

In Amritsar, reminder in a public park

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February 17, 2018



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Returning to Amritsar after 12 years and having done all the touristy things in the previous visit, we had planned to spend our two days there, soaking solely in the peace of the Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple. However, walking out from the temple early one morning, when we came upon the Jallianwala Bagh, we stepped in. It does not hit you immediately in the manner of all shock - the fair-like scene that unfolds at the other end of the iconic, two-abreast entrance.

Outside, a new corridor has been built around the Golden Temple, the shanty souvenir shops cleared away and the pathways laid in marble and cobblestone - the meandering smooth stretches of ivory aesthetically set off by the rough grey-stone squares. A two-minute walk from the temple is this historic site, easy to miss, pushed back and buttressed by buildings as it is in a long line of shops and houses.

The stark white marble sculpture that has been installed just outside the gates of the bagh, in the market square, seems quite incongruent with the surrounding buildings, many of these also new but painted in subdued shades of sandstone and lime. It is also quite disparate from the gracefully antiquating brick walls of the bagh it represents. This

sculpture is in the form of a flame with human heads in relief, and if it weren't for the respect one carried in their heart, it would not elicit much deference. The names of the people who died in the massacre are inscribed on the plinth.

At the gate, there were a couple of policemen, a few sellers of frivolous knick-knacks and nothing primes the visitor that they are on the threshold of viewing, perchance experiencing an intense slice of Indian history.

A scattered tableau

When we had visited at noon the last time, the bagh was full of Amritsar-in-a-day tourists clicking pictures of the martyrs' flame, the bullet marks on the walls around that rise several stories and have windows - most closed in, some offering fleeting vistas of living - people combing hair, pressure cookers whistling. They had peered into the Martyrs' Well where hundreds had jumped in to escape the bullets and died, trying to bring up the horror for themselves. Some threw in coins as an offering.

At this hour, it was the morning walkers chatting, greeting each other. It was like any other park in any other town. The martyrs' flame on its black granite flickered in the morning breeze as people walk past it without a glimpse or a bow of head. The sandstone flame-shaped memorial that has so evocatively stared at us from our earliest history textbooks stood deserted at the far end, the waterbody around it waterless. Scattered topiaries of gun-shooting soldiers evoked no sense of the actual scene. A yoga class was on in the largest patch of the dewy-lawn, people stretched out on white sheets and the lady instructor's voice rising above the general chatter.

In another corner, an older man in a white beard and track pants was showing off his yoga flexibility to three fidgety bystanders. The small museum, which among other memorabilia also has Udham Singh's ashes and Rabindranath Tagore's letter renouncing his knighthood, was closed at the hour.

Us before them

One hundred years ago, we were wronged. People's chest swelled with patriotic pride when a member of parliament recently demanded for the 'â€|British Prime Minister on the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre to come to that site, bend his or her knees, and beg forgiveness for all sins committed in the past.' We, who do not know how to honour our own, cannot preserve the solemnity of the site of a horrific massacre which remains a definitive symbol of our freedom struggle - we ask for retribution?

On April 13, 1919, on the day of the Punjabi festival of Baisakhi, a crowd that had gathered in this public park in Amritsar, was fired upon by the British Indian Army under the command of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer, killing and wounding hundreds of innocent, unarmed, peaceful protestors. A sign at the memorial puts the number of dead at 2,000.

A memorial exists as a reminder, as a symbol for the present generations to form connections with their past. The Jallianwala Bagh, the site of the horrific massacre of innocent, unarmed people that turned the course of the Indian freedom movement, fails to evoke any sense of history, any feeling of deference.

Where should a visitor pause and pay homage in the big picnic that they seem to be in the midst of? How should they perceive the fragmented information to be in a frame of mind where they may experience the poignancy if they want to? Perhaps a plaque-led heritage walk can bring the scattered mise-en-scène together. The sanctity of the place needs to be restored first in its upkeep, and then in behaviours that need to be enforced on visitors in order to elevate a culture of respect and remembrance.