Sikh Student Federation's (A-I.S.S.F.) men and others who were arrested after Operation Bluestar to Jodhpur jail and keeping them there, away from their homes, for over two years without trials; not allowing any Minister from Punjab or even their relations to see them. Many of them and all those who had a rough deal, I am sure, have relations and friends from their villages in the army. And that is how what happens in the country and particularly in their state, affects the minds of the jawans directly or indirectly.

The above instances of phoney propaganda, publicity and counter-publicity caused colossal damage to the image of the government; besides proving counter-productive.

That discipline and loyalty, two corner stones of the army edifice must be maintained at all cost is undeniable. But the uneasy feeling that started growing after Bluestar in Sikh soldiers' minds was, whether their interests would be as well watched in the days to come as they have been in the past.

If matters had continued in the army, the way they were moving till January 1986, they would have sooner or later resulted in the polarisation of communal feelings and perhaps dissension. But thanks to the Claude Auckenleck-like handling of the situation by the sagacious General Sunderji on taking over the reins of the army early this year — which improved the situation. In his interview with 'India Today' in February this year, when asked did that (desertion) shake your faith in the loyalty of Sikh soldiers? He replied: "The way I look at this; I've always held the Sikh soldiers in the highest esteem. But after this, my esteem for them has risen even higher than ever before. The fact is that the vast majority of them stood staunchly loyal. I don't think any other class of soldiers has passed through such a traumatic experience...."

There should exist no doubt in anyone's mind today as to what caused the ominous mutiny and who were the principal contributors towards the catastrophe.

What we, however, need to examine dispassionately is: is there a case for amnesty or clemency? To say that there should be a general amnesty, apart from sounding fallacious would amount to disregarding the discipline and well being of the army. But the fact that the simple and helpless soldiers with a peasant background came under a religious strain, which tore their minds asunder and left them with no thinking power, needs to be analysed in the correct perspective and sympathetically. That they all had no personal gain in their resort to desertion, and the only factor that influenced their minds to leave their units was an assault on their religion, cannot be disputed. And we also know from the circumstances and charges framed against the deserters that they had marched towards Amritsar, because their sanctum sanctorum had been attacked.

While considering their cases, it would only be fair to take into account their past sacrifices for the country — highest tally of gallantry awards in the **Indian Army** — their laudable performance in all fields of activity (be it war or sport), and their future. More

important than that is, the solidarity of the Indian Army and the other two sister services, the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force.

Not only that, the Sikh soldiers and in fact all Sikhs feel that the foundation of the country stands proudly on the sacrifices of the Indian people among whom they rightly perhaps claim to be the principal contributors as seen from these figures (Indian Freedom Struggle: persons executed 121, Sikhs 73; imprisoned for life 2646, Sikhs 2047; killed in Jallianwala Bagh 1302, Sikhs 799) These figures have been taken from an article published in The illustrated weekly of India in 1985.

Before going any further, it would be pertinent to recount what General Sunderji said about sharing of blame in the Sikh troops going berserk: "I attribute the primary cause to poor leadership in these units. There was a failure of command. The second reason was the unprecedented emotional trauma and pressures under which all Sikh troops were when the Golden Temple was entered."

If we take into consideration all the relevant factors, their past record, General Sunderji's opinion about them, poor leadership in the units where desertions took place and the leniency shown by Field Marshal Auchinleck in the I.N.A. trials — We have a strong case justifying clemency for the Sikh soldiers.

It would be fair to condone the offences of those who mutinied and deserted the unit lines. At the same time, to those who committed any brutality or murder, the punishment should be according to the law.

This action will go a long way in maintaining the stability, reliability and efficiency of the Indian Army, apart from restoring confidence in the Sikh soldiers.

Applying the same principle, it would be fair to dispose off all cases of the Jodhpur detainees expeditiously, punishing only those who have committed any brutality or murder and setting the rest of them free. Their prolonged detention without trial has an adverse effect not only on the masses in Punjab but also on the Sikh soldiers for the reasons mentioned earlier.

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