

NEWS

Opinion: Bay Area can help seek justice in India massacres



By **JASKARAN KAUR**

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Twenty-five years after the state-sponsored massacres of Sikhs in India, and thousands of miles away, the politics of hate motivating such crimes affects the Bay Area. In our fascination with India's culture and economic power, the American public and its leaders have ignored the reality of pervasive human rights abuses. This affects the Bay Area, where Indian hate groups have received ideological and financial support by people, politicians and corporations unaware of the origins of these groups.

On Oct. 31, 1984, two Sikh bodyguards of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assassinated her in retaliation for an Army attack on the center of Sikh religious and political life known as the Golden Temple. For four days, police and politicians implemented organized massacres targeting the religious minority Sikh community.

Death squads used government-issued voter lists to identify and destroy residences and properties of Sikhs, burned alive Sikh men and gang-raped Sikh women. The Indian government states that 2,733 Sikhs died in Delhi alone. None of the organizers has been brought to justice.

In early 2002, the violence repeated, motivated by the same politics of hate, but this time led by a different political party. Hindu nationalist groups operated with the assistance of the Gujarat state government and engaged in wide-scale rape and the killings of an estimated 2,000 Muslims.

These pogroms against Sikhs and Muslims demonstrate that impunity ensures the recurrence of such crimes, letting perpetrators know they can get away with murder.

When it released its chapter on India this September, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom placed India on its "Watch List," stating that India "has done so little to protect and bring justice to its religious minorities under siege." The report highlights impunity for the Sikh massacres, and violence against Muslims in Gujarat and Christians in Orissa.

Scars linger for survivors who have rebuilt their lives in the Bay Area. While local Sikhs will reflect on the 25th anniversary of the massacres this week, the vast majority of their neighbors will be unaware of the grief gripping the community.

More insidiously, groups that are closely related to the massacres of Muslims in Gujarat participate in Bay Area civic life.

For example, one of the member organizations of the annual Festival of India in Fremont is the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), the U.S. arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In a 2002 report, Human Rights Watch named the RSS as one of the organizations "most directly responsible for violence against Muslims in Gujarat."

Groups like the HSS advance their agenda in many ways, such as working to edit California textbooks to include an inaccurate description of Indian history that promotes Hindu nationalism.

Hindu nationalist groups in India even benefitted from Bay Area corporate charitable-giving policies until a report by the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate exposed how local charities were redirecting the donations to these groups. This prompted corporations like Cisco Systems to revise their policies.

The denial of justice in India makes a mockery of the rule of law. While we browse Indian jewelry or clothes on El Camino Real, awareness of abuses in India is an important issue for the Bay Area, so that we can end our ideological or financial support.

JASKARAN KAUR is co-director of Ensaaf, a nonprofit organization based in the Bay Area. She wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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