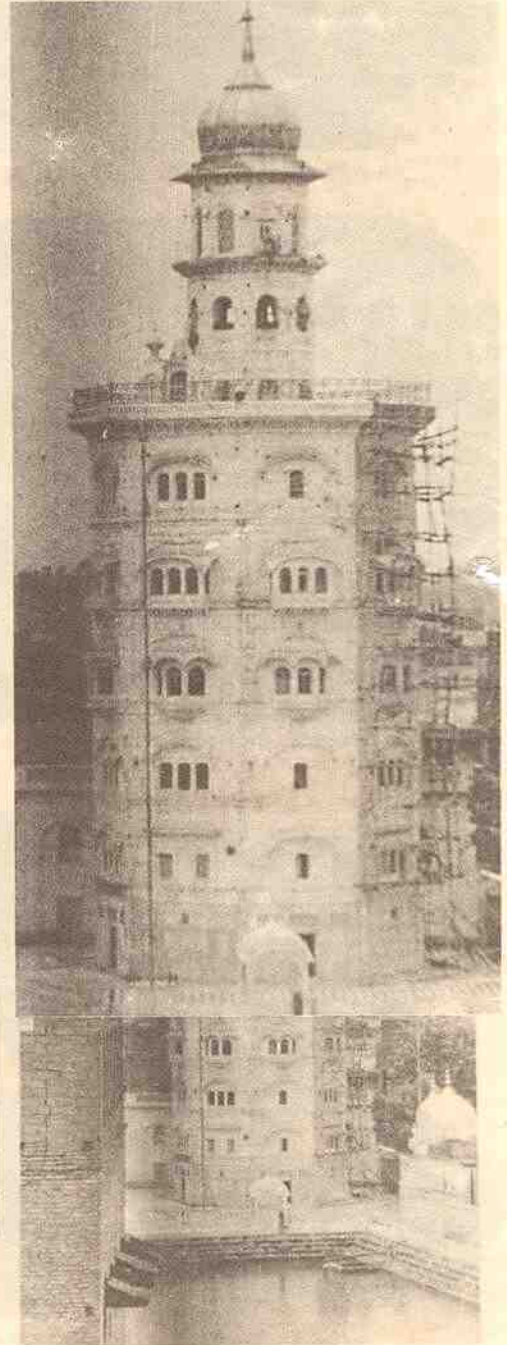


PUNJAB

# Eye-Witnesses Describe Army Action



*Operation Kar Seva:* An army bulldozer started clearing the rubble of the Akal Takht even before dead bodies were removed. Five bodies were found in the shattered building (top) in the bazar behind the Golden Temple. The pock-marked Gurdwara Atal Saheb (right) being patched up.



*Point number one. The Government's White Paper on Punjab simply cannot be taken at face value. Example: No details are given about the ubiquitous foreign hand or about the role of the Congress (I) in the creation of Bhindranwale.*

*Point number two. The Government-controlled media simply cannot be believed. Example: It says the Harmandir Saheb was not damaged during Army action, whereas in fact there are over 200 bullet-marks on the walls of the shrine.*

*Point number three: Army action simply has not solved the problem of terrorism. Example: Dams are being breached by saboteurs and there is at least one killing a day in the strife-torn State even today.*

*Point number four: Mrs. Gandhi's talk about a healing touch is simply not borne out by her actions. Example: The induction of Baba Santa Singh to perform kar seva has intensified tension within the Sikh community. Moreover, the Centre's assumption of ultra-extraordinary powers like the IAA (terrorist affected area) Ordinance has heightened the sense of insecurity in the Punjab country-side.*

*Point number five: The whole Sikh community simply cannot be held responsible for the black deeds of Bhindranwale. Example: Sikh workers held anti-Bhindranwale rallies on April 17, May 1 and May 31 despite dire warnings by the AISSF and despite lack of protection from the police; Sikh students participated in several seminars on communal harmony to counter Bhindranwale's*

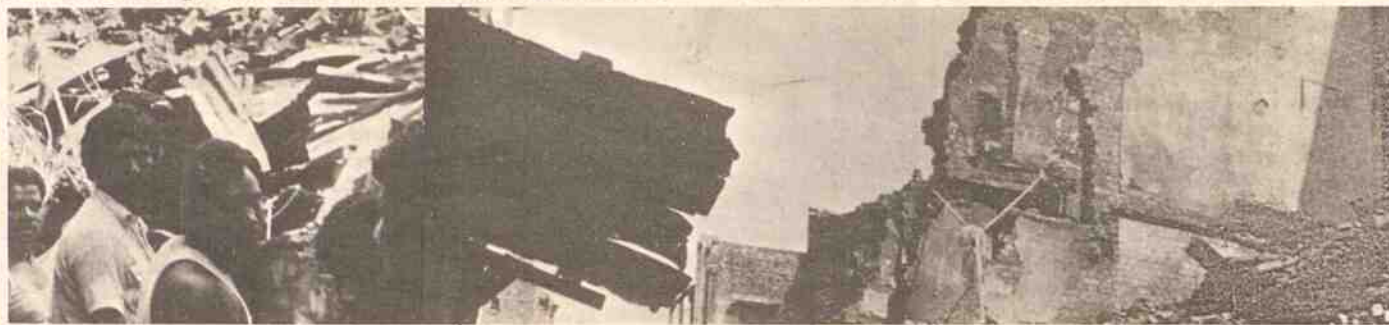
*preachings; Sikh poets and journalists wrote satires and articles in numerous little magazines debunking the Bhindranwale cult. What more could ordinary citizens do? It was the Government, the police, the ruling party, which did nothing for months on end until the Army was suddenly called in to destroy Bhindranwale and, simultaneously, to give the Sikh community a punch on the nose.*

*What, then, is the truth about Punjab today? Can the smokescreen of the Government's white lies be swept aside so that a glimmer of the truth can be glimpsed? Is it too early for a post-mortem on the Army action on the Golden Temple? Is it too late to grope for a formula for peace and communal harmony?*

*Surya begins the process of picking up the pieces of truth and putting them together in an attempt to build up an atmosphere free of half-truths and half-baked theories so that the dubious designs of political manipulators can be thwarted.*

*We present graphic eyewitness accounts of men who lived through the June blood-bath, together with rare photographs of the immediate aftermath of Army action. We*

*also publish interviews with both ruling party and opposition politicians in the holy city of Amritsar to record their differing perceptions on the latest developments in the Golden Temple. In a constructive contribution to peace, Khushwant Singh puts forward a formula that could pave the way for a genuine healing process. Interviews are by Onkar Singh and Jasvinder Singh.*



# I Was Not Allowed To See Bhindranwale's Dead Body'

—Giani Puran Singh tells *Surya*

**Giani Puran Singh, one of the many Pathi Singhs (*Granthis*) serving in the Harmandar Sahib, went to carry out religious duties on the evening of June 5 and was trapped within Harmandar Sahib till the morning of June 7. In an informal talk with the *Surya* he gave the first hand account of what transpired within the Harmandar Sahib after Operation Bluestar was launched.**

I went to Harmandar Sahib around 7.30 in the evening because I had to ensure that the religious ceremonies were performed despite the heavy odds. The moment I stepped into the Parikrama I stumbled across a body. Since bullets came like heavy down pour, I had to take shelter behind each and every pillar and other possible shelters to reach the Darshni Deodi. Another body was lying there. I ran a few yards and reached the Akal Takht. Since *Rehrass path* (night prayer) starts in the Harmandar Sahib five minutes after it starts at Akal Takht, I wanted to know if the *path* had been started there. I had a brief glimpse of Sant Bhindranwale at that time. He said nothing to me nor did I say anything to him.

"Around 7.45, I came down from there and taking the greatest possible risk entered the Darshni Deodi. I ran towards Harmandar Sahib unmindful of the bullets whipping past my ears and body. I had barely started the *Rehrass path* when another colleague of ours, Giani Mohan Singh, who was to perform this particular function, too joined me. Seeing the intensity of the fire, we decided to close all the doors barring the front door. Soon after the religious rites

were over, we took Guru Granth Sahib to the top room of Harmandar Sahib to prevent any damage to the holy Granth. The head Granthi Giani Sahib Singh, had left clear instructions that under no circumstances Granth Sahib was to be taken to Akal Takht if the conditions were not right.

"Looking through the window panes from the first floor of Harmandar Sahib I saw an armoured vehicle standing in the Parikrama with its lights on. I thought for a moment that maybe it was a fire-brigade which is collecting water from the holy Sarovar to put out fire which was raging in almost every room and around Harmandar Sahib. A few minutes later my belief was shattered when I saw the vehicle emitting fire instead of putting it out. By 10.30 or so around 13 tanks entered the Parikrama after crushing the staircase from the eastern wing where Guru Ram Das Sarai, Langar and Teja Singh Sumundari Hall are situated. One after another the cannon fire lit the skies. When the first shell hit the bottom of Darshni Deodi creating a big hole in it, I saw the room with the invaluable '*Chandni*' donated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh catching fire. One after another big bombs hit the Darshni Deodi in quick succession and what was once a marvellous building was now raging in fire. Tosha Khana (the place where the treasure was kept) was also on fire. Occasionally a bullet would hit the main building of Harmandar Sahib. Since we (myself, the other Granthi Giani Mohan Singh and 25 *sevadars* and *ragis* who recite *gurbani*) were spotted, we had to keep on changing our positions throughout the night.



**Guilty Or Innocent?:** There's no knowing how many of those killed were terrorists and how many were ordinary devotees.

In the early hours of the morning on June 6, we took the holy Granth Sahib down and performed the religious rites that we perform every day like "*Maharaj da prakash karna, asaji di war da kirtan karna.*" (Unfolding the holy Granth and reciting hymns from the holy scriptures). The two side doors were closed but the front and the back doors were open. Bullets kept hitting the wall both inside and outside, ripping off the golden surface of the main Harmandar Sahib at various places. Soon after we finished reciting *asaji di war* a bullet came whipping past the left hand door (as you face Harmandar Sahib) through the shut door and hit one of the *ragis* Shri Avtar Singh. Instead of shouting, the man started saying *wabe guru wabe guru*. We tore our clothes to try and bandage his wound. But the blood just wouldn't stop. We had to pull him to a corner to protect further. Another bullet came and hit the holy Granth. We have preserved that Granth Sahib. The original Granth Sahib is undamaged.

In the meanwhile, a lot of cannon fire and tank fire had hit the holy Akal Takht Sahib. Besides Avtar Singh, two other *sevadars* present in Harmandar Sahib were wounded. Since there was no let up in the intensity of the bullet fire, we had to literally crawl to the holy Sarovar to get water for ourselves and the injured showed remarkable patience despite the wounds. Around 5 p.m. they announced over the magaphone that those hiding in the Harmandar Sahib should come out and that they would not be shot dead. While myself and Giani Mohan Singh remained inside, the rest went out and they informed General Brar that two of us were still in. General Brar again asked us to come out but we preferred to stay inside. Around 7.30 an officer and two *jawans* came inside to take us out.

When we came out the General asked us as to why we did not obey his orders. We told him that we could not have left the costly belongings and or Guru Granth Sahib alone. We asked him to let us go to the toilet. He agreed to this. We were escorted back to Harmandar Sahib by a Sikh officer and some *jawans*. This officer was rude and he told us to walk in front to make sure that if anyone fired from inside, we would get killed. Since no one was hiding within and there was no gun or bullet within the Harmandar Sahib, we saw no harm in doing what we were told. It must have been around 8.30 at night. I noticed that Avtar Singh had moved out of the Harmandar Sahib and was lying with his head towards the holy Granth and his legs stretched outside towards the eastern gate.

The officer was ashamed of his behaviour

when he could not find even single empty shell from Harmandar Saheb. By the time we came down Avtar Singh was dead. Leaving two of us right there, he and the jawans, who had taken off their shoes before coming in, went out. Next morning two of us were escorted to Giani Sahib Singh's house (Head Granthi Harmandar Saheb) in Attamandi. While we were instructed not to move out or to speak to anyone, Gianiji was escorted to Harmandar Saheb. Before we came out the jawan escorting two of us told that bodies of Sant Bhindranwale, Bhai Amrik Singh, Thara Singh and Shahbeg Singh were found between the two Nishan Sahebs in front of rubbles of Akal Takht. When I asked if I could have a look at the bodies I was showed a gun and told that 'it's not permitted'.

## '350 Bullet Marks On Harmandar Saheb'

—Giani Sahib Singh tells *Surya*

Giani Sahib Singh, the head granthi of Harmandar Saheb had gone to Batala to perform the wedding ceremony of a boy on June 3, the day when the Sikh *sangat* of Amritsar were marking the martyrdom of fifth Guru Shri Arjun Devji. Giani Sahib Singh was the second religious figure to appear on Doordarshan to appeal for communal harmony. Wilted under pressure he said a few words on the national network, but he did not say what the government wanted him to say. When Harmandar Saheb was opened to the public for the first time on June 25, the angry Sikh *sangat*

sought for him and Giani Kirpal Singh, head priest of Akal Takht. Giani Sahib Singh gave them copies of his original speech written out in *Gurumukhi* (he also handed over a copy of the same to *Surya*). In an informal talk with *Surya* Giani Sahib Singh recounted the scene at Harmandar Saheb from June 3 onwards.

**W**hen I got down from the bus around 11 in the morning on June 3, I was told that the city (Amritsar) was under curfew and I could not go anywhere. I told them who I was. They took me to the Kotwali and an officer was asked to verify my statement from the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee. The Amritsar SP came personally to drop me at Ghantaghar. From there I went in. Everything passed off well. A helicopter kept on hovering over the Harmandar Saheb all the time. Due to curfew about 6-7000 people were trapped within the Golden Temple complex.

Almost all rooms within the complex and Teja Singh Sumundari Hall as well as Guru Nanak Nivas and Guru Ram Das Sarai were full. Most of the people who were staying there had their families with them. At about 4.45 on the morning of June 4, the army opened fire. In fact, they had been firing occasionally since June 1. Shelling continued throughout the day.

On the evening of June 4, Guru Granth Saheb was taken in procession to Akal Takht for night and on the June 5 morning around 4.45 a.m. after the holy Granth was brought to Harmandar Saheb, the shelling began again and this time there was no let up. I was there in the Harmandar Saheb till noon and came back to my place after taking shelter at various places. On June 4, four people had died near Darshni Deodi. The same day we successfully completed Akhand Paths at various places—two at Akal Takht, two at Nishan Sahib, two at Baba Budha, two at Dukh Bhanjani Beri, one each at Lachiberi, Baba Deep Singh Gumat (top room of Harmandar Saheb). Right through the day the *kirtan* had continued. On June 4, three more bodies were found lying in the Parikrama. These were picked up by the SGPC and cremated. While heavy shelling continued on June 5, we carried on with *shabad kirtan* and in the evening I left Harmandar Saheb leaving



*Holy Battlefield:* The marble Parikrama was littered with bodies and debris immediately after the bloody gun battle.

behind me two granthis namely Giani Puran Singh and Giani Mohan Singh.

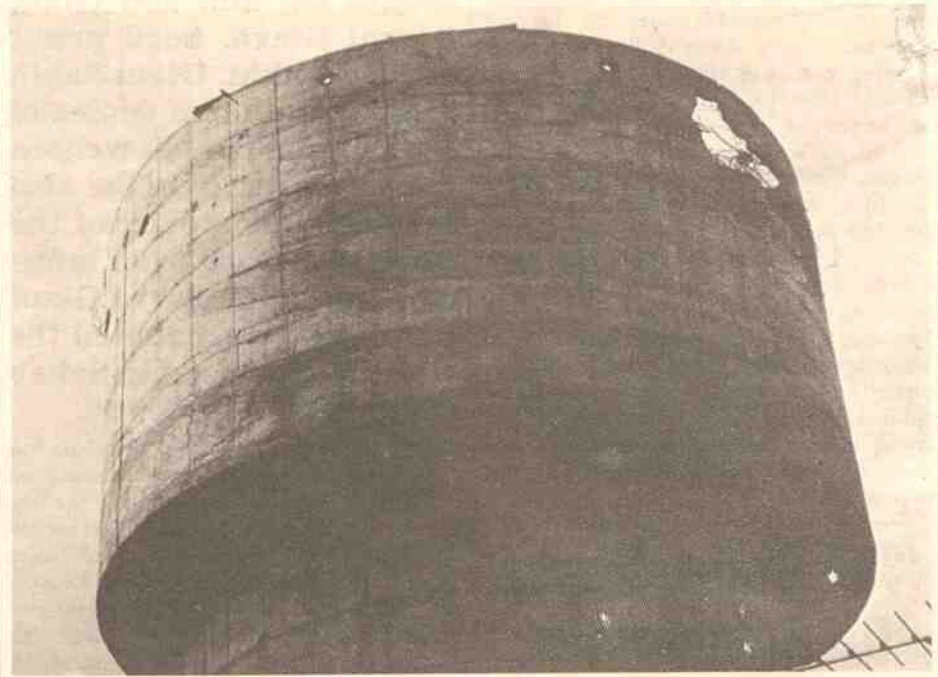
There were 25 other people within Harmandar Saheb. These included *sevadars* and *ragis*. What transpired within the Golden Temple complex I had never seen the like of it before anywhere. I was told by my colleagues that they used as many as 13 tanks which took up positions at various places in the Parikrama. Sardar Avtar Singh, one of the members of the *ragi jatha*, died right in Harmandar Saheb and yet they say that not even a single bullet was fired at Harmandar Saheb.

As many as 350 bullets hit the Harmandar Saheb during the operation. The original glass frames were shattered. There was blood all around. They had completely demolished Akal Takht. On June 7, a few jawans came with Giani Puran Singh and Giani Mohan Singh to my house and I was told that their boss wanted to see me. It was about 6.30 in the morning. The stench of the bodies lying in the Parikrama was just unbearable. Wherever I could see there were just bodies and bodies which included men, women and children. Some of them were floating in Sarovar. I think the number of people killed within the complex (I mean in the Parikrama alone) must have been somewhere in the region of 1000-1200. The Jawans were smoking freely.

While they were taking me to their officer, some of the jawans talked in rough and foul language. While one said, "Raj karega dogra," another said, "Maro goli sale ko". The officer asked me to carry on the religious duties as usual. I told them I could not do anything alone. I want my people. When he asked me who I wanted, I named 24 people, all of whom had been arrested. All these *sevadars* were right there but I could not talk to them. The officer reluctantly released 13 of them.

I just could not believe that the blood had been spilled right in Harmandar Saheb. Most of the *rumalas* (cloth coverings) had been burnt. We washed the entire Harmandar Saheb before performing other religious duties including doing the *prakash* (opening the religious book) of the Guru Granth. The body of Avtar Singh had been handed over to the army by Giani Puran Singh before he was escorted out. Three *ragis* were shot dead on the night of June 5 at Darshni Deodi. These were Bhai Amrik Singh, Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Balwant Singh.

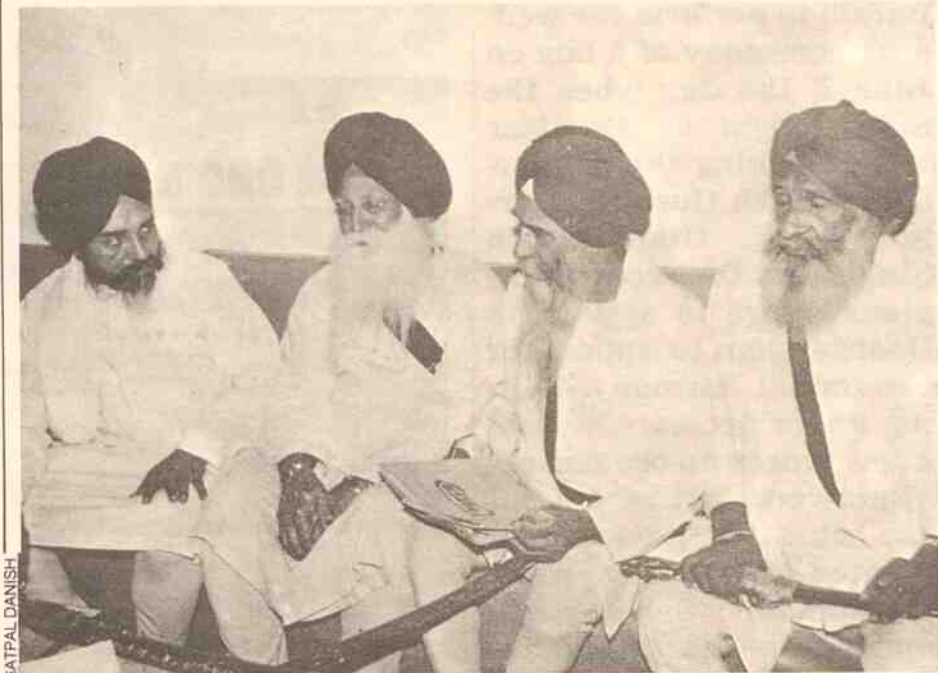
Till June 20, we went to Harmandar Saheb with cloth tied to our noses, so powerful was the stench. When the President came I told him that he had grown up under watchful eyes of the Gurus and now Guru Granth Saheb did not have even



**Water And Fire:** The damaged water tank in the Golden Temple complex, which came under heavy artillery fire.

silken coverings. He promptly sent some by next flight. When Mrs Gandhi came, the Generals would not let me talk to her. I showed her the bullet marks on the Harmandar Saheb. I told her in detail about the extent of the damage caused to Akal Takht, Darshni Deodi and other important places

and also told her the importance of the various parts of Harmandar Saheb. The Generals did not like it but they could do little on this occasion. I told her that 700 copies of Guru Granth had been burnt. What was the purpose of an attack in which innocents have been killed?



**Wise After The Event:** (from left to right) Giani Sahib Singh, Giani Harcharan Singh, Giani Kirpal Singh and Sant Lakha Singh.

## 'Six Tanks Were Deployed'

Rajinder Singh Vedanti, Ardasi of Harmandar Saheb, tells *Surya*.

At about 10 o'clock on the night of June 5, armoured vehicles entered *Parikarma*. As the first vehicle reached the *Chabeel* (water-stall), it was pounded with heavy artillery fire from the right side. The terrorists fired from inside the Akal Takht and destroyed it.

About 40 minutes later, the first tank entered the Golden Temple complex. The tanks made their way through the entry gate facing the Teja Singh Samundari Hall.

Simultaneously, a shell exploded close to my house and damaged the front railings. Fire was erupting from many parts of the Temple. The corner room, with its rear towards the Brahm Buta Akhada, was in flames. Swaran Singh, nephew and follower of Bhindranwale, lived in that room with his family.

The fighting intensified and the entire area was lit by fire at various places and by the flares used by the Army. In the beginning the army faced heavy casualties but they were successful in capturing the *Ghantaghar* (Clock-Tower), *Azaib-ghar*, *Wali Deori*, *Guru Ram Das Sarai*, *Guru Nanak Niwas* and *Teja Singh Samundari Hall*.

By then six tanks and armoured vehicles had positioned themselves inside the Temple complex. One, exactly at the place where an armoured car was earlier destroyed, the second at a distance of about 25 feet, the third near the *Samadhi* of Baba Deep Singh, the fourth was in the corner to

cover the first three. The remaining two were on the right side of the *Parikarma*. There was an armoured jeep, positioned just near the entry gate towards Teja Singh Samundari Hall but it did not enter.

