

Guilty Until Proven Guilty

An article that was published in India Today (30/9/84)¹ detailed how vulnerable children were among the 18,000 “suspected terrorists” arrested in June 1984 and detained in maximum security prisons:

“These were the other victims of Operation Bluestar, little children, some only two years old, who got rounded up. Since then, 39 children have been languishing in two Ludhiana jails. The youngest of these children, Jasbir Kaur, is only two years old, her sister Charanjit Kaur is four, and her brothers, Harinder and Balwinder, are six and twelve.

There is four-year old Rinku whose father died during the army operation and whose mother has been missing since. Like the rest of the ‘infant terrorists’, Rinku had to go through gruelling interrogation. When asked where his mother was he replied, “I don’t know”. Asked where his father was, he said, “Killed with a gun”. Why his stomach was so big; “Because I eat clay”.

Their ordeal began in early June when they were picked up around the Temple and packed into camps in Amritsar and Jalandhar... And then the nightmare began. Two central agencies, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) began their questioning. There were long, intimidating sessions. The children cried and begged to be sent home. But it went on for days. Their little finger prints were taken and IB sleuths set about verifying their bonafides. One interrogating officer admitted that officials were not moved by the children’s cries.

Sadly enough, in their interrogations, the CBI and IB have shown little regard to any civil liberties or laws protecting young children... “These are all fine ideas for newspapers and preachers. We had on our hands suspected terrorists and would be terrorists”

confessed a CBI officer...Their fate depends upon the Supreme Court, which takes up the case this fortnight. Meanwhile 39 little beings continue to pray for freedom every day.

The children continued to be locked up in a dingy old jail in the sprawling industrial city. Some were moved to a newer maximum security prison outside the city. Of the 39 children, three of them have now been classified as ‘dangerous terrorists’.

At the time of publication of the article, the children had been in maximum security prisons for over 16 weeks.

According to other reports the “terrorists” were also mistreated while in prison²;

“Mehrban Singh, aged twelve, said, ‘We were repeatedly asked if we were Bhindranwale’s men. They hit us at Ludhiana jail, and thrust fingers into our necks, wanting us to confess.’ Shamsheer Singh, aged eleven, confirmed the bizarre interrogation about Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and that they were “regularly beaten in jail”.

It is outrageous that in a country which prides itself as the world’s largest democracy, the Supreme Court had to be petitioned, for Sikh children as young as two years old to be released from maximum security prison.

The fact that even Sikh children were not spared by the Indian regime, shows the arbitrary and discriminatory nature in which all Sikhs were treated, and that all were considered terrorists.

1. Thukral, Gobind, ‘Atrocities on Sikh Children’ India Today, September 30, 1984

2. Tully, Mark and Jacob, Satish; Amritsar Mrs. Gandhi’s Last Battle (1985)

