

THE ARMY ACTION AT THE GOLDEN TEMPLE
ON 05 AND 06 JUNE 1984

Background

1. The Akali Morcha launched in 1981 under Sant Longowal gradually passed into the hands of the militant, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his band of extremists and terrorists whose declared intention was the creation of 'Khalistan', an exclusive nation for Sikhs with the active encouragement, connivance and assistance of certain foreign powers. The action arms of the movement were the All India Sikh Student's Federation (AISSF) led by Amrik Singh and a small hard core of the Nihang Sect. Combining indiscriminate killing of Sikh opponents and innocent members of other communities with vitriolic secessionist speeches, the Bhindranwale group gradually wrested effective control of the Golden Temple from the SGPC whose members were forced to endorse his line at the peril of being included in Bhindranwale's 'hit list' and willingly followed his line.

The internecine battle within the Golden Temple was accompanied by acquisition of sophisticated and country made arms, which, as evident after recovery, included anti-tank weapons, mines and heavy automatic weapons besides rifles, and grenades. Reports were received of military training being imparted to the members of the group in so-called 'religious training camps' in Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan occupied Kashmir. Reports confirmed that military activities were coordinated by certain retired and discharged ex-servicemen headed by Shabeg Singh who was a dismissed Major General due to corruption and malpractices. Simultaneously, the area around Golden Temple and the temple itself was developed into a virtually impregnable fortress garrisoned by fanatically motivated insurgents. This included construction of well built weapon positions, parapet walls and emplacements. In addition, high roof civilian houses on the periphery were occupied by armed insurgents and used/well fortified forward defences. Existing water tower, minarets and domes which

overlooked the temple were also fortified, not only providing a very effective observation, but also enabling devastating fire to be effective across all approaches.

Description of Golden Temple and area around

Layout and Buildings. The complex comprises the following:-

The Main Temple. The main temple area is squarish and enclosed by multi-storey buildings on the Northern, Southern and Western Wing with a wall on the Eastern side. The buildings enclosing the area include the Akal Takht (Command Headquarters of Bhindranwale) which is set back in a recess along the Western Wing and has a basement that reportedly served as the arsenal of the extremists. The Darshani Deori (main entrance) is in the Northern Wing and a similar gate is also constructed in the Southern Wing. The buildings enclosing the temple area are generally three storeyed with a large number of rooms which are used for administrative purposes like stores, selling outlets for books and photographs, and offices. Most of these buildings also have basements and passages some of which lead to the out-side. Within the enclosure, the major constructional features are:-

Water Tank. This occupies the bulk of the area and is rectangular in shape.

Parikrama. The 40 feet wide marble path all around the water tank.

Harmander Sabib. This is the 'Sanctum Sanctorum' and is located in the middle of the tank with a walk-way connecting it to the Western Parikrama.

Toshakhana. The entrance to the walk-way from the Western Parikrama is marked by a high domed gate of considerable width.

✓ Ancillary Buildings. On the Eastern side are constructed several important multi-storeyed buildings astride a good road leading from Jallianwala Bagh Side. These are :-

Langar, on the right of road.

Teja Singh Samundari Hall, also on the right of road. Between this building and the langar there is an open space with an inlaid rectangular garden.

Guru Ram Das Serai. Occupied by various armed factions and pilgrims.

SGPC Building. Occupied by prominent leaders like Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, Gurcharan Singh Tohra, Bibi Amarjit Kaur etc.

Guru Nanak Niwas. Generally occupied by pilgrims but also infiltrated by extremists.

Shiromani Akali Dal Offices.

Workshops.

Baba Atal Gurdwara.

Area Around Complex. The area all around the complex is heavily built up with old 4/5 storeyed houses with off-sets and projections through which run a labyrinthian maze of small lanes and roads that facilitate easy escape either through the lanes or over roof tops to safe houses. This is particularly so on the Western side adjoining the Akal Takht where domestic and temple buildings are virtually adjacent.

Dispositions of Terrorists in the Complex

The dispositions of the terrorists in the complex were on extremely well organised military lines, which exploited the defensive potential of the complex fully.

It appears that the Akal Takht was selected as the building of prime importance, since it housed Bhindranwale and his Headquarters. The approaches to the Akal Takht bastion were skillfully defended.

Look Out and Early Warning Posts. 17 houses in the civilian residential area were selected at distances of 500-800 metres from the outer periphery and held by approximately 10 men each. In addition, posts were created on the structures which dominated the entire surroundings i.e. the water tank East of Guru Ram Das Serai, the two towers (reportedly constructed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh) adjacent to and West of the Langar; each of these has a staircase, whose ventilation accesses were used as loop-holes.

