

The Valiant Jaswant Singh Khalra

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Jaswant Singh Khalra was a Sikh activist and a key figure in exposing the unlawful actions of the Punjab Police during a period of political unrest. As the head of the human rights wing of the Shiromani Akali Dal, Khalra uncovered the horrifying truth behind the extrajudicial killings and secret cremations carried out by the Punjab Police in the 1990s. His investigation revealed that thousands of innocent people were secretly cremated by the police without any official record, with many of them being victims of forced disappearances.

Khalra's investigation and his subsequent campaign to bring justice to the victims of these atrocities earned him significant threats from the government and police. Despite the grave dangers to his own life, Khalra remained committed to exposing the truth, even at the cost of his safety. His commitment to human rights ultimately led to his abduction and murder by the Punjab Police in 1995.

Human Rights and Justice: At its core, *The Valiant* is a narrative of a tireless fight for human rights. Khalra's investigation into the unlawful killings and secret cremations reveals the extent of state-sponsored violence and the systemic cover-ups that allowed such atrocities to go unnoticed. The book highlights Khalra's unwavering commitment to justice for the victims who had no voice and no one to stand up for them.

The Valiant Jaswant Singh Khalra by Gurmeet Kaur is a profoundly moving and powerful biography of a man who gave his life for justice and truth. It serves as both a tribute to Khalra's heroism and a reminder of the importance of standing up against injustice, even when the cost is high. The book not only informs readers about a key figure in the fight for human rights in Punjab but also makes a strong statement about the need to remember the victims of state violence and the individuals who dedicated their lives to exposing it.

Reduced to Ashes: The Insurgency and Human Rights in Punjab is a detailed and harrowing investigative report on human rights violations during the Punjab insurgency in the 1980s and 1990s. Published by the committee for coordination on disappearances in Punjab and edited by human rights lawyer **Ram Narayan Kumar**, the book documents extracted judicial killings. They forced disappearances and stated oppression in the region.

Courage and Resistance: The book highlights Jaswant Singh Khalra's extraordinary bravery in the face of immense threats. His ability to stand firm and continue his activism, even knowing the risks, makes him an iconic symbol of resistance against state repression. These books

beautifully capture his inner strength and determination to fight for truth, no matter what the cost.

Jaswant Singh Khalra was working as a director of a cooperative bank. He was deeply affected by the events of Operation Blue Star in June 1984 and the killings of Sikh youth by the Punjab Police. He opposed the killing of any innocent person, whether by police or militants. He and his family felt it was unsafe for him to leave India because the police might kill him [1]. In 1990, he went to the UK, where he sought and was granted asylum. He stayed there until 1992. His family was supposed to join him, but he suddenly showed up back at his home, to everybody's surprise. He felt he could not stay away from the service he was meant to provide, even if it meant sacrificing his life. He believed he could give the best service by joining an organization and becoming part of the human rights wing of the Shiromani Akali Dal. He was also very active in condemning the government for destroying the Babri Masjid. In 1993, he resigned from the human rights wing of the Shiromani Akali Dal because the Akali government was partners with the BJP and was also responsible for police actions in Punjab. He continued his investigation into human rights violations in Punjab, both independently and with his previous teams in the "Daman Virodhi Front."

In 1994, all of his colleagues went missing, and once he got the lead that they were cremated in Sheetla Mandir crematoria, he devoted all his time to unearthing more data. For the last 2 years, he worked full-time on human rights issues. Gurbachan Singh Manochal, a well-respected Sikh freedom fighter and member of the Panthic Committee, was killed by police, and his body was disposed of by an unknown person (Lawaris). While investigating his death, Sardar Khalra and his friends came across a crematorium employee who quietly confided in them that it was possible to get an accurate count in one place. He said that the police brought them the dead bodies and the municipal committee provided them with firewood. However, the firewood was only issued per deceased body after all the records about the deceased were entered into the registers. The registers would be the source of evidence that Jaswant Singh Khalra sought. His team went to investigate the crematoria in the cities of Amritsar, Patna, and Tarn Taran. In Patna alone, they found records of 538 such bodies cremated from January 1991 to October 1994. These bodies were declared "Lawaris". (orphan or unclaimed).

On January 16, 1995, Jaswant Singh, Jaspal Singh, and Amrik Singh Mukatsar held a joint press conference in Chandigarh with officials from the Akali Dal Human Rights Wing. Along with the documented evidence, they released a press statement alleging that the police and the security forces in Punjab had engaged in the illegal abduction and murder of innocent people. They revealed that despite being aware of the identities of the deceased, the crematoria had secretly cremated them after labeling their bodies as Lawaris (orphan or unclaimed). They stated that the law had been broken at every step, and they enumerated which statutes and articles of the Constitution were being brazenly violated.

