

# REMEMBERING NOVEMBER 1984 KILLINGS WAS IT A RIOT, MASSACRE OR POGROM?

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It has been noticed that in media an organized persecution and massacre, often officially prompted, of a minority group, the Sikhs, during November 1984 has been mentioned as '*riots*'. Which is again an insult to the Sikhs in reporting what happened to the Sikhs during that month. Let us see what should have been the right term for reporting this happening to the Sikhs. Was it a Riot or a Pogrom?

According to the New Pocket Oxford Dictionary, the meanings are:

1. **Riot:** a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd.
2. **Riotous:** a. involving wild and uncontrolled behavior.  
b. involving public disorder.
3. **Mayhem:** violent disorder.
4. **Slaughter:** the killing of a large number of people in a cruel or violent way.
5. **Massacre:** a brutal slaughter of a large number of people.

Going by the above dictionary meanings, what followed after the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31st October 1984 was indeed a *riot* since the incidents, which followed were definitely "*a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd.*" In this case the crowd or rather the mob were the non-Sikhs, in particular the Hindu community. Whose peace was disturbed?  
It was definitely of the Sikhs.

Next comes *riotous*: Indeed the situation was riotous in the sense that what the non-Sikh community did was: "*involved wild and uncontrolled behavior.*"

What followed the assassination could be described as '**mayhem**' too, since there was "*violent disorder*" for about 5 days.

But reality is that what happened in 1984 was not just a

riot, mayhem or of riotous nature but was much, much, much more than a mere riot or mayhem or being riotous!

Recall the partition days in 1947, which were of a purely riotous type and terming it as riots or the Partition Riots was appropriate. What normally happens in a riot: crowds or groups of armed people attack each other, **I repeat each other**, in an offensive way and the one with more manpower and might and arms comes out alive. One group of people attacks the other group and clashes take place on both sides with casualties too on both the warring sides. Besides, there is looting, damage to properties, rape and arson observed in a riot.

Now coming to those Demonic Days starting from the evening of 31st October and culminating on 4th November 1984, the events which followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi, were attacks by only one side, i.e. by the Non-Sikh community, in particular the Hindus. So definitely labeling it as only a riot would not do justice and in fact would connote that even the Sikhs behaved in an equally frenzied manner like the Non-Sikh attackers. But this was not the case! It was only from the 4th or late of 3rd of November, especially, in some Sikh dominated pockets of Delhi, that the Sikhs were able to fortify themselves to fight back and that also with the sole motive only to defend themselves or in saving their families lives. Besides, the Sikhs while defending their lives never resorted to looting, rapes or damage to properties. Whereas the attackers belonging to the majority community resorted to mass scale looting of houses and shops, rape of Sikh girls and women, arson and frenzied killing like for example, garlanding tyres on the necks of the Sikh males and pouring kerosene and lighting it. And with what precision the looters managed to reach the Sikh homes and business establishments, definitely a pre-planned scheme of the Congress leaders who worked in close co-ordination with the district and state and city level offices of the

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**Editorial Note:** *Defining or coining new terms', is another feature of this Research Journal. Some terms like, Sabd, Guru, Granth, Gurbani, Nanakian philosophy, Sikh, etc. have already been defined specifically in some of the feature articles published in this Journal. In this article Mr Dimpy Gurvinder Singh, Associate Editor of The Sikh Review, Kolkata, has tried to explain some terms, which are already very specifically defined in many dictionaries but were not used specifically in the media when writing about the Sikh events. He has done an excellent job in advising the media for proper use of some terms when dealing with the Sikh events, especially, '1984 Pogrom of the Sikhs'. DSC*

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then Government in power.

Now the question arises:

***If 1984 happenings in October-November in India were not solely riot or mayhem, then what was it?***

**Was it a slaughter/massacre?**

Innocent Sikh boys, men and elders were killed in large numbers in a cruel or violent way, going by the definition of ‘*slaughter*’ as mentioned above. In fact the killings were so brutal that one can only describe the incidents as a ‘*massacre*’ going by its word meaning in the Dictionary as: “*a brutal slaughter of a large number of people.*”

Yes, indeed, 1984 was a *massacre*. Since it was an organized massacre to a large extent, the appropriate term to describe the happenings would be a ‘**POGROM**’ to coin it perfectly.

The irony is that while describing or discussing anything related to that happening was flashed by the media in term of riots at that time and is still being used till today. For example, recent news was flashed as:

“*Victims of the 1984 riots... Five widows willing to immolate themselves...*”

Whereas it should have been portrayed as:

“**Victims of the 1984 Pogrom of the Sikhs...Five widows willing to immolate themselves...**”

It is the media, which has been responsible for labeling it wrongly since November 1984. Was it upon the insistence of the Congress leaders then in power? Definitely the photographers and the reporters who were covering the brutal killings in November 1984 must have seen the helplessness of the defending Sikhs and **how could they do justice to their profession by terming it as riots when to the mute witnesses it was nothing short of an organized massacre or pogrom.**

Furthermore, it was the media-hype, which fuelled the massacre to unimaginable levels of butchery and savagery. And what to comment upon the immature and untimely words uttered by the elder son of the assassinated prime minister which flashed all over at periodical intervals in the TV news channels as well as printed in newspapers the next day by all the newspapers in India. This person, named Rajiv Gandhi, who took over the reins of India, in a hereditary fashion, uttered, “*When a great tree falls down, the earth is bound to tremble and havoc is created!*” These very words further emboldened the ministers in power to resort to a Sikh man-hunt the type of which one had read in Sikh history books when

the Mogul Emperor, Aurangzeb had issued a similar command only 300 years ago.

And it is due to this wrong labeling that even today the media even in Punjab is seen quoting the organized massacre or pogrom as a riot

Was it the duty of the Jatherdar of the Akal Takht, the President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar, Delhi Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, President of Akali Dal Party (Badal) or any other Sikh political Party? It seems that all of them were dumb-struck and filled with so much fear in their hearts that their “*bolti band ho gayee*” (mouths got sealed).

The purpose of raising this tragic heart-tearing or poignant topic of 1984 after nearly 18 ½ years is four-fold:

1. To advise the media to use the correct term, **1984 Pogrom of the Sikhs**, for November 1984 happening to the Sikhs so that the reality is known to the present as well as to the future generations and the history books all over India be accordingly rectified.
2. A long gap of 18 ½ years tends to make one go to sleep and in this sleep one slackens and loosens the preparedness required to thwart such probable attempts in the future seeing the changing democratic colors of India into Hindutva politics. So the purpose is to awaken from slumber the Sikhs and check if their houses are in order.
3. Correct term for this happening would bring not only the Sikh masses but also the Non-Sikh educated public into awareness and in this awareness one’s willingness and eagerness to help those affected by the ‘**1984 Pogrom of the Sikhs**’ would climax into actions and positive results.
4. To find out whether justice has been given to the massacred and the surviving widows and children and to the Sikh community in general in the sense that:
  - (a) have the culprits been arrested and put to trial?
  - (b) has compensation been given to the survivors? and
  - (c) has the Congress leadership, the present government in power and other political parties so connected then in November 1984 apologized to the Sikh masses?