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39th Year of Operation Bluestar

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Why in News:

June 8 2023 marks 39 years of Operation Bluestar, in which the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush out militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers.

About Operation Bluestar

Operation Bluestar was an Indian Army operation carried out in June 1984 in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, to flush out militants who were led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a one-time leader of the Sikh seminary Damdami Taksal and a key figure in the growing separatist Khalistan movement at the time.

While successful in its intended objectives, it caused a furore among some members of the Sikh community, who saw the operation carried out in their shrine as an attack on their faith, and 39 years later too, it remains a controversial episode of Indian history.

The history of Khalistan Movement

The idea of Khalistan was born in the aftermath of the Partition of India into West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

Punjab, the home of most members of the Sikh community, was also divided into two because of the newly-created border.

It led to a sense of loss among Indian Sikhs, with culturally and religiously important cities, such as Lahore and Nankana Sahib, going to Pakistan.

As writer Khushwant Singh put it in the collection of essays *The Punjab Story*, "The sentiment (for a separate Sikh state) was expressed in a single query – Hindus got Hindustan. Muslims got Pakistan. What did the Sikhs get out of Partition and Independence?"

Additionally, there was some discontent over a few administrative issues, like river water sharing with other states, which led to demands for autonomy – and then for a sovereign Sikh state from some quarters. It is also believed that Pakistan aided the movement with arms and funds.

In response to demands for autonomy, in 1966, the erstwhile Punjab state was divided into the Hindi-speaking, Hindu-majority states of Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, and the Punjabi-speaking, Sikh-majority Punjab. However, by the 1970s, the separatist Khalistan movement was in full swing – in India and abroad.

The buildup

In this scenario emerged Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a firebrand preacher who positioned himself as "the authentic voice of the Sikhs" in a period of political uncertainty, Canadian journalist Terry Milewski wrote in his book *Blood for Blood: Fifty years of the global Khalistan project*.

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While Bhindranwale was initially courted by the Congress to counter the Shiromani Akali Dal's influence in the state, by the early 1980s he had become "a problem" – he found a captive audience among the youth, the activities of his followers were becoming increasingly violent, and Bhindranwale himself was engaging in aggressive rhetoric. In 1982, he became a part of a civil disobedience movement launched by the Akalis, called the Dharam Yudh Morcha, and moved to the Akal Takht inside the Golden Temple complex to evade arrest from the authorities.

In 1983, A S Atwal, Deputy Inspector-General of Police (DIG), was shot dead after praying at the Golden Temple and his body was left to decay. "The assailant... after firing the shots from a carbine, entered the Golden Temple," The Indian Express reported at the time.

The late KPS Gill, the DGP of Punjab Police who is credited with bringing the Punjab militancy under control, later wrote: "Ugly as the Atwal murder was, however, it was only a beginning... This became a regular feature; bodies, mutilated, hacked to pieces, stuffed into gunny bags, kept appearing mysteriously in the gutters and sewers around the Temple."

By 1984, the government finally decided to step in by sending in armed forces to flush out Bhindranwale and his followers from their hideout inside the Golden Temple.

The operation

At this point, the Golden Temple complex was nothing short of a fortress. Over a period of months, Bhindranwale's men had smuggled in a huge cache of arms and ammunition inside the complex and placed guns strategically for defence. Furthermore, under the leadership of Major General Shahbeg Singh, who had been dismissed by the Indian Army over corruption charges, Bhindranwale's men received extensive military training.

On June 1, four days before the army actually entered the Golden Temple complex, the first shots were fired at the temple by the CRPF to, according to reports, "assess the training and strength of the militants inside".

On June 3, a 36-hour-curfew was imposed on the state of Punjab with all methods of communication and public travel suspended, electricity lines cut and complete media censorship.

The army finally commenced the operation on the night of June 5. The initial thrust of the operation was to neutralise the high-perched defensive positions built by Bhindranwale's men in the Golden Temple complex. As per the army, any assault on the temple compound could not be successful if they remained in play.

As the outer defences of the temple complex fell, the army was still hopeful for a quick capitulation. What they did not take into account was that the militants were not necessarily making "rational" decisions. The troops' entry into the Golden Temple was met with furious fire from inside.

In The Punjab Story, journalist Shekhar Gupta described the troops' attempts to capture the Parikrama or the circumambulatory path around the Golden Temple: "The troops made a mad rush for the staircase at each end of the Parikrama. But Shabeg had not earned his reputation of a wily, doughty commander in the army for nothing. He had anticipated just this and the sprinting troops ran headlong into automatic fire from men who sprang out of the manholes, strategically situated at the foot of each staircase."

The unanticipated resistance faced by the troops resulted in the commanders calling for tank support. According to Giani Puran Singh, a temple priest, tanks began entering the temple complex at around 10 pm on June 5.

Over the next 12 hours, the army's Vijayanta tanks shelled the Golden Temple's Akal Takht – one of the five seats of power as per Sikh belief. This was Bhindranwale's location, where resistance was the strongest. Tanks had been initially avoided over possible structural damage to the complex – something that would anger the Sikh community further.

However, once tanks were brought in, they proved to be extremely effective. As dawn broke on June 6, the main defences, comprising machine guns and Chinese-made RPGs, had largely been neutralised.

At around 11 am, some 25 militants rushed out of the building, firing at random and running straight towards troops, who gunned down most of them. “The generals guessed that the mad dash was an indication that Bhindranwale was either dead or wounded or had, confirming their worst fears, escaped,” wrote Shekhar Gupta.

Fortunately for the armed forces, the firebrand preacher had not escaped. As the troops finally entered the Akal Takht, now in ruins, they found Bhindranwale dead, reportedly in a heap of “about 40 corpses”. The last remaining militants either surrendered or were killed by June 10.

The aftermath

While the army initially placed total casualties at 554 militants and civilians dead, 83 troops dead (4 officers, 79 soldiers) and 236 wounded among government forces, other estimates peg the number of casualties as much higher.

Though the army has always claimed it did everything to protect civilians, including making announcements on loudspeakers prior to the attack, its actions have been questioned. In 2017, a sessions court in Amritsar ruled that there was no evidence of such warnings.

Beyond the casualties, there were reverberations across the country. The resentment among some members of the Sikh community over the operation saw its gravest manifestation on October 31, 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards, who blamed her for the attack.

Her assassination would trigger some of the worst communal violence ever witnessed in India, as Sikhs were openly targeted and killed. Many in the government and the Congress party, which was in power at the time, were accused of playing an active role in the anti-Sikh riots, such as Congress leader Sajjan Kumar. He was sentenced to life imprisonment by the Delhi High Court in 2018 for the murder of five persons in Delhi.

Crucially, while Bhindranwale had been killed, his death made him an almost mythological figure in some ways.

The events at Golden Temple did not end violence in Punjab, with rising militancy accompanying rising repression from the state and the armed forces well into the 1990s.

Conclusion

In hindsight, Operation Bluestar was possibly the single most significant act of political overreaction and military incompetence that gave a lease of life to a movement that could easily have been ended in the mid-1980s