Then the troops entered, marching towards *Parikarma* and the second column entered the Teja Singh Samundari Hall. They entered each and every room to flush out the terrorists.

By the morning of June 6, the Army was in control of three fourth of the *Parikarma*. The ring was drawing closer and closer to the Akal Takht. At a quarter past eight, they seemed to be getting ready for the final assault on the Akal Takht. For about an hour, heavy fighting continued and at about quarter past nine, there were war cries and people could be heard screaming and shouting. It became clear that there was some kind of a heavy hand-to-hand fighting going on. This went on for about half an hour.

During the same period, Sardar Avtar Singh of village Parovar, Gurdaspur district, was hit by a bullet inside the Harmandar Saheb. He was an old *premi* (devotee) and a very regular visitor. He could not be given any first aid as there was no resistance left inside the complex except at a few places.

At around 4.30 p.m. a Sikh Colonel appeared in front of the Sikh reference library. He declared over the public address system that the temple was fully under army control. He gave every body within the vicinity of the temple 20 minutes to come out with their hands in the air and to surrender. There were 18 *sevadars* and six or seven *Akhand Pathis* inside the Harmandar Saheb. They all came out and surrendered.

My family panicked in terror as we heard the announcement. I had my wife, mother-in-law and nephew with me to look after. We hurriedly packed our clothes and made our way towards the complex. There and then about ten army men with sten-guns took charge of us and when our convoy reached the place, there were already about 200 people there. About 52 of our SGPC colleagues were also present there. A lady with a three-week old child in her arms was lying dead near the Atta Mandi Deori.

Our kirpans were taken away and our *dastars* (turbans) were removed. These were later used to tie our hands. We were taken towards Dukh Bhanjani Beri, the corner room near Brahma Buta Akhada. This was still in flames. There were dead bodies scattered all around the place near the *Janana Snanghar* (ladies bathroom). We were told to make a queue as they took us to *Ghantaghar* with our hands tied behind our backs. We sat there the whole night.

—J.S.

## Golden Temple Today

Entering from the Ghantaghar side we slowly walked past the barbed wire (first obstacle, about 100 yards from the Golden Temple complex as it stood on July 12, 1984 at 8 a.m. in the morning) to the outer side of the Golden Temple to leave our shoes at *Jorean Di Seva* (shoe keeping service).

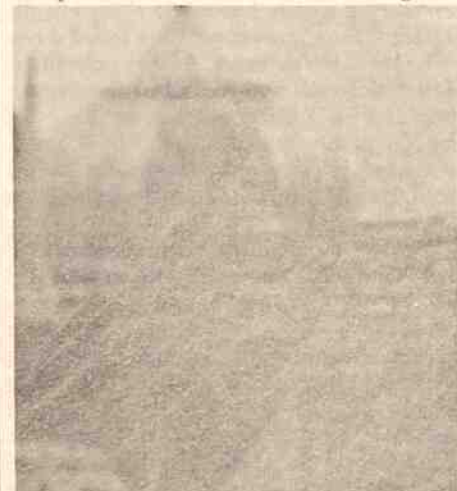
At the entry point stood a jawan just below the Ghantaghar (since the original watch could not be repaired in time, the army officers had replaced them with plastic dials and plastic hour and minute hands which do not work, just before the Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi visited Golden Temple) who insisted that the devotees remove their leather belts before going in.

Each person on entrance looked towards the Akal Takht. A majority of the men and women burst into tears. Among those who visited Golden Temple were also two Christian nuns who had come to find out if the government version that Harmandir Saheb was safe, was correct.

Akal Takht, seat of the sixth Guru of the Sikhs, Shri Hargobind Singh, has been the most important in the history of Sikh religion. Situated at the west end of the Temple, the beautiful marble building had



Before... : The Akal Takht in its erstwhile splendour.



And After... : A gaping gash in the copper dome.

