

# BATTLE FOR THE TEMPLE

**"T**he fact that 151 terrorists have surrendered," declared Punjab's Governor Siddhartha Shankar Ray in a statement he issued on 15 May, "shows that our action in surrounding the Golden Temple was wholly necessary and justified." Leaders of at least five Opposition parties complimented the Union government for the police action. "Some relief in Amritsar," sighed an *Indian Express* headline. "It's about time," muttered 26-year-old Delhi college student Dilip Goel. "We had to prove that we wouldn't take it any more."

In New Delhi, Chandigarh and Amritsar last week, there were outpourings of pride on a paramilitary job well done. Not since the Bangladesh war of 1971 had there been such self-congratulatory zeal. If the Congress(I) needed a platform to fight the approaching elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, it had found one. The government's message to the terrorists was loud and clear: "You can run but you cannot hide."

But could the operation be called a "triumph"? The commando action in the Golden Temple was only a small victory in

the larger war against terrorism, to which no end is yet in sight. If anything, terrorist strikes might recur with redoubled force. Although 151 terrorists had surrendered to the security forces on 15 May, 80 hardcore militants of the Babbar Khalsa, Khalistan Commando Force (KCF), Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan (BTFK) and Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF) still remained inside.

During the operation, two terrorists had escaped, one of them Malkiat Singh Ajnala, a leader of the KCF. A large number of terrorists are still on the loose. It is likely, say intelligence sources, that they will mount retaliatory attacks to avenge the police action.

Nonetheless, with bold and carefully coordinated operation, the government had erased six days of terror, indignation

and misery, an all-too-familiar progression in the recent history of terrorism in Punjab. Once again, terrorists, over the last two months, had begun using the holiest of holy Sikh shrines as a hide-out to mount brutal attacks on vulnerable civilian targets. They had been busy fortifying structures, and misusing a place of pilgrimage to carry on nefarious activities. The clock had been slowly turning back.

When the operation had started on 9 May, after a prolonged exchange of fire between CRPF men and terrorists who were building a fortification atop some private property they had usurped behind the Akal Takht, there were about 1,100 people inside the Golden Temple. The next day some 800 were evacuated with the help of the SGPC, of whom about a dozen were arrested under the NSA after being screened. Six days later, 151 per-



A securityman on the vigil: a move which paid off

Jagdish Yadav

*A determined government's security forces moved in and managed to get most of the hardcore terrorists who had fortified themselves in the Golden Temple. Is it really a triumph for the government?*

sons, among whom were 18 women and eight children, came out with their hands in the air. Among them was the Surjit Singh Penta who had actually come out to escape. It was only after his pregnant wife pointed him out to the police that he swallowed deadly poison and died in hospital. Also killed in the battle was a spokesman of the Panthic Committee, Jagir Singh. But the terrorists who had surrendered showed no sign of remorse. The women—among whom were the wives of Roshanlal

Golden Temple about two months ago. They worked methodically, reinforced almost every vulnerable structure, piled up sandbags to set up bunkers at vantage points on the temple's periphery, bricked up doors and windows and mounted their guns behind them. It was a virtual preparation for war. The two clock towers to the north and south came in handy as ideal positions to snipe from, and the two 80-foot eighteenth century watch towers, used by the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to

taken no action? Was it part of a plan to allow hardcore terrorists to gather inside the temple before closing in on them? Amritsar's deputy commissioner Sarabjit Singh would have us believe so, while Punjab's DG K.P.S. Gill chose to reserve comment.

But the police had to act, finally. Residents of the area behind the Akal Takht lodged a complaint with the police that the militants had taken over a part of some private property contiguous with the temple, and were busy fortifying it. Around 1 pm on 9 May, the DIG, CRPF, S.S. Virk, SP (city) Baldev Singh, and a team of officials went to the rooftop of a house to inspect a bunker that the militants were building above the *prasad ghar* near the Akal Takht, on the western side of the complex. The officers requested the militants to stop building the bunker. An altercation followed. All of a sudden a number of Babbar Khalsa gunmen opened fire on the officers, hitting S.S. Virk on the lower jaw. Thanks to a timely signal from a nearby CRPF observation post—a warning that the militants had taken up positions—Virk escaped certain death. The police returned the fire. A profusely bleeding Virk was rushed off to the SGTB hospital, where he was operated upon and declared out of danger. "I am all right and in high spirits," he scribbled on a piece of paper that he showed reporters since he was unable to speak.

But the situation in the temple had got out of hand. A fierce gun battle was in progress between the militants and the CRPF jawans manning the pickets around the complex. Four civilians were killed in the crossfire outside the temple, and one, an SGPC *sevdar*, inside. The terrorists took up positions on top of the two watch towers (*bungis*), on the clock tower entrance and other fortifications they had built. For seven journalists who had gone to the temple to cover Virk's visit and who were stranded along with 1000 devotees and SGPC employees, it was a harrowing time. The journalists were standing near room no. 14, the newly-opened "Khalistan Office". When the firing broke out, they made an attempt to escape by taking cover behind pillars along the *parikrama* walls. But this proved too dangerous because anything that moved provoked gunfire from both the security forces and militants. Said the *Indian Express'* Dinesh Kumar: "I trembled as I saw the *sevdar* being felled by a bullet barely a few feet in front of me." A bullet grazed another newsmen's leg. Four hours later, the journalists emerged with their cameras and hands behind their heads.

There were about 80 hardcore terror-



A deserted Amritsar street photographed during the shootout

Bairagi Malkiat Singh Ajanala and Penta—however, seemed happy to have survived.

The drama was still not over at the time of writing. The exchange of fire between the terrorists led by Karaj Singh, Nirvair Singh and others, who were hiding in the basement of the two 80 feet watch towers on *bungis*, the clock tower, room nos. 44 to 48 and the Harmandir Sahib was still on. At least 15 militants who had feigned surrender, emerged from the rooms around the *parikrama* and then ran into the Harmandir Sahib to carry on their fight from the *sanctum sanctorum* where the security forces did not dare enter. A large stock of arms and ammunition had been kept there. Meanwhile, the screening of the surrendered people was in progress. According to Punjab's director general of police (DGP) K.P.S. Gill, unless proved to the contrary, "everyone is being considered a terrorist and would be put through sustained interrogation."

The militants began fortifying the

defend the temple against attacks, became the terrorists' major vantage points. Denying that the militants had any plan to provoke and fight the security forces, the Akal Takht chief, Jasbir Singh Rode, said: "The fortifications were only a reaction to the police pickets outside." But why had the government

Devotees who had come out of the temple told newsmen that it was very difficult to get any water in the temple because it was risky to venture towards the holy tank, since that would bring them in full view of the securitymen. This made it even more difficult for the extremists in the heat



ists inside, among them Surjit Singh Penta of the Bhindranwale Tigers Liberation Force, wanted for the June 1987 Delhi Greater Kailash massacre. Others included Sukhinder Singh Jhamka (KCF), Nirvair Singh and Jagir Singh, who were responsible for extorting money by issuing threat letters, Surnam Singh Khalsa, office secretary of the AISSF, Jagbir Singh (KLF), Karaj Singh Pehelwan (KCF), Jagraj Singh (KLF) and Bhutto (KCF). Said one of the journalists who went inside: "Of the 100 or so terrorists who are fighting it out, each has a gun. They have boxfuls of ammunition, and rations enough to last them for months." They were all in high spirits, at least during the first four days of fighting. They were equipped with

The war between the terrorists and the embattled Punjab administration was on elsewhere, too. Only a day before the battle for the Golden Temple had started, extremists dressed in red turbans and black clothes had struck at Panipat, less than a kilometre from the city police station, killing 13 people at a wedding party and injuring 26. They used two AK-47 rifles. As many as 91 empties were recovered from the scene of the massacre. The same day, police shot six terrorists in separate incidents

all over the state.

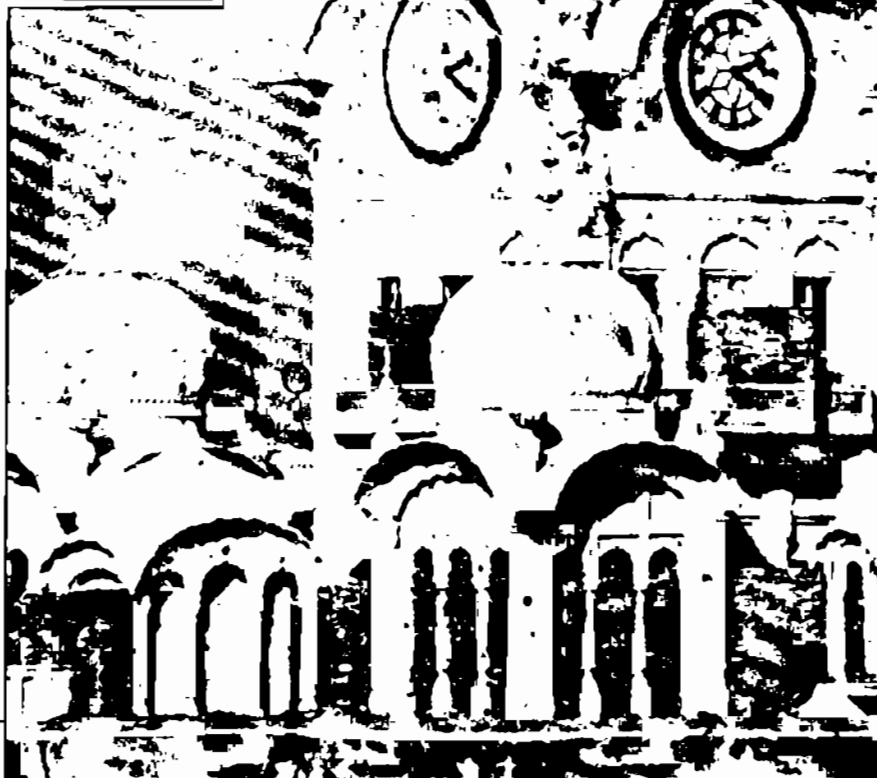
On 10 May, the 800 evacuees from the Golden Temple were screened at Amritsar police headquarters and about 600, mostly old people, women and children, were allowed to go home. The early morning and evening *Gurbani* from the Golden Temple had stopped. It was alleged that electricity and water supply to the Golden Temple had been cut off, though the authorities denied this. And although the telephones were working, nobody inside seemed to be answering



The head priests with Jasbir Singh Rode minutes before their arrest; (right) Terrorists' fortifications in the Golden Temple

walkie talkie sets and were in constant touch with each other. According to Sarabjit Singh, they even had cyanide pills.

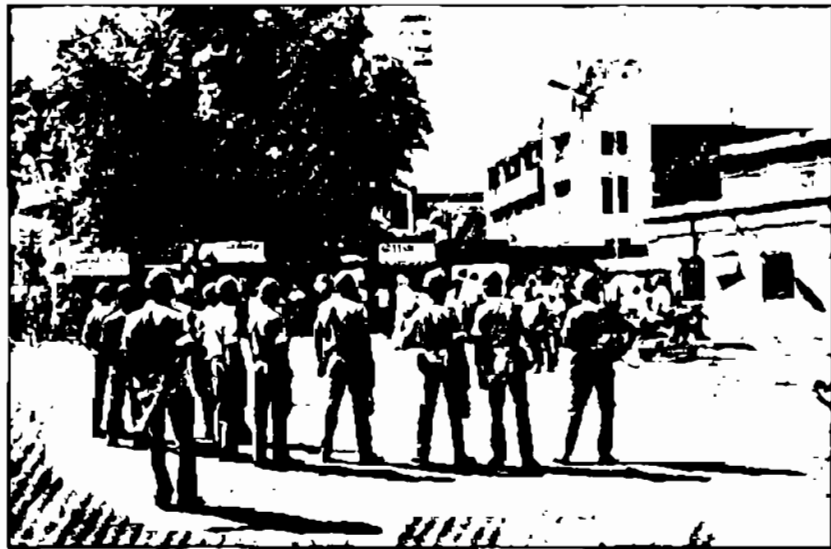
Curfew was clamped on the panic-stricken city. The trouble had been sparked off by a spontaneous incident, and no one could guess what the outcome would be, not even Jasbir Singh Rode, who was away in Patiala to attend a Punjabi University function, or any of the head priests who were outside the Golden Temple. After a heavy exchange of fire during the first ten minutes, the gun battle between the terrorists and CRPF became a slow, intermittent affair. Both policemen and militants were using Chinese-made AK-47s, and LMGs. The next day, 10 May, one more person was killed by the CRPF inside the Golden Temple complex. Some 800 persons were swiftly evacuated from the temple after the SGPC authorities and the head priests arranged to get them out.



them any more. The police and paramilitary forces had laid siege to the shrine. Since the lights in the temple complex remained switched off at night, the security forces resorted to the use of night vision devices (NVDs). On the night of 9 May, senior police officers, including the DIG (border range), A.A. Siddiqui, went around the temple complex to test the devices and see if there was any movement near the fortifications. Devotees who had come out of the temple—there were also a large number of labourers from Bihar who were practically living inside the complex, surviving on the *langar*—told newsmen that it was very difficult to get any water in the temple because it was risky to venture towards the holy tank, since that would bring them in full view of the securitymen. This made it even more difficult for the extremists in the heat, with temperatures touching 39 degrees Celsius.

By 11 May, the police and district authorities began complimenting themselves for having succeeded in holding up 80 dreaded extremists. Union minister P. Chidambaram told the Lok Sabha that though he would not spell it out, the government now proposed to take some measures to deal with the situation in Amritsar firmly. He would not, however, use the expression "flush out". The battle in the Golden Temple was being monitored at the highest level, he said. The home minister, Buta Singh, said that no fortifications would be allowed to be built outside the temple: "All such attempts would be countered and neutralised," he said, referring to the fortification that the DIG, CRPP, S.S. Virk, had gone to inspect. In Chandigarh, the adviser to the Governor, J.F. Ribeiro, repeated the warning: "The terrorists will be dealt with squarely if they try to do so (build defences outside the complex)."

To all appearances, a mini-Operation Bluestar had begun. The walled city had been cut off from the rest of Amritsar, and the Darbar Sahib complex turned into a deserted battleground dotted with CRPF pickets. Helmeted policemen clad in khaki hovered about in the shadows with their self-loading rifles (SLRs) in hand, while photographers and reporters inched their way towards the temple to get a better view. The sun beat down mercilessly. And the staccato bursts of AK-47s and reports of LMGs became a familiar refrain. The police had taken up positions behind 14 pickets and nine bunkers they had built on the roofs and upper storeys of buildings around the temple. Occasionally, they would run into problems getting enough labour



Securitymen take up positions before the assault: timely move

to carry more sandbags to reinforce a picket. The labourers who agreed to work were afraid to venture out in full view of the extremists. "Come on, get on with it," shouted a CRPF post commander to a group of labourers whom he had ordered to carry a dozen sandbags to the picket near the northern clock tower. "Don't worry, they won't hit you, it's safe." The labourers obeyed, but each of them was trembling with fear.

Meanwhile, the pro-extremist Sikh leadership—the type who are anxious to appease the militants—including Jasbir Singh Rode, the five head priests, their aides, the UAD chief, Baba Joginder Singh, and former chief minister Prakash Singh Badal, began getting anxious to "restore their credibility". They could not bear to be accused of "betraying" the extremists and consequently lose their claim to be representatives of all shades of Sikh opinion. Four leaders of the United Akali Dal, Prakash Singh Badal, Sukhdev Singh, Sukhjinder Singh

and Gurdev Singh Badal, declared in a joint statement that they would march to the Golden Temple "to pay obeisance and restore our right to worship". All four, along with their supporters, were arrested in Chandigarh on 14 May. Earlier, Baba Joginder Singh, too, had been arrested for trying to march to the temple. It was only the threat of Jasbir Singh Rode, the chief of the Akal Takht, to march into the Golden Temple "to restore Sikh *maryada* (rituals)" that the officials seemed to take seriously.

On the night of 11 May, Jasbir Singh Rode and the five head priests, Bhai Jaswant Singh, Jathedar of the Takht Damdama Sahib, Bhai Savinder Singh, Jathedar of Takht Kesgarh Sahib, Giani Puran Singh, head *granthi* of the Golden Temple and Kaahmira Singh, head *granthi* of the Akal Takht, told a group of newsmen that they would force their way into the Golden Temple to restore the rituals. Rode had called for a ceasefire so that religious ceremonies could be resumed in the Golden Temple. He also said that he wanted all fortifications made by the militants and the securitymen inside and outside the temple to be dismantled. The government, however, claimed full control of the situation, and nine persons were killed in different incidents all over the state, including three inside the Golden Temple.

The attempt to bring about a ceasefire was partly successful: around 2 pm the same day, Gurdev Singh Konke, a former acting Jathedar of the Akal Takht and professed champion of Khalistan (Konke had been arrested on 30 April 1986, during Operation Woodrose from the Golden Temple and had given a call for Khalistan in a speech he delivered on 9 March, 1988) visited the militants at

Denying that the militants had any plan to provoke and fight the security forces, the Akal Takht chief, Jasbir Singh Rode, said: "The fortifications were only a reaction to the police pickets outside." But why had the government taken no action? Was it part of a plan to allow hardcore terrorists to gather in the temple?





Police officers preparing themselves at the Amritsar kotwali: successful

Normal lens

the Golden Temple on behalf of Rode. He took with him two sackfuls of food for the terrorists. Konke, along with three others, drove right up to the main entrance of the temple in two white Ambassadors, and carried the food inside. This correspondent was a witness to the scene. Konke and the three emissaries of Rode stayed inside the temple for about 20 minutes, during which they managed to persuade them to observe a cease-fire, so that Rode could enter the temple to restore the *maryada*. A cease-fire did come into effect at 2.30 pm. The same evening a group of journalists went inside the Golden Temple. With their help ten persons were evacuated. One of them, Balbir Singh, a farmer who had been hit by bullets, wore a shirt which had stiffened with coagulated blood. Two young people among the evacuees were taken in for questioning, while the rest were sent to hospital or home. It was learnt that only 48 of the 200 who had been detained earlier had been kept in custody, of whom 12 had been arrested under the NSA. One was from the Damdani Taksal.

"The terrorists have taken advantage of the cease-fire," said a Punjab Police DSP at the city kotwali. He pointed out that more food had been passed on to the militants through Rode's emissaries. Some even suspect that in the sacks containing foodgrains were arms and ammunition, too. The journalists who had entered the temple during the cease-fire reported what they suspected to be a change in tactics. Both the terrorists and securitymen had started using long range sniper guns fitted with telescopic sights. Said one of them: "The terrorists appear to be replacing

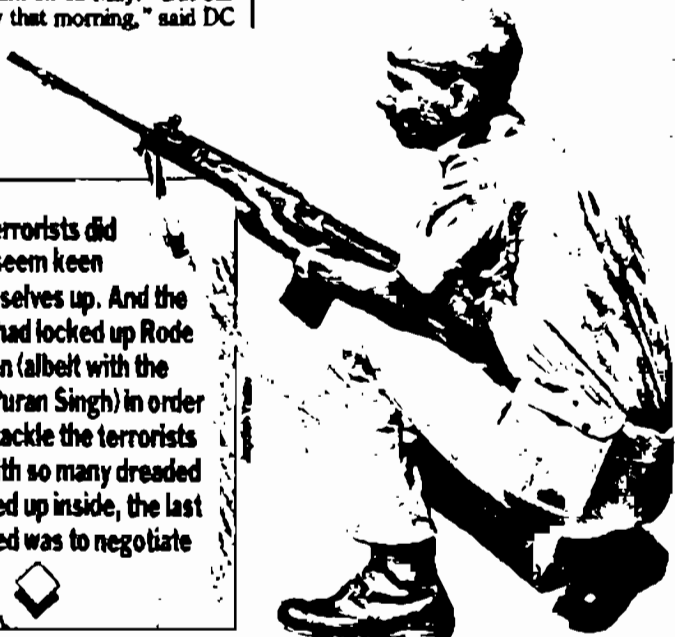
their LMGs with MMGs now, and supplementing their AK-47s with sniper guns. About this time, a number of National Security Guard (NSG) commandos, too, started taking up positions at each picket to help the CRPF and Punjab Police. Each commando wore a bulletproof vest, helmet and had a Swedish-made PSG sniper gun in hand. They were obviously planning to sneak in and the fact that they had NVDs meant that most of the action from now on would take place at night.

The police claim they were all ready to escort Rode and the head priests into the temple to call a halt to the firing from both sides. Rode and his group were to be led from the Santokhsaar gurdwara to the temple at 8 am on 12 May. "But our plans went awry that morning," said DC

Sarabjit Singh. "The militants violated the cease-fire. There was firing from precisely 8 am—which is an indication that there was a threat to Rode's life. There was no way we could allow him to go in." For about two hours, Rode, Savinder Singh, Jaswant Singh, Kashmir Singh, Bhai Mokham Singh and Rode's aide Gurdev Singh Konke along with 24 others staged a noisy protest in front of the Santokhsaar gurdwara, shouting "Satnam Wahe Guru", and pressing ahead in an attempt to break through a cordon of a few hundred riot policemen. "I have got an assurance that they will not fire when I enter," Rode told the police officers. "I want to stop the firing. So firing or no firing, go in we will."

Finally, when the persuasion of the DC Sarabjit Singh, IG (border) Chaman Lal and SSP Suresh Arora failed, Rode and his men began their march. The SP (city), Baldev Singh, requested him not to go ahead, but Konke pushed him back, shouting, "You men are liars. It is you who are shooting, not the militants." He was struck on the forehead by a CRPF rifle butt. The incident embarrassed the police, and the DC had to apologise to Rode. The CRPF jawan was rebuked and sent off. Rode and his men were formally arrested, booked under section 188 IPC for violating curfew orders, and placed in 15 days' judicial custody. Rode was the first to get into the bus and book a window seat for the press to photograph him. After being detained for three hours at the nearby kotwali, the group was driven off to a guest house on Ranjit Road.

The terrorists did not seem keen to give themselves up. And the government had locked up Rode and his men (albeit with the exception of Puran Singh) in order to be free to tackle the terrorists on its own. With so many dreaded terrorists holed up inside, the last thing it wanted was to negotiate



## The foreign hand in Delhi

As the operation to flush out terrorists from the Golden Temple continued in Amritsar, a tenuous peace existed over the rest of northern India. Intelligence agencies anticipated simultaneous strikes outside Punjab in retaliation to the siege of the shrine. It is significant that when the action on the Golden Temple began on 9 May, Surjit Singh Penta and Roshan Bai Ragi were the only known hardliners among the militants hiding there. Most of the militant leaders were either underground in gurdwaras in other parts of the state or attempting to cross the border. These included the most wanted leaders of the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF), General Labh Singh, Daljit Singh Bittoo and Gurcharan Singh, Gurbachan Singh Manochahal, head of the Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan (BTKF), Gurjit Singh of the AISSF, Attinderpal Singh and others. The question on the minds of the security forces was: would the militants outside Punjab be able to mobilise themselves with attacks in Delhi and elsewhere?

On 10 May, a day after the action of the security forces began, such fears did not seem unfounded. In the afternoon a massive bomb exploded in the Citibank office of the Charles Correa-designed prestigious new multi-storied building in Delhi's Connaught Place. One person was killed and 15 injured in the blast triggered off by a gelatine-based sophisticated device. Before the day was over, the Delhi police received numerous false alarms from citizens who feared a repetition of the 1983 transistor bomb blasts which occurred in the post-Operation Bluester period.

Though investigators have made no major breakthroughs in the Citibank case, the intelligence agencies have concluded that the attack was not the handiwork of Punjab terrorists but that of an international terrorist group. The choice of target was unlikely to get the Punjab terrorists the kind of attention they seek when attempting a massacre and the detonator planted in the Citibank is not known to have been used by them earlier. Interrogation of



Vijayaraj

arrested terrorist leaders has revealed their game plan: outside Punjab, terrorists are likely to attempt mass killings at major congregations. This policy again makes it unlikely that the Citibank blast was the responsibility of Sikh terrorists.

Also, because of the similarity of this incident with the August 1986 explosion in the Bank of America office in the Hansalaya building, the intelligence agencies suspect the involvement of a foreign group. The Japanese Red Army, the Irish Republican Army and the deadly Abu Nidal group are being investigated. Of these groups, the last, headed by Il Baana and believed to be the number one terrorist organisation in the world, is the prime suspect.

The Abu Nidal group was probably behind the Hansalaya blast. The group also had a hand in the assassinations of a Jordanian diplomat in Delhi in 1983 and of the British deputy high commissioner in Bombay in 1986. At a time when red-alert conditions exist in northern India due to reported infiltration by Sikh extremists, the increased activity of groups like Abu Nidal has only worsened the law and order situation.

Ritu Sarki/New Delhi

The bomb blast at the Citibank: extremists on the rampage

Having got him safely out of the way, the police set the stage for a showdown with the extremists. The same morning, securitymen led by NSG Black Cat commandos had taken possession of the strategic water tank situated on the western periphery of the complex, from where they got a clear view of the entire area, and were in a position to neutralise the threat from the two watch towers (*bungas*). The water tank, which had been destroyed during Operation Bluester had been rebuilt, but had remained unoccupied by the militants. It gave the commandos an excellent vantage point. Securitymen using sniper rifles killed at least four more terrorists inside, during a heavy exchange of fire in the morning and afternoon. Jagat Singh, a resident of Jalandhar, who was injured in the firing came out of the Golden Temple. Two boys aged 14 and 18 also tried to cross over from the *langar* to the area behind the Akal Takht. One of them ran back inside, and the other managed to reach a police picket. He was taken in for questioning, and was known to have revealed valuable information about the terrorists' gun positions.

One incident that shook the police was the escape of two terrorists late in the night of 12 May. A group of six militants made a bid to break out of the Golden



(Left to right) K.P.S. Gill, Sarabjit Singh and Suresh Arora: the architects of the victory

Temple from the Akal Takht side into the adjoining Indira Market (a part of the complex which had witnessed heavy firing lately). When the CRPF opened fire, three of them turned back, one was shot dead, and two others escaped. A security patrol alerted about the escape spotted the two terrorists in a lane near the temple sometime later. An exchange of fire followed, in which one terrorist was injured (two CRPF jawans were injured in the exchanges—the first police injuries since the gun battle had begun). The escapes provoked a long exchange of fire between the militants and securitymen. A gun recovered from one of the terrorists who had died in the getaway was marked “KCF” and “Khalistan”. Securitymen also shot dead five other terrorists inside the temple, two near the new langar building and one each near the old langar near room no 31 and the holy tank.

The battle was intensifying: what was the police going to do? Governor S.S. Ray had told reporters in Amritsar that “police action would depend on what the terrorists would do”. He said that there were “a series of possibilities” and “several ways of dealing with the situation, of which the government would choose the best”. But did the government have many options? The terrorists did not seem keen to give themselves

up. And the government had locked up Rode and his men (albeit with the exception of Puran Singh) in order to be free to tackle the terrorists on its own. With so many dreaded terrorists holed up inside, the last thing it wanted was to negotiate with them—it had to be a violent confrontation. For the terrorists, it had to be a fight to the finish. Asked what he planned to do considering he had few options, the DGP K.P.S. Gill replied: “The fact that we have been keeping these terrorists under observation and have not allowed them to get out of the place over the last two to three months has gone to our advantage.” Though he never spelt it out

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clearly, the police was aiming to wipe the terrorists out—though not perhaps in one stroke. The strategy was to use the commandos to creep inside, occupy positions and slowly close in on the terrorists before making a final assault; this would give those inside all the time to surrender even if it took long. Time, anyway, was on the government's side.

The augmentation of the NSG force from 50 to some 500 meant that from “waiting and watching” the securitymen were now slowly going on the offensive. Contrary to popular impression, the police never meant to “lay siege” or starve the militants or even “flush” them out but fight them to the end. And the commandos were making progress: after taking control of the water tank, the security forces late on the night of 12 May took over the Guru Ram Dass Sarai dividing the SGPC complex and the rest of the temple.

This gave them a decisive edge: they got complete control over the SGPC headquarters, Guru Nanak Niwas, Guru Ram Dass Sarai, Teja Singh Samundari Hall, and to some extent even the Manji Sahib gurdwara and the new langar building adjoining the *parikrama*. Announced Gill: “The CRPF is already



Governor Ray: victorious Ribeiro: exultant



patrolling the sarai, and will set up a picket there if necessary. Around 3 pm on 12 May, he said, three more terrorists had been hit near room no. 14, of whom two had died and one was probably seriously wounded. The sarai, Gill admitted, however, was still not within the temple. About the future, he remained uncertain: “They have got plenty of rations, arms and ammunition, I cannot say what this is leading to,” and added: “Actually, we want them to stop firing. We want to conclude the action. The exchange of fire has been taking place between interludes. For the time being, the securitymen have orders to hit anything that moves inside.”

But by 12 May, the police was confident about being able to contain the trouble within the temple. The DC gave

orders for the curfew, to be lifted all over the city, except within a 300 metre radius of the temple at 6.30 pm on 12 May. But he said that it might be reimposed indefinitely again. Asked why two IAF Jaguars had flown low over the Golden Temple earlier in the day when the firing was on, DGP Gill smiled. "It was a sheer coincidence." The administration also denied that the supply of water and electricity had been cut off to the temple. "But it is possible they keep the lights out to avoid detection," an official said. Sarabjit Singh admitted that the government's task was a tough one especially considering that there are "ten to 20 women and children with the terrorists inside." Asked why fortifications were allowed to be built in the first place, K.P.S. Gill replied with an evasive "I have answered this question 20 times".

stand by. The securitymen had encircled the entire temple. They wanted to make sure nobody got away this time.

