

# Recent anti-Sikh violence in India evokes memories of 1984 genocide

By Andrea Castillo [acastillo@fresnobee.com](mailto:acastillo@fresnobee.com)

Jagjit Singh had been in the U.S. under political asylum for less than two weeks when he got word in October 1993 that his family had been tortured and his wife killed by Indian police.

Singh, 55, now lives in Fresno. He and other Sikhs in the central San Joaquin Valley are reeling over recent violence against followers of their religion in India. The situation evokes memories of the Indian government-led campaign that started in 1984 and resulted in the deaths of thousands of Sikh civilians.

Kashmiri Sikhs kick a burning effigy of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, chief of a religious sect Dera Sacha Sauda, during a protest against the killing of two Sikh boys, in Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir, in October 2015. Two people were killed during police firing to control a crowd protesting against the alleged desecration of a Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhs, in Punjab state on Wednesday. Most of the anger was directed at the religious sect with allegations that an anonymous note with a slogan popularly used by the sect was found at the place where the holy book was reportedly stolen from, according to news reports. Dar Yasin Associated Press



“Nothing has changed since 1984,” Singh said through an interpreter. He now fears for the lives of family members who remain in his homeland.

Protests have wracked the Punjab state of India since June after torn-up copies of Guru Granth Sahib – Sikhism’s holy book – started showing up in different parts of the state. Police [opened fire during a protest](#) last month in a northern Punjab village, killing two protesters and wounding dozens of others.

Sikhism, which promotes equality, compassion and tolerance, is the world’s fifth-largest religion. It was started in the Punjab region of northern India and eastern Pakistan. More than 30,000 Sikhs live in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Punjabi Sikhs here and abroad worry the current violence will erupt into a repeat of 1984.

That year, Indian security forces killed many Sikh militants after seizing the Golden Temple in Amritsar – the religion’s most important site. In revenge, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards.

The Indian government estimates 3,000 Sikhs were killed in the period immediately following Gandhi’s murder. Sikh advocacy groups say that number is much higher – 30,000 killed, thousands of women raped, hundreds of gurdwaras (temples) burned and more than 300,000 displaced.

Some of those displaced ended up in the Valley, including Singh. He was persecuted along with his family for his involvement in the religious political group All India Sikh Students Federation.

We’re afraid. We can’t do anything sitting here.

Jagjit Singh of Fresno

Singh said he was jailed and tortured four times, starting in 1983. In some instances, police forced him to sit on the floor then split his legs apart. Other times, they tied his arms behind his back and to the ceiling while he stood on a table, then kicked it out from under him.

In 1993, he escaped with plans to send for his family. Instead, he learned his wife, 8-month-old son and father had been arrested in Chandigarh, the capital city of Punjab.

Singh's wife died in police custody and his father died shortly after being released. His son was tortured by being placed on a block of ice but survived and now lives in Fresno, along with Singh's mother.

Singh's brothers also were tortured. Two now live in Canada but one remains in India.

"We're afraid," he said. "They could kill him anytime. We can't do anything sitting here."

## Genocide recognition

The plight of Sikhs to get their genocide recognized is much like [that of Armenians](#), another ethnic group with a large Valley population, though less publicized in mainstream media. If the U.S. declared the violence a genocide, the United Nations could prosecute those responsible in International Criminal Court.

Small steps, though, have been taken. Most recently, the [Kerman City Council voted unanimously](#) on Wednesday to recognize the 1984 violence as a genocide, becoming one of the first U.S. cities to do so.

The city of San Joaquin passed a similar resolution this year, and Stockton passed a proclamation. Last year, the city of Harvey, Ill., passed a resolution.

The national advocacy group Sikhs for Justice [requested the Kerman resolution](#) in an Oct. 23 letter to the City Council.

Sikhs for Justice legal adviser Gurpatwant Pannun said it was a coincidence that his group started working to pass the resolution in Kerman around the same time that violence started up again in Punjab. But he said the present situation is no different than what happened in 1984.

Genocide means the deliberate killing of a racial, ethnic, religious or national group.

Back then, Pannun said, organized mobs attacked Sikh temples and burned the holy book. It was a ploy: Sikhs would leave their houses to try to save the holy book from desecration and end up killed.

Pannun said that makes it clear what happened was a systematic effort to eliminate their religious identity. Genocide is defined as the deliberate killing of a racial, ethnic, religious or national group.

"Now, again, it has erupted from desecration of the book's pages," he said. "Sikhs said enough is enough. We've got to stand up now."

During the Kerman meeting, City Council Member Rhonda Armstrong asked the 50 or so Sikhs present how the resolution would help them gain justice.

Pannun told her the Sikh genocide of 1984 has continued in different forms. He said another counterinsurgency campaign continued into the 1990s, during which time thousands more Sikhs were killed. Since then, a [drug epidemic](#) has made addicts of young men across the state.

"The recognition of genocide by the council and by the international bodies will deter India from further committing the genocide of Sikhs," he said.

Kerman and the other U.S. cities are not the only jurisdictions Sikh groups have sought recognition from.

Last year, Sikhs for Justice [organized a petition](#) that garnered more than 30,500 signatures. It called on the White House to recognize the 1984 atrocities as a genocide. In its response, the White House called them "grave human rights violations" but stopped short of the word genocide.

The U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices have covered the political killings, disappearances, denial of fair public trials, stifling of religious freedom and the Indian government's response (or lack thereof).

From the [1994 report](#): "In Punjab the pattern of disappearances prevalent in the early 1990s appears to be at an end. Hundreds of police and security officials were not held accountable for serious human rights abuses committed during the counterinsurgency of 1984-94."

30,000 The number of Sikhs killed in 1984, estimated by advocacy groups. The Indian government estimates 3,000 were killed.

The report includes details about the torture and deaths of Sikhs similar to what Singh described: extrajudicial executions and mass cremations.

In April, the California Assembly [passed a resolution](#) declaring the murders a pogrom, or an organized massacre.

Current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did characterize the 1984 deaths as a genocide and during his campaign promised a new investigation of the bloodshed. But critics say he has [not followed through](#).

## **Making noise**

The renewed violence in Punjab has local Sikh families thinking up ways to help from afar.

In Fowler last month, many used a parade celebrating the birthday of Sikhism's founding guru, or spiritual teacher, [as a quasi-protest](#). Banners adorned semitractor-trailers outfitted as parade floats, bearing photos of the two men killed last month. Banners read, "What has changed in last 31 years?"

The Sikh Council of Central California, which represents 13 temples throughout the Central Valley, passed a resolution that day condemning the way police have responded to peaceful demonstrators in Punjab and urging residents to ask their local congressional representatives to intervene.

But for Raj Singh Badhesha, 32, of Selma, signing petitions and marching isn't enough to save his uncles, grandparents and other extended family in India if Sikhs face another genocide. He feels helpless watching online videos of water cannons blasting protesters and officers whipping them with sticks.

"If this were happening here, you'd do something," he said. "All we can do is sign petitions. All we can do is share things on Facebook or Twitter. You make noise and hope people will hear you."

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Los Angeles Sikh Genocide March

**Route:** Along Beverly Boulevard from Beverly Center mall, 8500 Beverly Blvd., to Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, 100 The Grove Drive

**When:** 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday

**More information:** [referendum2020.org](http://referendum2020.org)

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