The press statement detailed their investigation based on the firewood issuance logs, revealing approximately 3,100 names: about 400 in Patti, 700 at Tarn Taran, and 2,000 in the Durgiana Mandir, one of the three crematoria in the Amritsar district alone. Based on their investigation, research, and projections, they showed estimates leading to a total of 25,000 missing people murdered by the state and illegally committed in all 13 districts over the previous 10 years.

On June 1, 1995, Jaswant Singh and Justice Ajit Singh Bains of PHRO were invited to speak to the Canadian Parliament committee in Ottawa. The Sikh advocacy group, the World Sikh Organization, organized this visit. Jaswant Singh, addressing a large group of parliamentarians, spoke of the ongoing genocide of the Sikhs in India, providing data and evidence to back up his claims. Some Parliament members advised him not to go back and seek asylum in Canada because they were afraid that he would be killed in India. He refused to do so and returned, continuing his human rights campaign.

On September 6, 1995, Jaswant Singh Khalra was washing his car outside his house when police kidnapped him. Several witnesses observed this incident during daylight hours, but the police denied that he was arrested or detained. On September 12, 1995, Jaswant Singh's wife, Mrs. Paramjit Kaur Khalra, filed a habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court of India—Paramjit Kaur v state of Punjab. In response to this petition, the Punjab police continued to deny that he had been arrested. In November 1995, the Supreme Court ordered an investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into the disappearance of Jaswant Singh Khalra.

On July 30, 1996, the CBI presented its investigation report to the Supreme Court, identifying 9 Punjab police officials as responsible for the abduction of Jaswant Singh Khalra and recommended their prosecution. It also found evidence that Jaswant Singh had been held at the Chabal Police station after being picked up by the police and that he had been moved from there on October 24, 1995, after which his whereabouts were unknown. The Supreme Court requested the CBI to continue its effort to establish the fate of Jaswant Singh Khalra. Even after this report, one of them was given a promotion to Station House Officer. The Punjab and Haryana High Court granted the accused anticipatory bail in November 1996. Three of the accused were under suspension in another similar case [9].

A "special police officer," Kuldeep Singh, was present when Jaswant Singh Khalra was taken from his home. He approached the Khalra Action Committee with his testimony. After presenting the evidence to the CBI and recording a statement, he was provided with police protection and requested guards from the CRPF. Paramjit Kaur Khalra was threatened on numerous occasions by police officers in Punjab to withdraw her petition. These threats have included visits to her home on the day following the disappearance of her husband and telephone calls to her house. She was also falsely charged with attempting to bribe a witness, Kuldip Singh.

Lawyers acting for the petitioner were also subject to threats. At the hearing on March 7, 1998, at the special CBI court in Patiala, the accused policeman reportedly openly abused Brijinder Singh Sodhi, one of the two lawyers acting for the petitioner (Paramjit Kaur Khalra), and

threatened him in front of the Magistrate presiding over the hearing. Still, the Magistrate did not try to prevent the accused police from threatening him and proceeded to grant them bail.

Kuldip Singh, a Special Police Officer (SPO) in Punjab, played a pivotal role as a witness in the case concerning the abduction and murder of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra. His testimony provided critical insights into illegal detention, torture, and subsequent disposal of Khalra's body.

Details of Kuldip Singh's Testimony: Illegal Detention and Torture: Kuldip Singh recounted that, in September 1995, he was assigned by Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Ajit Singh Sandhu to serve meals to a man detained in a room adjacent to the SHO's quarters. This individual was later identified as Jaswant Singh Khalra, who was found in a state of severe physical distress, including torn clothing and numerous scratches.

Interrogation by Senior Officers: He described an incident in which Khalra was taken to SSP Sandhu's residence, where he was interrogated by high-ranking officials, including the Director General of Police (DGP), KPS Gill. During this interrogation, Khalra was reportedly given a choice between life and death.

Murder and Disposal of Body: Kuldip Singh testified that, on October 28, 1995, he witnessed Khalra being tortured and then shot dead at Jhabal police station. The body was subsequently disposed of by being thrown into the Harike, a confluence of the Sutlej and Beas rivers.

