

Revisiting the scarred history of '84

PARAMJIT S JUDGE

THE famous English poet HW Longfellow in his poem 'A Psalm of Life' advised: "Let the dead Past bury its dead!" However, history of memories informs us somewhat differently. Individuals, communities and nations never forget agony, tragedy and sufferings experienced in the course of their lives, and history.

In 1984, widely regarded as the Orwellian year, the Sikhs experienced humiliation and tragedy, which they were neither prepared for, nor foresaw. It was the year of the Army operation at the Golden Temple in Amritsar in the first week of June — an action that could have been avoided by choosing an alternative strategy — without any consideration for the fact that it was the holiest of places for the Sikh community. It was followed by the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, by her Sikh bodyguards and then widespread violence against the Sikhs in Delhi and many parts of North India.

Most of the victims were those who had migrated from western Punjab in 1947 and had already experienced uprooting, displacement and violence. 1984 seemed like the enactment of the same violence of a communal nature — the difference though lay in the fact that this time the actions of a few individuals made their community responsible for the crime.

Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry's book is a collection of articles written by academicians



**REMEMBERING THE PAST:
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE
ANTI-SIKH VIOLENCE OF PUNJAB**

Edited by Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry.

Orient BlackSwan.

Pages 217.

₹1,285

belonging to different disciplines and social activists, making it an interdisciplinary work. Chaudhry takes up an interesting issue with regard to the characterisation of anti-Sikh violence in 1984 by referring to various terms, such as riot, pogrom, carnage, genocide or massacre. Obviously, subsequent articles have used one or the other term to study various aspects of the events of 1984. What had been happening before the assassination of Mrs Gandhi has been taken up by some articles, though it is part of Sikh memory.

The anti-Sikh violence turned into an organised pogrom within a few hours, duly led by some notable Congress leaders.

Nandita Haksar, human rights activist and lawyer, has underlined the organisa-

tional character of violence, but it should be remembered that had this kind of organised violence been planned much before the event, then it also implies that the assassination would have been planned much earlier. She has also pointed out that there were FIRs registered against 49 BJP-RSS leaders for their role in the violence.

Yasmeen Arif's ethnographic study of the widows of 1984, which recorded various narratives in 2004, uses the expression 'enduring exile' to signify the lasting loss endured by the women, offering a vivid analysis of the victims of violence who have largely remained invisible in various studies of the period. Uma Chakravarti, one of the most respected feminist writers and historians, has given a moving personal account of how she helped a Sikh family, underlining the fact that the offenders need to be understood and pinpointed by not giving them a blanket communal identity.

Anne Murphy focuses on how memorials of the 1984 violence in Delhi and Canada, with their museological elements, are commemoration of trauma of a shared past among the Sikhs and compares it with those of the Holocaust as well as First Nations.

Jasmine Anand's analysis of the film 'Chauthi Koot' (directed by Gurbinder Singh) is thought-provoking. She has used the metaphor of a 'dog's life' to characterise the period of militancy in Punjab. The film is based on two stories by Punjabi writer Waryam Sandhu. She comments: "The failure of the state to protect all its citizens equally and its complicity in the killings had

orphaned sections of it by denying them a basic requirement — safety."

Diamond Oberoi Vahali's psychoanalysis of the Malayalam film 'Kaya Taran' ('Chrysalis') is another notable contribution in this volume. The film is about the Christian nuns who gave protection to a Sikh woman and her son during the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Meerut. The author points out that the universe of hatred and violence could be counteracted through kindness and compassion. A Malayalam movie conveying a message of the need to sustain one's identity even in an adverse situation may be an addition to the knowledge of many Punjabis.

The volume offers a new perspective on the events of 1984 through ethnographic accounts, literature, memories, cinema and the idea of commemoration. It also strongly reminds that people did not lose their identity as humans and stresses the need for compassion for others, irrespective of their identities. The work takes the reader back to the times when violence turned into a cult by losing its radical and positive dimension, as preached in history through movements like Ghadar and by icons like Bhagat Singh.

The book reminds that the politics of religion could be a danger to humanity in all situations, and cautions that there is a need to be aware of such possibilities as well as to counter them. It's a must-read work for anyone interested in contemporary history.

— *The reviewer taught sociology at
Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar*