

Politics and the Dehumanization of Human Rights

Gian Singh Sandhu O.B.C.

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Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh

Thank you very much for the warm welcome. It gives me immense pleasure once again to be with you. It is good to see many friends in the audience.

In his opening remarks, our President Gurpreet Singh Bal touched on the WSO's founding and some of the key principles enshrined in its Constitution. Looking back 24 years, it is amazing to see everyone still as active as ever! Organizations come and go and your unflinching dedication, selfless commitment, and tireless support have made us stronger. Congratulations!

To discuss politics and human rights, individually by itself, is no small task. However, when you combine politics and the dehumanization of human rights, it makes it pretty challenging.

I will leave the real work to experts like our Honourable friend David Kilgour to untangle that mystery.

I must say that there are very few examples in the history of democracy when you see so many horrible events happening in the same week. The first week of June brings back many memories for the Sikh community.

In 1606 Guru Arjan Sahib, fifth Guru of Sikhs, who laid the foundation of the Harmandir Sahib (The Golden Temple) and compiled the Sikh Scriptures (Guru Granth Sahib) was mercilessly tortured by the Mughal ruler Jahangir and attained martyrdom.

June 5th 1984 witnessed the unprecedented attack by the Government of India's armed forces on Sri Durbar Sahib, commonly known as the Golden Temple. The attack on Durbar Sahib coincided with attack on 39 other Gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) throughout Punjab. Precisely ***"At Seven o'clock on the evening of 5th June, tanks of the 16th Cavalry Regiment of the Indian army started moving up to the Golden Temple complex"*** write authors Mark Tully and Satish Jacob in their book titled "Amritsar - Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle". While the number of people killed inside the complex is disputed by both sides, Major General Brar, the military officer in charge of the forces puts the number of worshippers inside the complex at 5000, in his book, *"Operation -Blue Star"*. John Pike author of *"Sikhs in Punjab"* mentions 10,000.

The ensuing bloody crackdown that occurred through the 80's and 90's, killed thousand of innocent people.

This week in June also marks a number of other pivotal events in world history.

On June 6th 1944, after almost a year of special assault and combined operations training, the allied forces along with 3rd Canadian Infantry Division commanded by Major Gen. R.O.D. Keller and the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, led by Brigadier R.A. Wyman landed on the Normandy coast of France in Operation *Overlord*. This day is remembered as 'D-Day' and was the pivotal moment in World War II that turned the tide against the Nazis.

On June 4th 1989, the world woke up to witness a massacre of innocent men and women at Tian'an'men Square. "That may not be the sole atrocity that had occurred on the square." Writes Zheng Nian the author of "*Life And Death In Shanghai*".

Webster defines **dehumanization** 'as' a psychological process by which some individuals are viewed less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration. Most people will agree that this process is at play when atrocities are committed either by the States or by certain individuals and or Groups.

History provides numerous examples of people and groups using the powers of the state to reduce targeted groups to a pitiable 'dehumanized' state.

- Hitler's Nazis did that to the Jews;
- Hutus did that to the Tutsis in the recent genocide in Rawanda;
- Janjaweed Arabs are doing that to Darfurians – as we speak;
- Sikhs, Dalits and other minorities of India have been the victims of this at the hands of the majority Hindu Governments.

When you closely examine the causes behind these atrocities, the single most predominant reason is to suppress the desire by people of different faiths and beliefs to be free and equal; a basic fundamental of human dignity.

And what is wrong with wanting to be free and equal? Is this asking too much ?

Expressing the desire to be free is the God given right for each one of us and it is not alien to humanity. In the mid-eighteenth century, the famous French thinker Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains".

That is precisely what Guru Nanak said almost 500 years earlier.

At one time, in the days of slavery, those chains might have been in the form of iron shackles that put physical restraints on unwilling subjects. In pre-industrial

societies, those in power have used different forms of 'fear' and 'favor' to fulfill their own interests. Some means were obviously shabby, cruel and 'de-humanizing'.

In today's modern society, governments still rely on the use of fear and favour, but their means are usually more subtle and sophisticated, and often invisible, but just as effective as restraints, that put limits on people's freedom to think, act or move.

Let me give you a small example that the Sikh community is intimately familiar with. Here in Canada, Sikhs like all other Canadians, have the freedom to speak out against the atrocities committed by the Indian, or any other state. In turn, Indian authorities, routinely, deny visas to those who do speak out; a subtle but effective lever against those who wish to visit their places of birth but take issue with the treatment of Sikhs in India.

Why do the governments, so often, take extreme measures to repress the rights of its own citizens? Humans, by nature, enjoy power. Power over people is viewed to be the highest form of power. And it is more certainly true that the human appetite for power is insatiable.

Lord Acton (*John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton -1834:1902*) said it more explicitly, "**Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely**".

Throughout history, humans have demonstrated a recurring urge to exercise power over people. Since we are all created equal – with equal powers or rights, if we need to have greater rights over others, we must, somehow, strip others of some or all of their, God given rights, and assign the same to ourselves.

In modern democracies, human societies have relied on the institution of 'government' to, among other things, guarantee basic Human Rights to ALL its citizens, without any distinction. To enable the governments to fulfill their assigned responsibilities, people, voluntarily signed-over some of their rights, to empower them to restrict the rights, liberties and freedoms of people, who, infringed on the natural rights of others.