Kuldip Singh's testimony was instrumental in implicating several police officers in the abduction and murder of Jaswant Singh Khalra. His accounts provided a detailed narrative of the events leading up to and following Khalra's death, highlighting the involvement of senior police officials in the illegal activities. Despite facing intimidation and threats, Kuldip Singh's courage in providing this testimony was crucial in bringing attention to the human rights violations that occurred during that period.

Convictions and Sentences:

In November 2005, Additional Sessions Judge Bhupinder Singh (**Patiala Special Court**) convicted six police officials for Khalra's abduction and murder. Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Jaspal Singh and Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) Amarjit Singh received life imprisonment for murder, along with additional sentences for abduction, destruction of evidence, and criminal conspiracy. Other officers, including Station House Officers (SHOs) Satnam Singh, Surinderpal Singh, Pritpal Singh, and Jasbir Singh, were sentenced to seven years for abduction and five years for conspiracy. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Ajit Singh Sandhu and DSP Ashok Kumar died during the trial. (SSP) Ajit Singh Sandhu was killed under suspicious circumstances. He was reported to have committed suicide, but he may have been killed by his colleagues so that higher-ups could be saved.

Subsequently, in 2011, the High Court extended the sentences of four officers—Satnam Singh, Surinder Pal Singh, Jasbir Singh, and Prithipal Singh—from seven years to life imprisonment [15].

In 2013, the High Court dismissed a plea challenging the relief granted to former DSP Jaspal Singh, stating that such matters should be taken up in the Supreme Court.

Supreme Court's Ruling on Human Rights Violations:

The case became an important landmark in recognizing extrajudicial killings and human rights violations by law enforcement [15]. The Court's ruling underscored the need for accountability within law enforcement agencies and provided a basis for subsequent human rights activism in the state. In addition to seeking justice through the legal process, the Court also emphasized the importance of giving compensation to the victims' families for their suffering.

Impact of the Case:

The case significantly raised the issue of police accountability and the protection of human rights in India, particularly during the period of conflict in Punjab. It also sparked debates about the impunity of law enforcement officers and the need for reform to prevent such abuses. Although the Supreme Court's involvement was a critical step toward justice, the Khalra case remains a poignant reminder of the broader issues of state violence, human rights abuses, and the role of law enforcement in conflict situations [17].

On July 23, 1996, Justice Kuldeep Singh, a Supreme Court judge, publicly stated that the action of Punjab police is "nothing short of genocide" [17].

The police officers, except one, who tortured Jaswant Singh Khalra, were Sikhs. The question is, why did police officers torture their people?

Answer: **The Stanford Prison Experiment**, conducted by psychologist Philip Zimbardo in 1971, showed that situational and systemic factors can have a profound impact on human behavior. The study showed how ordinary individuals could quickly adopt abusive or submissive roles when placed in a simulated prison environment, even though they had no prior history of such behavior.

Key conclusions from the experiment include **the Power of the Situation**: The study demonstrated that situational forces and authority structures have a significant influence on behavior. The guards, who were given power over the prisoners, quickly became abusive, while the prisoners became passive and submissive, even though they knew the situation was temporary.

Role Conformity: People tend to conform to the roles they are assigned, and these roles can lead to dramatic changes in behavior. The guards began to act with increasing cruelty, while the prisoners became more distressed and withdrawn.

Deindividuation and Loss of Personal Responsibility: The study illustrated how anonymity and a loss of personal responsibility in group settings can lead to extreme behavior. The guards felt less accountable for their actions due to the "role" they were playing, which contributed to their abusive behavior.

Why do police torture their people to please politicians?

The phenomenon of police torture or abuse in the context of political agendas can be a complex and disturbing issue, with several factors contributing to why this happens in certain circumstances. While not all police forces engage in such practices, there are instances where law enforcement may cross ethical boundaries due to various pressures. Here are some potential reasons why police might engage in such behavior, mainly when influenced by political factors:

Political Pressure and Corruption: In some cases, law enforcement agencies may be influenced or even directly controlled by politicians. Suppose political leaders want to suppress opposition, intimidate certain groups, or ensure that specific policies or actions are implemented. In that case, they may pressure or indirectly encourage law enforcement to use extreme measures, including torture, to achieve these goals. This can happen when law enforcement becomes entangled in political power struggles.

Maintaining Control and Power: In specific authoritarian regimes or corrupt systems, police may use torture as a tool to maintain control, suppress dissent, or send a message to potential protestors or opposition groups. Politicians, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies, might encourage or overlook police brutality to ensure their grip on power remains unchallenged.

Institutionalization of Abuse: When law enforcement organizations are deeply embedded in a culture of violence, impunity, or corruption, abuse can become normalized. Officers may view torture or brutality as an acceptable means of maintaining order, obtaining confessions, or intimidating specific populations, especially if they believe there will be little to no accountability. If politicians or the political system fail to address or even tacitly approve of such practices, they can persist.

Lack of Accountability and Oversight: In many cases, police forces that are not held accountable for their actions, especially when the political system is weak or corrupt, may feel empowered to use extreme measures without fear of repercussions. Politicians may disregard these actions because it serves their interests to have law enforcement act in a way that preserves their authority or suppresses opposition.

Fear of Losing Power: When politicians or political parties feel threatened, they may exploit law enforcement as a means of silencing critics, activists, or dissidents. Police may be pressured to engage in abusive tactics, such as torture, to extract information or intimidate the opposition, ensuring that the political status quo remains intact. This is often seen in regimes where leaders prioritize their personal or party power over human rights and justice.

Ideological Justification: In some situations, law enforcement personnel or political leaders may genuinely believe that the use of extreme measures, including torture, is justified to maintain national security, prevent crime, or safeguard a particular ideology. They may view the actions as a necessary evil to achieve broader political or societal goals despite the moral and legal implications.

Militarization of Police: In countries where police forces are heavily militarized or operate with military-like tactics, there can be a blurring of lines between law enforcement and military

repression. In such environments, police may adopt more aggressive methods to deal with perceived enemies of the state, often under the direction of politicians seeking to maintain control.

Scapegoating and Targeting Specific Groups: Politicians may exploit societal divisions and encourage law enforcement to target specific groups, whether for political, racial, ethnic, or religious reasons. Torture can become a tool for persecuting these groups, especially if the political elite benefits from sowing fear or creating an atmosphere of division and distrust within society.

It's important to note that such practices are widely condemned by, and many countries have laws, such as the UN Convention Against Torture, which aim to prevent and punish torture. Reforms, better training, accountability mechanisms, and independent oversight are essential to ensure that law enforcement agencies operate ethically and respect human rights.

"Punjab 1995" is a movie about **Jaswant Singh Khalra's life**, in which a famous Punjabi actor, Diljit Dosanjh, plays the role of Jaswant Singh Khalra. This film has been ready for release but has not been permitted by the Indian government. What is the Indian government trying to hide? Is it that the Indian government does not want people to know the CBI's findings or the Supreme Court's decision? Facts are facts, and facts can never be hidden. It is believed that the Home Minister of India, Amit Shah, has personally threatened the director of the movie or his team against the release of this movie to the public].

"In India, if the story cannot be killed, the storyteller is silenced" (B.T. Venkatesh).

Legacy of Jaswant Singh Khalra:

Jaswant Singh Khalra's story exemplifies the personal sacrifices that many activists make in the face of intense government opposition and violence. His efforts to document the disappearances highlight the importance of memory in the face of state-sponsored violence, ensuring that these stories of victims are not forgotten.

Jaswant Singh Khalra serves as a symbol of resistance against tyranny, inspiring others to stand up for human rights and social injustice.

His wife, Paramjit Kaur, has continued his work. Recently, she oversaw Amrit Pal Singh's campaign, and he won with the overwhelming majority to be a member of the Indian Parliament. About two years ago, we held a function in Northern California to honor the memory of Jaswant Singh Khalra, and Paramjit Kaur spoke—a very humble Sikh without any bitterness. Navkiran Kaur Khalra, his daughter, also spoke. She said in her speech that if there is a war going on, we win and continue doing the same thing that people who were defeated were doing, then what have we won? This tells us what Jaswant Singh Khalra was about.

This is very much in line, but it made America great. As the Civil War ended, Gen. Lee surrendered to Gen. Grant, who had been his junior at one time. Gen. Grant told him to leave his weapons, take his horse, and go back home. Pres. Abraham Lincoln and Gen.

Grant did not take any revenge on Confederate soldiers. There was no prosecution, trial, or jail for anybody. Their leadership in choosing reconciliation over retribution significantly contributed to the nation's long-term unity and rebuilding. It serves as a reminder that true victory is not just about defeating the enemy but about rising above the conflict and moving forward with the vision of peace and rebuilding. In my personal view, we need to advocate for a similar approach – a vision of liberation that does not turn into further violence but rather an opportunity to create a just and peaceful homeland. This is crucial for healing, moving beyond bitterness, and building a future that honors the sacrifices made while avoiding the mistakes of the past.

Whatever the Indian government tries, Jaswant Singh Khalra remains a Sikh martyr and our hero who will not be forgotten.