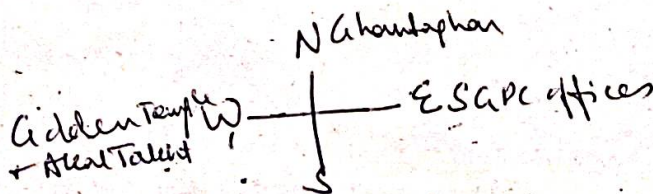
First Line of Defences. Weapon positions were sited on roof tops of all the buildings on the Eastern side which constituted the most vulnerable approach. In addition, the buildings themselves permitted fire through the sand-bagged windows at each floor level.

2) Second Line of Defences. Similar weapon positions including a large number of alternate positions were created on the roof and intermediate floors of the buildings enclosing the main temple area.

The Akal Takht. As the Akal Takht is set back from the Parikrama on the Western Wing, the open space to its East, was developed as a "killing ground", with very effective fire being brought down from the Akal Takht itself, the buildings on its right and left (which bevel into the Akal Takht and increase the domination) and the Toshakhana.

Design of Defensive Battle. On analysis after the Army's action, the design of battle of the insurgents and terrorists was as follows :-

Early Warning and aggressive attrition by the peripheral ring of look out posts.



Skilful fire control and use of alternate positions on the first and second line of defences. It was evident that weapons were deployed and fired as required and there was no indiscipline. For example, while rifles and automatic weapons were used on the look out positions, stens were the major weapon on the first and second line defences since ranges of more than 25-30 yards were rarely available around the main complex.

A very effective coordination of fire on the selected killing-ground. The limited anti-tank resources were well marshalled and used only when a mechanised vehicle came within range.

Even after capture of the buildings, suicide squads continued to operate in the basement rooms to spring out and cause casualties on the attacking troops.

Prelude to the Army Action

After all other methods employed by the Government failed and quantum-escalation of terrorist activities continued against the helpless and innocent civil population, under Bhindranwale's orders from the Golden Temple; the Army was charged with the task of removing the terrorist menace, and restoration of law and order and normalcy in Punjab.

In the first days of June, Army units were swiftly moved to their positions at Amritsar and other cities of Punjab where the growing terrorist factions had been known to have been operating from religious places. Quick coordination was carried out with police forces and civil administration. There was little intelligence or detailed information, but speed was of the essence if the terrorists were to be effectively countered and a stop brought to the senseless 'Hit list' killings as also the extermination of innocent people aimed at driving the Sikhs and Hindus apart.

Detailed orders were given to all troops to use only minimum force, I repeat minimum force, show utmost reverence to all holy places and to ensure no desecration or damage to Harmandir Sahib, the Sanctum Sanctorum at the Golden Temple and the Darbar Sahib of all Gurudwaras used as sanctuaries by the terrorists. The use of high trajectory weapons and incendiary ammunition was debarred. Troops were carefully instructed not to wear ^{any} leather item in the Temple area and to treat all captured people with dignity and care till the process of screening was over to identify terrorists and extremists.

The Events

A 36 hours curfew was declared by the Punjab State from 2100 hours on 03 June 1984, and extended selectively to 06 June 1984. Police cordons around the Golden Temple and certain other terrorist hide-outs was made effective by Army units who also assisted in ensuring that the curfew was not violated by the terrorists.

From 1630 hours on 05 June 1984 onwards, continuous appeals were made over loud speakers to all within the premises of the Golden Temple to come out and hand themselves over to the authorities. 129 men, women and children came out. Similar actions took place in a number of areas in Punjab. Full opportunity was given to all the inmates of the Golden Temple, and other holy Gurudwaras which the terrorists had usurped, to avoid bloodshed.

From 2230 hours, Army units commenced moving to the Golden Temple precincts. This drew a very heavy volume of fire from the terrorists into the narrow streets at close range. Despite casualties, the troops closed in and slowly commenced movement into the area around the Temple, after overcoming initial opposition. Very heavy volume of fire had to be faced from the Akal Takht which stood like a fortress, sweeping all avenues of approach with a deadly volume of machine gun fire, causing heavy casualties.

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The terrorists from the outer lines of defence, reinforced the Akal Takht and made it a bastion of automatic weapons. Machine guns from Harminder Sahib also raked with fire the Parikrama and surrounding buildings where the troops had forced back the defenders.

At 0100 hours on 06 June, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal and Mr. GS Tohra surrendered near Guru Nanak Niwas with about 350 people including some women and children.

