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39 Years Since Operation Bluestar What Actually Happened?

Why In The News?

- June 2023 Marks **39 Years Of Operation Bluestar**, In Which The Indian Army Stormed The Golden Temple In Amritsar To Flush Out **Militant Leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale** And His Followers.

What Was Operation Bluestar?

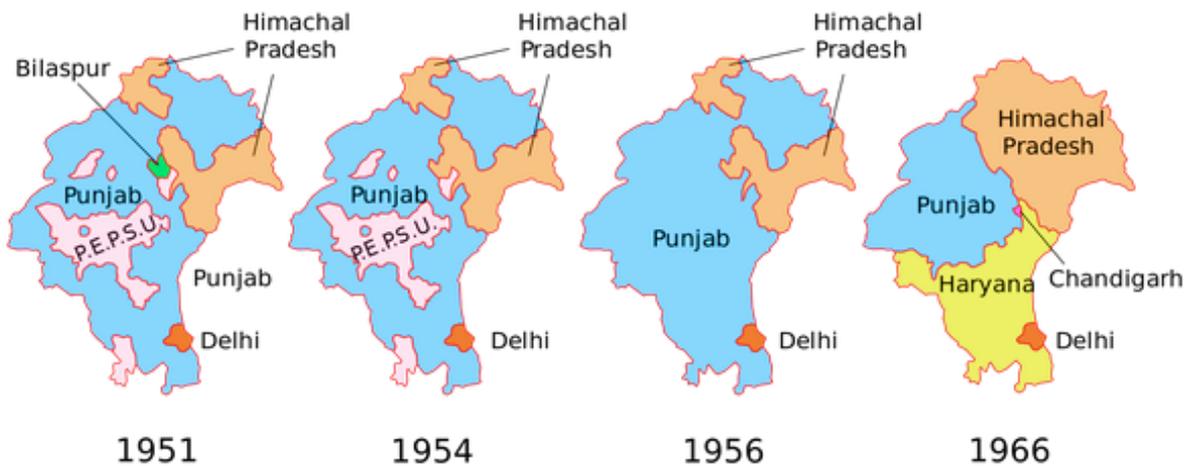
- An Indian Army Operation Carried Out In June 1984 In The **Golden Temple In Amritsar, Punjab**, To Flush Out Militants Who Were Led By **Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale**, A One-time Leader Of The Sikh Seminary Damdami Taksal And A Key Figure In The Growing Separatist **Khalistan Movement** At The Time.



The Birth Of Idea Called “Khalistan”:

- It Was Born In The **Aftermath Of The Partition Of India** In 1947. Punjab, The Home Of Majority Sikh Community, Was Also Divided Into Two. This Led To A **Sense Of Loss Among Indian Sikhs**, With Culturally And Religiously Important Cities, Such As **Lahore And Nankana Sahib, Going To Pakistan**.
- Additionally, There Was Some Discontent Over A Few **Administrative Issues**, Like **River Water Sharing With Other States**, Which Led To Demands For Autonomy -And Then For A **Sovereign Sikh State** From Some Quarters. It Is Also Believed That **Pakistan Aided The Movement With Arms And Funds**.

- For Autonomy, In **1966, The Erstwhile Punjab State Was Divided** Into The Hindi-speaking, Hindu-majority States Of **Himachal Pradesh And Haryana**, And The Punjabi-Speaking, Sikh-Majority Punjab. However, By The 1970s, The Separatist **Khalistan Movement Was In Full Swing** - In India And Abroad.



The Build-up For Khalistan Movement:

- In This Scenario Emerged **Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale**, A Firebrand Preacher Who Positioned Himself As **“The Authentic Voice Of The Sikhs”** In A Period Of Political Uncertainty.
- While Bhindranwale Was Initially **Courted By The Congress To Counter The Shiromani Akali Dal’s** Influence In The State, By The Early 1980s He Had Become **“A Problem”** - He Found A Captive Audience Among The Youth, The Activities Of His Followers Were Becoming **Increasingly Violent**, And **Bhindranwale Himself Was Engaging In Aggressive Rhetoric.**



- **In 1982**, He Became A Part Of A Civil Disobedience Movement Launched By The Akalis, Called The **Dharam Yudh Morcha**, And **Moved To The Akal Takht Inside The Golden Temple Complex To Evade Arrest** From The Authorities.
- In 1983, **A S Atwal, Deputy Inspector-general Of Police (DIG), Was Shot Dead** After Praying At The Golden Temple And His Body Was Left To Decay. By 1984, The Govt Finally Decided To Step In By Sending In Armed Forces To Flush Out Bhindranwale And His Followers From Their Hideout Inside The Golden Temple.

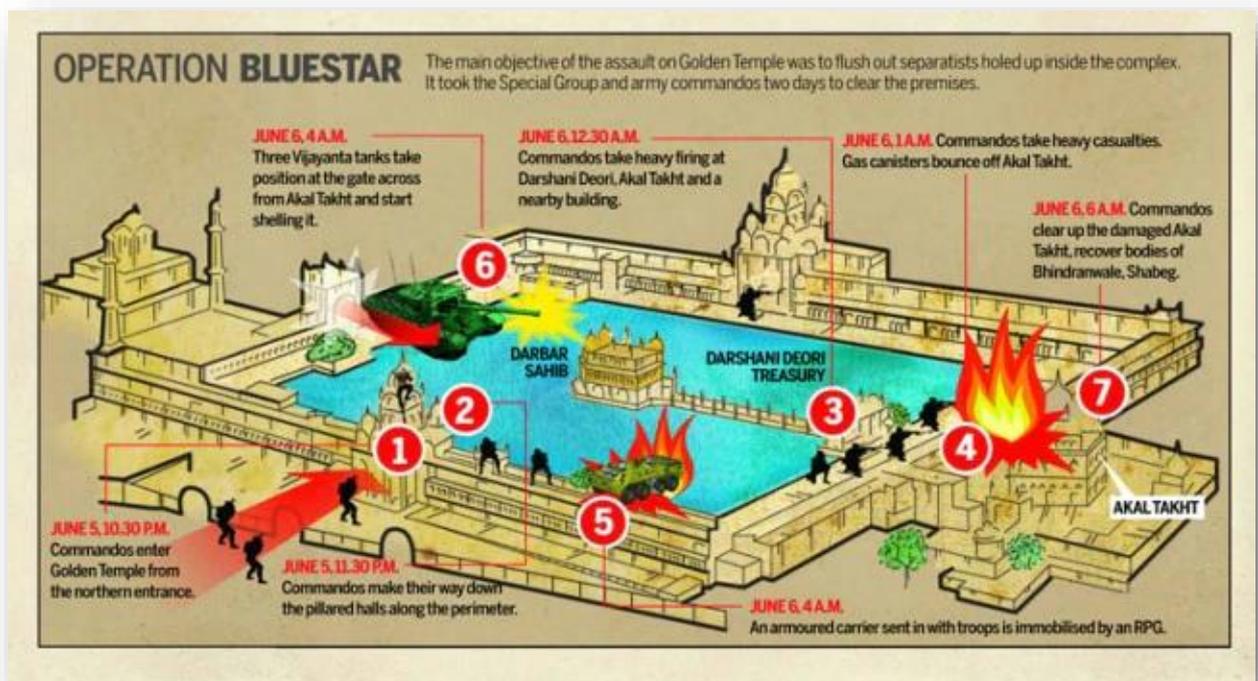
The Dreadful “Operation Bluestar”:

- At This Point, The Golden Temple Complex Was Nothing Short Of A Fortress. Over A Period Of Months, **Bhindranwale’s Men Had Smuggled In A Huge Cache Of Arms And Ammunition Inside The Complex** And Placed Guns Strategically For Defence.
- Furthermore, Under The Leadership Of **Major General Shahbeg Singh**, Who Had Been Dismissed By The Indian Army Over Corruption Charges, Bhindranwale’s Men Received Extensive Military Training.



- **On June 1**, Four Days Before The Army Actually Entered The Golden Temple Complex, The **First Shots Were Fired At The Temple By The CRPF** To, According To Reports, “Assess The Training And Strength Of The Militants Inside”.
- **On June 3**, A **36-hour-curfew Was Imposed On The State Of Punjab** With All Methods Of Communication And Public Travel Suspended, Electricity Lines Cut And Complete Media Censorship.