In other words, people gave some of their own powers away to their governments and subjugated themselves to the institutions they created. They did so with a fond hope that the governments will discharge their assigned duties in a fair and judicious manner.

This works well, when the geographical spread is limited and the people know each other. By way of direct or indirect contact, people choose sincere, committed and knowledgeable governing bodies. This is still in evidence in small villages or religious groups serving a small localized community.

On a larger scale, where the stakes are high and those in power at a distance from those that they govern, it is not hard to compromise the system.

People with vested interests, focused only on acquiring power – by any means, can easily subvert the political process at community group levels, and eventually at regional or national levels. This is usually accomplished by;

- Saying things that a Special Interest Group likes to hear;
- Making promises that will earn the support of a large constituency;
- Getting favorable mention at large community functions or festivities;
- Inducing popular media to create and highlight a favorable image;
- Learning to keep constituents quiet or complacent, if not happy.

Acquisition of power is only the beginning. The next step is staying in power. If the above strategies proved successful in the first critical stage, there is every reason to reinforce the same, for continuing success.

Now that full powers of the state are at the disposal of the governing entity, supporting the objective in the longer-term becomes easily achievable.

Single minded criminal and murderous pursuit of narrow, personal or group objectives has been the bane of human society, throughout the history of mankind.

On one hand, technology has virtually eliminated geographical barriers between groups of people and resulted in what we have begun to call – ‘**the global village**’. On the other hand, the same technology has increased the reach, expanded the zones of influence and broadened the killing fields in front of rulers gone berserk.

This may, quite appropriately, be termed ‘Dehumanization’ of politics, systems or institutions of governance.

Sikhs had hoped that the days of their societal ostracism and persecution were over with the end of the Mogul rule over India. Unfortunately, they faced a fresh round of murderous inquisition under the tyrannical regime of Indira Gandhi and by her son Rajiv.

It is true that Sikhs had been demanding and agitating for their rights since the emergence of an independent India, at the end of the British rule.

India gained independence, why shouldn’t the Sikhs have been able to enjoy a ‘glow of freedom’ - as promised by one of the independence movement leaders and later, the prime minister of India– Mr. Nehru.

Why did the Sikhs have to agitate and make additional sacrifices to claim the rights, freedoms and liberties that became available to all the people living in the sub-continent.

Considering the disproportionate share of price paid and the sacrifices made by the Sikhs for India's independence, a grateful India and its leadership ought to have offered their thanks, a respectful acknowledgement, and a guarantee of a place of pride among communities and constituents of India.

No one agitates, faces police brutality and goes to jail, without a reason. The undeniable fact of Sikhs' collective, denial, deprivation, alienation and persecution at the hands of India's governmental agencies and its police, should convince anyone of a strong need to restore Sikhs' fundamental and constitutionally guaranteed rights of; free-expression, assembly and pursuit of political and religious objectives.

Canada has been home to Sikhs since 1897. The community has worked hard to integrate and earn its rightful and well deserving place in the Canadian history. It is sad and disappointing to see that the Canadian government continues to believe Government of India's propaganda against the Canadian Sikh community.

India is viewed as a democratic state, part of the Commonwealth and a strong emerging economy. Obviously, such communications from India are accepted on their face value, without being subjected to the level of skepticism or scrutiny, as would be the case with communications from say, North-Korea or Iran.

For over two decades I have been a witness to Canadian media carry endless coverage of anti-Sikh views, messages and propaganda, I have a hard time reconciling that with the facts I see on the ground.

Certainly, there have been incidents that required law enforcement agencies to deal with, but not any more than such incidents in any other community of this size and spread.

Absolutely nothing that would warrant or justify any collective negative characterization that has unfortunately been implied in media and governmental communications.

The fact that normally civil and accommodating people in India did not question their government's negative stereo-typing of a highly visible and easily identifiable religious minority in their midst, suggests that a powerful campaign of anti-Sikh slander, originating in the government circles and irresponsibly fanned and propagated by the media has caused serious reputational damage to this community of Sikhs.

I am personally confident that my community of hardworking and enterprising Sikhs will recover from the setbacks that they have been made to suffer. While this is comforting, I still cannot understand why, in the first place, they were put in that terrible spot, by their own government, with the seeming connivance of India's intelligence and media while society at large was totally unaware of the machinations behind the scenes.

A small clue, if one may call it so, was recently provided by a retired Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) operative Maloy Krishna Dhar in his book "The Open Secrets". Dhar writes that, "Among many two of the priorities of my desk were "to target the mainstream Canadian print and electronic media and sell the Indian side of the story and to generate a few 'friends' amongst Canadian Members of Parliament." (p294). Dhar was stationed in Canada in the 80's. The clandestine methods established by Dhar to destabilize the Sikh community are bearing fruits 20 years' later, at the perils of the Canadian Sikh community.

Before concluding I want to thank you for your patience and interest in hearing what we have to say. The World Sikh Organization has held this parliamentary dinner commemorating the Golden Temple tragedy every year since 1984. We look forward to your participation in the coming years.

“ਤੇਰਾ ਕੀਆ ਮੀਠਾ ਲਾਗੈ”, “Your actions seem so sweet to me” is what Guru Arjan Sahib was reciting when he was made to sit on the red hot iron plate and burning hot sand was being poured over his head.

If we all learn to “Live by God's Will”, the World would be a much more honourable and peaceful place to enjoy.

Thank you,

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh