Serenity in the Midst of Savagery

SATPAL SINGH

I stood up in complete reverence to the Divine Will, and said my own last prayer. I had accepted death, just as death had accepted me.

It was odd, under the circumstances, to be feeling as serene, and as much at peace with the world, as I did. But such is the power of prayer.

This was a bad time for Sikhs in India. Sikh men were being beaten, in most cases with iron rods, and then subjected to the garland treatment, which means putting tires around their necks, dousing them with kerosene and setting them on fire. Before such treatment, many were forced to watch their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters being brutally gang-raped. Even children were not spared. This ruthless ethnic cleansing of Sikhs had been organized following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 by two Sikhs after she had led an assault on a large number of historic *gurdwaras*, Sikh houses of worship. Mobs were being organized and incited by senior government politicians to wipe out the Sikhs. The police stood by watching, and often abetted the carnage. The mobs were given government voting lists so they could identify Sikh homes and burn them and the Sikhs inside. The state-controlled media did its share by broadcasting sloganeering to shed Sikh blood. The incoming Prime Minister justified the carnage by saying, "When a big tree falls, the earth shakes."

During this time of chaos, I was traveling on a train when it made an unscheduled stop at a small railway station. A mob of about twenty or more entered the coach and started attacking Sikhs one by one. Standing outside our coach, the police incited the mob to show no mercy and to spare no Sikh. Inside the

coach, my co-passengers, including some army men in uniform who were sitting next to me minutes earlier, watched me being attacked ruthlessly without intervening. I tried desperately to save my head, the main target of the most vicious blows. Ironically, it was the loss of consciousness that would eventually save my life. After throwing my body on the railway track, the mob moved on to their next victims.

When I regained consciousness, I was badly bruised, but was able to quickly crawl back onto the train to avoid being stoned to death by the mob standing on the platform. The train soon restarted its journey towards its destination, the country's capital Delhi, where the carnage was happening with particularly vicious ferocity. We were now hurtling towards an inevitable finality for me, where I would be beaten and burned alive, or suffer an even worse fate as many Sikhs had. There was no option but to reconcile to my inescapable destiny. Such reconciliation does not come naturally, or easily. My faith gave me the courage and the strength to stand in prayer and be transformed.

I closed my eyes and in my mind I hugged my wife—who was holding her breath hundreds of miles away—asking her forgiveness for breaking the promise of life-long companionship so suddenly. I hugged my four-year-old son and daughter of a few months, asking them to be good to their mother and to every human being in the world. I thanked God for the wonderful life I had been granted and for a loving family that was bringing warmth to my heart from distances afar.

In the midst of all the brutality and savagery, I felt faith in the basic goodness of human nature. I had no resentment, no complaint, no rancor. I was at peace with myself. I was at peace with the world. I was at peace with God. The tranquility of prayer had touched the deafening cacophony of violence and silenced it. Through all of this, I strived to keep in my mind and heart the Sikh Scripture, "No one is an enemy, nor a stranger, I get along with all."

A confluence of highly improbable coincidences and blind but fortuitous gambles took me out of the jaws of death. However, I was soon plunged into another slaughterhouse, this time with an ironic twist—I was now at an army facility, at a railway station in a city that housed a major army base.

The police chief at the station refused to protect me. His answer to my pleadings was unambiguous and emphatic. "*Sardar ji* (Sir!), whatever is written in your destiny, I can't interfere with that! How can I? That is your destiny!" Similarly, the army refused to give me shelter because they had not received any orders to protect civilians. They explained that this helplessness had forced them earlier to hand over two Sikhs to a mob carrying sticks and stones. The Sikh men had been

> There is one hope that I still nurture—the realm of God

brutalized and killed as the fully armed men of the Indian Army looked on. The army men told me that I would face the same fate in a few hours as the day broke.

My persistent efforts and a lucky break with a very senior army officer, who visited the facility for a few minutes, eventually got me a temporary stay at the army base. From there, I was sent to a local gurdwara where other injured Sikhs were staying. Eventually I was able to return to my family, battered and bruised but alive, several days after I had hugged them the final goodbye.

More than a quarter century after what happened in the streets of India, the dead have found no justice. Thousands of widows and orphans are still dealing with an unending nightmare. Any witnesses that dare to come forward are still being intimidated. The politicians who organized the carnage have been rewarded with highly lucrative political positions. And a democratic nation of over one billion stays mute to the concept of justice.

In the Summer 2004 issue of *World Policy Journal, The New York Times* Delhi Bureau Chief, Barbara Crossette, wrote:

> Almost as many Sikhs died in a few days in India in 1984 than all the deaths and disappearances in Chile during the seventeen-year military rule of Gen. Augusto Pinochet between 1973 and 1990 . . . . Not only Chile, but also Argentina, Peru, Mexico, South Africa, and Ethiopia, among other nations, have been addressing atrocities from decades past. India, in refusing to confront its bloody recent history, stands in glaring contrast to these nations.

My own experience and what I often see in the world leaves me wondering about what is happening to the world, and about the human nature itself. How can one kill a child, put a garland of fire around someone's neck, savagely gang-rape someone's daughter, and then go home and lovingly hug one's own daughter or son and give the unconditional love of a father?

Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur and many other places have experienced genocides just in the past few years. Justifications and pretexts for genocides vary, but much of it happens in the name of religion or religion-related divisions, although religion teaches us compassion and love, Love of God and of God's sons and daughters.

Can such violence be prevented? Internal political dynamics and international political constraints make any meaningful solution practically impossible. It takes heated discussions over months, and often years, to come to even simple agreements. What happened in Rwanda and Darfur reflect the political world's inability in preventing such massacres or even in bringing the perpetrators to justice.

There is one hope that I still nurture—the realm of God. The realm of 'Fellowship in Prayer.' If religious and spiritual leaders of the world make a joint, collaborative effort, we can achieve miracles that can transform our society. For example, such is

happening across the world under the leadership of Religions for Peace.

Religious leaders wield more influence over the minds of their followers than any politician or any government can ever dream of. Their reach goes beyond that of the presidents and the prime ministers of the world, or of its tyrants. It goes even beyond the national boundaries. Even if the pressures of internal dynamics or of international sanctions and foreign armies do not move a regime, most men and women still hold the fear of God deep in their heart.

The spiritual leaders of the world need to unequivocally, and in one voice, impress upon their individual constituencies that God does not look kindly to brutality, even if it is ostensibly committed in the name of God. In particular, when proponents of a faith start perpetrating such atrocities, the leaders of that faith must speak forcefully and urgently against it, so as to stop further bloodshed and avoid the vicious cycle of ever increasing reciprocal violence. Leaders of other faiths must join the cause and lend their voice to it.

Admittedly, this is a simplistic hope. Even if such a joint and concerted interreligious effort can be forged, it may not bear fruit overnight. The world of hatred, intolerance and cruelty has deep memetic roots that have been developing over centuries, and that can be tackled only if committed leaders can reach the souls of their followers and nurture love and compassion in place of hatred and cruelty.

My hopes burn brighter than the garlands of fire around men's necks. As long as we have amongst us the courage and fortitude of Immaculee Ilibagizas, Eli Wiesels and Harvinder Singh Phoolkas, and as long as the leaders of our faiths can flood the conscious of the world with God's love and compassion, we can triumph over some of the most difficult challenges that we face today.

If we remember the oneness of all humanity, and seek

blessings for the well being of all humans, the world can become a better place to live for us all. We can achieve true universal harmony.

As I did on that dark night in a secluded corner of a train, I would like to end with the last line from the daily Sikh prayer that transformed ultimate horror into inexpressible serenity for me:

"O Nanak! In Thy Will, May ALL Prosper!" SJ



Dr. Satpal Singh is Chairperson of the World Sikh Council-America Region and the Chair of its Interfaith Committee. He frequently speaks on Sikh philosophy and the Sikh way of life in various forums and participates in interfaith dialogues on diversity, religion and peace. He is a professor at the University at Buffalo, NY.