At about 0410 hours on 06 June some troops attempting to close in with the Akal Takht in an Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) were fired at by anti-tank rockets which damaged the APC. By the morning of 06 June, the troops had effectively engaged all loop holes at the Akal Takht. Some terrorists attempted to rush out of the Akal Takht to clear some areas held by the troops: but were beaten off. A group of 10 extremists surrendered with a white flag. Room to room fighting continued in the Akal Takht till it was cleared by 1230 hours 06 June: though some resistance continued from the ground floor.

That afternoon, the troops made further appeals over loudspeakers, for the terrorists to surrender. As a result some 200 terrorists surrendered including 22 from Harminder Sahib. The head Granthi and two other Granthies were safe in Harminder Sahib.

The continued resistance from the ground floor of the Akal Takht was tackled during the night of 06/07 June. When this resistance was finally overcome, Bhindranwale's dead body was found in the basement among others and another 35 bodies were found in the Akal Takht.

Some extremists and terrorists remained active in the morning hours of 07 June, using the surrounding buildings and a number of tunnels in the area of Golden Temple. It would require a number of days of careful search to winkle out the remaining terrorists. No women and children have been killed in the troops action.

Damage to buildings in the area of Golden Temple

It is emphasised that right from the commencement of the planning stage of this operation, damage to the temple buildings was not even contemplated and strict instructions were issued to preserve the buildings. The heavy toll of the own casualties is an indication of the deliberate restraint exercised on the power of our troops in order to ensure that the Akal Takht and Harminder Sahib were not damaged despite the murderous small arms and automatic fire which poured forth on our troops from these supposedly holy buildings. The fire on the Akal Takht was only opened when unacceptable losses began to accrue on our troops and the extremists escalated to use of anti-tank weapons.

Weapons and Equipment Captured

A large cache of weapons, ammunition and explosives were recovered including automatic and anti-tank weapons and a small factory for manufacture of hand grenades and sten guns. Recoveries are continuing.

Conclusion

Till the last, our efforts were to preserve the security of the Akal Takht. Surprisingly the extremists resorted to firing with automatic weapons at our troops even from within Harminder Sahib and inflicting heavy casualties. As can be seen from the layout of the defences, our troops progressing operations along any wing of the temple complex came under heavy fire from the opposite wing of the temple complex and in most cases if the fire was to be returned, the Harminder Sahib was directly on the line of fire and troops could not fire back. In spite of heavy provocation and heavy casualty we had to take a very difficult decision, to accept all these constraints and ensure that not one single round was fired on Harminder Sahib i.e. the Golden Temple, thus maintaining the sanctity of the 'Sanctum Sanctorum'. Few Armies in the world would have achieved this during the course of such operations.

This decision on the part of our troops called for high discipline, junior leadership and motivation. Every opportunity was given by us to the extremists as well as sympathisers and innocent pilgrims to accept a peaceful decision rather than enter into a pitched battle. Regretably this sincere appeal was not heeded to.

It will also be seen from the details of casualties suffered by our troops that the proportion of officers and JCOs casualties was high. This only goes to prove that responsible leaders were always in the forefront to ensure that the task is accomplished at minimum cost of the extremists' lives and the sentiments of the nation.

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Where was this Terrorists Movement HEADING?

The large quantity of arms, ammunition, explosives and some radio sets recovered at the Golden Temple complex; the thorough training and resolute leadership of the terrorists and extremists and their ruthless conduct in the holy Sikh shrines; must come as a surprise to most far-thinking Indians. We must ask ourselves where all this was leading to. What were the eventual aims of this movement? They had support and encouragement from some foreign countries and had effectively controlled the Punjab countryside by ruthless terrorism with the Command Headquarters at the Akal Takht and had all but made the administration totally ineffective. The taking over of the moderate Sikh leadership and fortifying a large number of Gurdwaras as safe sanctuaries all over Punjab, together with subtle and invidious propaganda in all Sikh organisations that the 'Panth is in danger' indicated a thrust towards much bigger stakes than merely getting a better deal for the Sikhs. The obvious direction and thrust of the movement was towards an independent Khalistan - fully supported by neighbouring and foreign powers. The terrorists led by Bhindranwale were perhaps only cogs in the wheel. If the Army action had not been resolute and determined, the movement would have moved towards full scale insurgency which would have crippled the armed forces in any future confrontation across the borders.

We must now heal the wounds of the majority of the Sikh community who were not partisan to the terrorist movement. We must ensure that the hard working, prosperous and happy people of Punjab work together for their prosperity, and the prosperity of the Nation, with full brotherhood and affection among all communities.