- The Army Finally Commenced The Operation On The Night Of June 5. The Initial Thrust Of The Operation Was To **Neutralize The High-perched Defensive Positions Built By Bhindranwale's Men** In The Golden Temple Complex. As Per The Army, Any Assault On The Temple Compound Could Not Be Successful If They Remained In Play.
- As The Outer Defences Of The Temple Complex Fell, The Army Was Still Hopeful For A Quick Capitulation. What They Did Not Take Into Account Was That The Militants Were Not Necessarily Making "Rational" Decisions. **The Troops' Entry Into The Golden Temple Was Met With Furious Fire From Inside.**
- The Troops' Attempts To Capture The Parikrama Or The Circumambulatory Path Around The Golden Temple. The Unanticipated Resistance Faced By The Troops Resulted In The **Commanders Calling For Tank Support.** Tanks Began Entering The Temple Complex At **Around 10 Pm On June 5.**



- Over The **Next 12 Hours**, The Army's **Vijayanta Tanks Shelled The Golden Temple's Akal Takht** - One Of The Five Seats Of Power As Per Sikh Belief. This Was Bhindranwale's Location, Where Resistance Was The Strongest.
- Tanks Had Been Initially Avoided Over Possible Structural Damage To The Complex - Something That Would **Anger The Sikh Community** Further. However, Once Tanks Were Brought In, **They Proved To Be Extremely Effective.**

- As Dawn Broke **On June 6**, The Main Defences, Comprising **Machine Guns And Chinese-made RPGS, Had Largely Been Neutralized**. At Around 11 Am, Some **25 Militants Rushed Out Of The Building**, Firing At Random And Running Straight Towards Troops, Who Gunned Down Most Of Them.
- The Generals Gussed That The **Mad Dash Was An Indication That Bhindranwale Was Either Dead Or Wounded** Or Had, Confirming Their Worst Fears, Escaped.
- Fortunately For The Armed Forces, The Firebrand Preacher Had Not Escaped. As The Troops Finally Entered The Akal Takht, Now In Ruins, **They Found Bhindranwale Dead, Reportedly In A Heap Of “About 40 Corpses”**. The Last Remaining Militants Either Surrendered Or Were Killed By June 10.

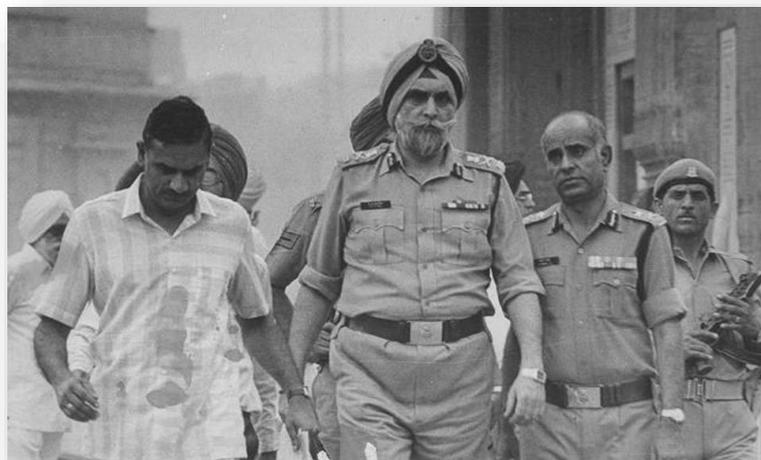


The Aftermath:

- While The Army Initially Placed Total Casualties At **554 Militants And Civilians Dead, 83 Troops Dead (4 Officers, 79 Soldiers) And 236 Wounded** Among Government Forces, Other Estimates Peg The Number Of Casualties As Much Higher.
- Though The **Army Has Always Claimed It Did Everything To Protect Civilians**, Including Making Announcements On Loudspeakers Prior To The Attack, Its Actions Have Been Questioned. In 2017, A Sessions Court In Amritsar Ruled That There Was No Evidence Of Such Warnings.
- There Were Reverberations Across The Country. The **Resentment Among Some Members Of The Sikh Community Over The Operation** Saw Its Gravest Manifestation **On October 31, 1984, When PM Indira Gandhi Was Assassinated** By Her Two Sikh Bodyguards, Who Blamed Her For The Attack.



- Her Assassination Would Trigger Some Of The Worst Communal Violence Ever Witnessed In India, **As Sikhs Were Openly Targeted And Killed**. Many In The Govt And The Congress Party, Were Accused Of Playing An Active Role In The Anti-Sikh Riots.
- Crucially, While Bhindranwale Had Been Killed, His Death Made Him An Almost Mythological Figure In Some Ways. The Events At Golden Temple Did Not End Violence In Punjab, **With Rising Militancy Accompanying Rising Repression From The State** And The Armed Forces Well Into The 1990s.
- **KPS Gill, Former DGP Of Punjab**, Wrote In The Punjab Story: "In Hindsight, Operation Bluestar Was Possibly The Single Most Significant Act Of Political Overreaction And Military Incompetence That Gave A Lease Of Life To A Movement That Could Easily Have Been Ended In The Mid-1980s."



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