



When a Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and its Aftermath

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OD says

This book was part of a necessary catching up with an important part of Indian history for me. The Delhi riots of 84 are brought up by Narendra Modi/BJP apologists every time the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 is discussed and the timelines and details were very sketchy in my mind.

Well, there's a wealth of detail in this book. A first section gives a broad overview of the story that played out over 3 days in '84 taking the lives of 3000 people and the legal drama that's still unresolved three decades later.

The second section of the book is told from the decidedly partisan viewpoint of one of the lawyers involved in the decades-long struggle for bringing those responsible for the 'carnage' to trial. The partisanship is not necessarily bad, some stories just do not have two versions equally deserving to be told and this is most certainly one of them. HS Phoolka, the lawyer, lays out in painful detail the workings of several inquiry commissions that set about trying to find the 'truth of 84', the various botched trials and police cases, and gives fleeting glimpses of the judges, police officers, lawyers and politicians whose various agendas dragged these processes first one way then another and in the end ensured nothing ever really was resolved.

The details are tiresome to read. As they must have been tiresome to live through, if you were one of those affected. But the author doesn't help with his style. There is no attempt at building a narrative. The book can't decide whether to shock you about the callous murders, or to be an exposé of the infighting between various organs of the judiciary and the executive, or to be the author's autobiography, or his personal thank-you notes to all those people who helped him along the way. In the end you get glimpses of something truly big, and I'm glad I read this book, I just wish they had hired a competent editor first.

Nitin Bhandarkar says

Some episodes from India's past are so dark, it almost seems unbelievable that they belong to India. The carnage of 84 in New Delhi is one such dubious chapter. What followed for 3 days after Mrs. Gandhi's killing left a long trail of pain and trauma that would consume the lives of many who survived.

HS Phoolka's narrative mostly delves into his work trying to bring justice to the victims and the humongous struggle it proved to be, given that the perpetrators of the crime were people in high positions. Eventually, political will prevails one way or the other and our institutions only bend to their sway.

Swarnendu says

A human life was valued at 500 rupees. Let that sink in.

Amit Tiwary says

1984 is a blot on post independence modern Indian history. The detail in the book is completely factual which clearly shows the nexus between politicians and police force during those unfateful 3 days. And then there are details on how the politicians/police/judiciary denied the suffers even the basic rights of representation and delivery of justice.

I feel ashamed. I feel raged. I feel frustrated. How easy it was for the powerful and rulers in the country to manipulate and cover up the first organized pogrom of independent India. How pathetic that not a single politician got a sentence for their deeds which caused such a deep scar in the minds and hearts of the affected and concerned.

Kudos to Manoj Mitta and H S Phooka to bring out the truth and details from one of the greatest cover ups.

And H S Phooka, you are a hero. A hero in many senses. The kind of commitment and efforts you have put in all your life to bring justice to affected is unparalleled. Salute sir.

Rahul Sharma says

1984 Sikh pogrom is one of the darkest chapters in the history of India and also the most easily forgotten. 'When a Tree Shook Delhi' reminds us of the horrific time and the neglect & callousness with which the judiciary investigated the case.

The book is essentially divided into two parts; where Manoj Mitta recounts his experience as a journalist of (un)covering the riots and shares some of the most harrowing accounts of the victims. Each story is filled with pain, anger and remorse & you can't help but be moved by it. I was particularly shaken when I read the Gurdip Kaur's chilling account who was gang raped in front of her son and her husband & other son were set to fire.

The second part is more focused on the legal aspect with HS Phoolka taking over and sharing his struggles with the bureaucracy to get the victims justice. He provides an exhaustive account of the lapses made by the commissions at the behest of Congress party and how they failed the victims and society at large. Congress leaders like HKL Bhagat, Jagdish Tytler, Sajjan Kumar and Kamal Nath were all set free because of 'lack of evidence' and what's worse is that all of them went on to become ministers in successive Congress governments.

More than feeling angry, I felt sad after reading the book. Sad at the sad state of affairs in our country and a judiciary paralyzed by politics.

Rajesh says

Shocking! The book got its name from the infamous statement from Rajiv Gandhi after the 1984 anti-sikh riot - " When a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little". 'The shaking of earth' is the metaphor he used to refer to the genocide that took the life out 3000 Sikh people. Rajiv Gandhi instead of expressing regret over the unfortunate incident, said it was just natural for the people to vent out their anger. The book shows that 1984 carnage was not a spontaneous outflow of anger against the Sikh community over the assassination of Indira Gandhi but a state sponsored genocide. Gujarat riot, which dragged on for 3 months, resulted in loss of 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus. 1984 genocide which lasted just

for 3 days killed close to 3000 Sikh people! That too perpetuated by the goons of the party which consider itself a secular party! What an irony!!

Anjishnu says

Depressing, enlightening, a must read for anyone who claims to have an opinion on Indian culture, politics and the legal system.

Annie Zaidi says

Read this book. Read it to understand how things go wrong, how justice goes haywire, and how - in the absence of justice - injustice is repeated. Read it alongside 'Hashimpura: May 22' by Vibhuti Narain Rai.

Mandatory reading for all journalists. I really hope it is being translated into other Indian languages.

Amrit says

fair enough reason to be rebel , to hate indian democracy and government .. it shows how so called all mighty constitution was fucked up , manipulated by the then gov.

Megha Sharma says

The metaphorical title is what grasped my attention when I picked up the book. Rajiv Gandhi in his address to nation referred to the carnage that led to a genocide of 3000 people as shaking of earth while Indira Gandhi was being referred to as a tree which fell.

While we all know about the massacre that took place in 1984, I was unaware of the intricate details behind the riots and the aftermath. This book is a wholesome guide to all that there is to these riots.

Heart rendering and shocking, some of the tales leave you in a wretched state. The tacit involvement of Congress leaders is focussed upon and is backed by facts.

The gory details I've learned of the spiteful massacre from this book will remain in my heart forever!

Soham Chakraborty says

After Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, the capital of India, Delhi, was ravaged for three days by rioters, killing almost 3000 sikhs. Indira's son, India's next prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had said, 'when a mighty tree falls, the earth around it does shake a little bit'. It was said after the massacre of sikhs was complete and gave the carnage the stamp of legitimacy, attached a symbol of state endorsement. By official estimates, 2733 sikhs were killed, during a three day long bloodbath. Largest democracy of the world, played a very suitable and vital role. 13 persons faced punishment in half a dozen murder cases, no political leader faced conviction.

What was known earlier as well and has been rendered by after this book, is that, several Congress leaders actually instigated the mob to attack the sikhs. The mob in turn, murdered the sikh males, raped the women and burned off the dead bodies and properties. The worst of this mass killing happened in an area, called Trilokpuri, where 300 sikhs were killed in a single block, over the span of a day, in what could very aptly, be called, a genocide. Bone chilling accounts of atrocity are documented vividly in the first half of the book. Manoj Mitta, the investigative journalist, didn't leave a single archive untouched and the result, is this book, a fable of an unjust, unlawful, barbaric, inhuman democracy of India. As the noted sociologist Ashish Nandy had said, 'this book is almost a handy guide on how to organize a communal riot and then escape the consequences'.

Why the mobs attacked the sikhs? Obviously not to avenge the murder of Indira Gandhi. It would serve no purpose to kill random people for that. The answer lies in politics. Ruling Congress leaders in Delhi, wanted to make it big in national circuit. Where subtlety is not counted as a virtue, brute force obviously does. And so it happened that the Congress leaders, urged the mob to go and kill the sikhs. The mob, in turn, followed the theory of conformism. As we know, that a person who doesn't have the skill or courage to take a decision in hours of crisis, conforms to the behaviour of the group, even if that goes against his conscience. Also, as per 'Agentic state theory' "the essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view themselves as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and they therefore no longer see themselves as responsible for their actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow." The reason I cited this study is because, in the age when consent is manufactured and propaganda is served as TV news, every citizen should determine their action. Unfortunately, blind group thinking is still manufactured in India, under the veil of democracy and culture.

Why did the political leaders did so? Indira Gandhi was a cult who 40 years ago, had imposed emergency on the republic of India. She had successfully managed to create a perception that she is the party, the nation. After her death, the power hungry hyenas of political circus, wanted to use the opportune moment to catapult themselves in national political circuit. Sure enough, Congress party stayed true to its culture of one man worship and hardly anyone - anyone who had some clout over the leaders who were on streets - uttered a note of dissent. The Congress government, was in fact, complicit to the carnage and actively abetted the violence and stoked the fire of animosity towards sikhs. Not for one day, not for two day, but for three days. It crippled the police and army, giving a free rein to the blood thirsty mobs and their instigators. Also it made most of the situation by soon going into a national election and rubbing salt to the wounds of democracy, it won the elections with a thumping majority. The Delhi Congress leaders were suitably rewarded, one getting cabinet rank and another bagged minister of state portfolio.

What was the police doing? Very simple. Police acts as per the political current. This book lays bare how the Congress government, coordinated with Delhi police, allowing the rampaging mob unchecked. Suddenly, after three days - as if nothing had happened in between - police and military started restoring law and order.

What did the judiciary do? This book MUST be read if we want to understand how the supreme institutions for upholding justice - the courts - behaved and continue to behave, in contradiction of natural justice. Arundhati Roy had once said, that the Supreme court of India, has two supremacy - one, it wields supreme power and two, it is supremely unaccountable. Not unsurprisingly, mere mortals, never understand legalese and how it can be exploited or even used as a weapon against them.

The first judicial inquiry, constituted by none other than the Congress government, was a total farce. The Ranganath Misra commission held inquiries before camera, opposed to the standard practice of inquiring before public. Not to go into details - and the book must be read for the details - the commission made a mockery of justice. The Congress party duly rewarded for the subservience shown to it and Ranganath Misra

not only went on to become chief justice of India but laughingly was also made, the first chairman of National Human Rights Commission. Such is the travesty of justice.

The second judicial inquiry, formed after almost two decades, showed feeble repentance for the state sponsored carnage. It booked the Delhi Congress leaders for mobilizing people to murder the sikhs, but, it failed to mention the top brass of Congress, who acted in unison with the local leaders. However, the very order of allowing the mobs to go on was propagated from the who's who of Congress. But the higher ups were spared and none of them were even hinted even as complicit in the report. But again, not all man are equal. Some man are more equal than others.

India boasts of being a democracy. Truth be told, the trumpet breaks in a closer inspection. None of the major sectarian and communal carnage in independent India, has seen justice. Be it the anti-sikh riot in national capital, or Babri Masjid destruction and ensuing riot in parts of the country, mostly Mumbai, or exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in the Kashmir valley, or Godhra riots and extra judicial killings in the three month long communal riot in Gujarat, or the Hindu Muslim riots in Uttarpradesh. In each of them, law and justice never prevailed and truth be told, will not prevail.

It is unsure of how India will behave in future. Democracy is of little value, if it is only an electoral democracy. Democracy entails and imbibes law and order and justice. An unjust society, an unjust country, can never be a true democracy. As much as it hurts me to say this, India is not one.

Jaswinder Singh says

The book gives a first hand account of the 1984 sikh riots in the capital. It brings forth the facts to support the claim that the mass killings were organised and supported at the highest level. The Army and the police were disempowered to take any action during the three days of the carnage. Instead the police played a crucial role in disarming the sikhs so that they could be deprived of even the last resort namely, self defence.

Post the riots, Rajiv Gandhi at the boat club, in his first ever public address after becoming the prime minister, came up with a metaphor "When a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little". Such was the callous attitude of the prime minister.

The book also highlights HS Phoolka's struggle for securing justice to the victims of the carnage. Two major commissions were formed to enquire into the riots and none have been able to provide justice to the victims. The book describes how evidences were destroyed/manipulated and how red tape and bureaucracy was used to its core to cover up the facts.

Even after 30 years, the sikhs are still awaiting justice. Reading this book has reaffirmed my faith that the judiciary has and will remain a puppet in hands of the big shots and that law and order is only for the citizens - the powerless people. Bhagat Singh once remarked "Freedom is not given, it is taken".....time may not be far when the same applies to Justice.

Balaji says

Gruesome and sorry state of affairs - the words that come to mind when one reads this book. When the entire

state machinery, judiciary, political system, police all collectively failed not only in its duty to protect its citizens but also complied with people responsible for the massacre of 3000 sikhs in the aftermath of PM Indira Gandhis murder. The book exposes how despite the various judicial probes and despite evidences against tainted cops and leaders - the accused still managed to evade the law by exposing loopholes in the judicial system and using the entire political power to get away from their heinous crimes. As rightly said, the only wins for the victims were the resignations of tainted ministers after two decades of inquiries and court battles and an embattled prime minister apologising to the Sikh community that justice was not delivered. Ironic that the apology came from a Sikh PM. The chapters give a blow by blow account of how everyone in the system complied to ensure that the massacre was passed off as an outburst of emotion at the passing of an eminent leader whereas in reality - it was a planned activity where the sole purpose of the attackers was teaching a "lesson" to a community. An absolute shame for the country and a reminder for us of the dark times that preceded

Harish Muralidhar says

written by the very person who fought for the victims, it details the horrors that took place in Delhi (including the ones faced by the author himself) and of course the meticulous manner in which every possible attempt was made to cover up and shield the perpetrators after. Reading this, one feels justice too is a game after all.

Saurabh says

The very apt name references to one of Rajiv Gandhi's statements in the aftermath of the 1984 carnage (mass killings of Sikh) trying to justify the same - "But, when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little." This book made me ashamed of our great country not just because such an incident happened but also because of the failure of the legal system which punished just 13 odd people for half a dozen murder and let the political leader walk free. FYI- the original official count of people dying in the carnage was 2,733, unofficial number above 3500.

The book is divided into two parts - first authored by Manoj Mitta, a journalist, giving account of happening from media's perspective with inputs from the other author HS Phoolka. HS Phoolka, a Sikh, is a senior advocate practising in Delhi, giving account of the legal happenings in part two of the book. He spearheaded the long-drawn campaign for justice to the victims. I like the way he ends the book with last chapter named 'small mercy' where on a positive note he says that all the efforts have not been in vain as after the long struggle the compensation to the victims were increased manifold, the Congress leaders called out in the Nanavati report had to resign and Manmohan Singh (2005,PM) in his symbolic speech apologised to the Sikh community for the incident. The epilogue of the book briefly talks about another carnage - Gujarat riots.

On a lighter note, this book seemed like a 80-90s Bollywood movie where the government and the goons colludes against the masses. I bet many Bollywood movies of the yesteryears (esp 90s Akshay Kumar & Sunil Shetty's movies) would have taken inspiration from this book.

A must read book.