With the final assault coming closer, the authorities began appealing over loudspeakers to the women and children inside the temple to come out. To ensure that the press saw it all, the DC and the SSP escorted at least 50 newsmen to a picket opposite the clock tower to witness the announcements being made from 4.15 pm to 4.30 pm on 13 May. Instead of responding to them, the terrorists fired several rounds at the security forces in reply. The DC then told the newsmen that since no women and children had come out, there was no point asking the terrorists to surrender.

Six more militants were killed by the police on 14 May. A ceasefire call was given by Baba Uttam Singh of Khadur Sahib in Tarn Taran, who had performed

was coming to an end. The unofficial death toll in the gun battle had shot up to 34 by 14 May, although the DGP, K.P.S. Gill, put it at 27. Curiously, the Punjab Governor, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, while making an appeal to the terrorists to surrender with their arms "or face action", maintained that 23 had died so far. Ray also appealed to all Sikh religious bodies, including the SGPC and Darudam Taksal, to do everything in their power to get the militants to surrender and cleanse the Golden Temple of "such undesirable elements" once and for all. "If this operation fails," Ray warned, "no one should blame us for our action." He added: "We are prepared to face any eventuality."

The good news came on 15 May. In all, 151 terrorists, including Penta himself, had surrendered after the IG (Border) Chaman Lal and DC Sarabjit Singh repeatedly appealed to them over loudspeakers atop the Brahmbara Akhara—the main CRPF post—to come out. All 151 trooped out with their hands and weapons in the air. Eight of them were wounded. They were all made to sit in the compound of the Guru Ram Dass Sarai. As a gesture of peace, the police extended their "cease fire" to two-and-a-half hours. Penta, his wife and his brother Harcharan Singh were in the crowd. Sometime later, however, he was found dead. According to the DGP K.P.S. Gill, he had swallowed some poison shortly before being identified by his wife. Rumours spread that he had been killed by the police. But no one knows for sure. Penta had got married barely eight months ago, and his wife was pregnant.

The Punjab administration was jubilant. The Governor boasted about how the job was done without the police setting foot on the *parikrama*, Akal Takht, Harmandir Sahib or any part of the Darbar Sahib complex. But senior police officers in Amritsar who were still directing the operation against the remaining hardcore terrorists thought fit not to comment on the surrender at all. And they had reason to be upset: for one thing, the trouble was far from over. For another, the escape of two terrorists, including Malkiat Singh, proved a serious lapse. The police's intelligence, too, was very poor—while the DGP had all along been stating that there were "70 to 80 hardcore terrorists inside", the total number turned out to be about 220. Nonetheless, whether by accident or design, the operation turned out to be satisfactory. And shrewdly enough, the police had made sure that the media was able to fully report it.



The terrorists give themselves up to the security forces in the Golden Temple

On 13 May, a pall of gloom fell over the walled city again. Curfew was reimposed beyond the 300 metre radius, too. The security forces appeared to be moving towards a final showdown with the terrorists. They had consolidated their position in the Guru Ram Dass Sarai area, and neutralised the two *bungas*, though terrorists were still entrenched in parts of the Manji Sahib gurdwara and the new *langar* building which the commandos had tried to capture. Some shots were heard being fired from the two buildings by terrorists later. With the noose tightening, reinforcements were rushed. The total security forces swelled to 3,300 CRPF personnel and 500 NSG commandos, while 300-400 BSF jawans were made to

the *far seva* of the Golden Temple sometime back. The Baba asked the *sevadars*, women and children to come out. The terrorists who had taken up positions in one of the *bungas* then shouted that they would come out only if the Baba came inside and led them out. But the Baba offered to talk to them over the phone. Eventually, the police held fire for one hour, and six *sevadars* rushed out of the temple. The terrorists, obviously unhappy that they were losing grip, fired on the *sevadars*. Luckily, they managed to escape. Immediately after the ceasefire was over, the securitymen fired a volley of bullets into the Manji Sahib gurdwara, killing three extremists.

It was becoming clear that the battle

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