

Manuscript - September Focus

Harjit Singh was dragged off a bus by police in the Punjab on 29 April 1992. There was no warrant for the 22-year-old's arrest and police in the state have denied that the incident ever took place. Two weeks later police gave Harjit's parents what they claimed were his ashes, saying that he had been picked up for questioning but had been killed when Sikh militants attacked the police officers. His father, Kashmir Singh, refused to believe that Harjit was dead and for more than two years has campaigned tirelessly for his son's release. Harjit Singh's case is among those featured in AI's campaign against political killings and "disappearances."

When he heard of his son's abduction, Kashmir Singh, a junior engineer for the electricity board, immediately went to the local police station in Baba Bakala. The police refused to listen to him and did not record a complaint.

Over the following days he went to several police stations trying to trace Harjit but was told repeatedly that he had not been arrested. Kashmir said that finally an assistant sub-inspector reportedly told Kashmir that for 30,000 rupees he could arrange Harjit's release within three days. Kashmir paid the money but after three days Harjit had still not been released.

On 8 May Kashmir found out that Harjit had been sent to Mal Mandi Interrogation Centre. He said that the police officer in charge there had told him that Harjit had been tortured under interrogation and that although Harjit was not a terrorist, false charges were being concocted against him because of pressure from political and senior officials.

On 13 October Harjit's close childhood friend, Anoop Singh, discovered that he was being held at Rasulpur Security Force Post. He and Kashmir went to the High Court and filed a *habeas corpus* petition. The court ordered a search and on 17 October a Warrant Officer, Kashmir Singh, Anoop Singh and another friend located Harjit at Mal Mandi Interrogation Centre, Amritsar. From outside the building they saw Harjit standing at a window, naked and in handcuffs.

The Punjab police official in charge of the building refused to let the search party in for over half an hour. When they finally gained access they found Harjit's cell was empty. His handcuffs were hanging on an iron bar and a man was cleaning the floor.

Kashmir made several submissions to the High Court, which ordered the police to produce Harjit at the court. They did not do so. During subsequent hearings the police repeated their story that Harjit had been killed in an attack by Sikh militants. Harjit has still not been traced. Kashmir Singh says he last saw Harjit in early September 1993 in Kapurthala and friends reportedly last saw him on 7 and 21 March 1994 in Amritsar.

Kashmir Singh's struggle to trace Harjit has taken him around the world, trying to draw attention to his son's case. In May 1994 he visited the British Section of AI, where he spoke about his long fight and gave an interview to the international *Newsletter*, which is printed in full overleaf. His speech gave an insight into the huge obstacles and enormous personal pressure which family and friends face when trying to trace loved ones who have "disappeared" in Punjab.

At the end of his speech in London, Kashmir Singh said: "The police have directly and indirectly harassed me and it is now almost two years and I have travelled hundreds of miles all over Punjab in search of my son and I have discovered that what is happening to my family is not an isolated incident. I have seen with my own eyes, listened with my own ears to children, women and the elderly being tortured at the hands of the security forces.

"If it were not for the tremendous support and good will shown to us by members of AI and the international community I am sure that the police would have either eliminated us altogether or broken us down enough to give up our search for Harjit."

AI challenged the Indian Government to respond seriously to more than 200 cases of "disappearance" in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, following a disappointing response to an AI publication in December, 1993.

Interview with Kashmir Singh

Q. What was going through your mind when you heard that Harjit had been taken off the bus by police. Were you angry, worried? Presumably you knew what could happen?

A. I was devastated by the news. I have heard so many cases where this has happened before. There are very few that are actually released, the majority of them are killed. It was heart-stopping, I find it difficult to adequately explain what I felt like.

Q. I read that the police actually gave you his ashes. What did that feel like - did you believe it?

A. They handed over somebody's ashes. I wasn't convinced that they were Harjit's. Even at that point in time I was saying that these were not Harjit's, I didn't want them.

Q. Were the police at all embarrassed by this?

A. At that point in time they were standing there with the ashes and I was standing there thinking, my son hasn't done anything wrong, he hasn't been involved in anything, there is no reason for him to be killed.

I contacted various officials who refused to talk to me and put the phone down. They did not want to answer my questions. One official said Harjit would never return, which made me think that he must still be alive. I was convinced that he wasn't dead.

I was very angry and frustrated with the whole situation. Money had been given for his release and they had profited from this money. I knew that he hadn't been involved in anything and that this was a revenge abduction.

Q. What effect was this having on your own family?

A. This has had a very bad effect on the whole family. Everybody has become very ill and weak and there is a lot of crying, even now.

Q. You must sometimes have thought that you were going mad, that this could not be happening?

A. Obviously I have now come to terms with the fact that Harjit has "disappeared". What I can't come to terms with is the fact that he could be killed. I am very sad at times, but this has happened to thousands of kids across Punjab who haven't come back. I know it's going on. I know I'm not alone.

Q. The stress of dealing with the courts and the bureaucracy must have been very difficult.

A. Initially I had some hope, but after so many court cases I think that nothing can be done and that's when I feel despair.

Q. Can we talk about the moment when you saw Harjit alive at Mal Mandi?

A. When I first saw him I was happy and I didn't anticipate that I would have so much difficulty getting in to see him.

When Harjit first saw me I could see that he was thinking that he was going to be released. He didn't realise that there were going to be problems. He must have only been gone a few seconds when we finally saw into the cell. Harjit must have anticipated this because he indicated to us to go to the side of the building.

Q. Could you see into the cell from the outside of the building?

A. Yes. We saw from the outside that he was not there anymore, there were just his handcuffs.

Q. What was the reaction of the people who were there with you?

A. Officials see this sort of thing happening all the time. What difference was it going to make to him? If he acted earlier then maybe something could have been done, but he was concerned for his own life.

Q. How do you think Harjit has been coping with this?

A. Harjit is quite a strong person, but even he must be scared after this amount of time. He was physically quite strong - he put up a fight when the police dragged him out of the bus. He didn't go with them easily.

Q. What effect has this had on your belief in the police and the justice system?

A. We have never had faith in the police.

Q. Because you could see what was going on around you?

A. I have seen this kind of thing before - maybe if two warrant officers had been there he may have been released.

Q. Did you try to shout to Harjit the times you saw him in the jeep and elsewhere?

A. Obviously I was worried about what would happen if I did that. But I would indicate with gestures, when the police weren't watching, that I knew he was there.

Q. When was the last time anybody saw Harjit?

A. I saw him on 4 September 1993 and the last time anybody saw him was March this year.

Q. What gives you hope for Harjit's release after all this time?

A. I obviously have to keep up the fight and keep hoping something will happen.

Q. It must be very difficult for you personally?

A. There have been sightings and other people know that this has happened - this outside knowledge is very important.

Q. Have you had any time to work - it must be very difficult?

A. It takes up all my time after work and I have taken a lot of time off. I get up at 4am and go to work at 9am. Then after work at 5pm I continue my search.

Q. Have you got a lot of support in your community?

A. I haven't been talking to people about it as secrets get out that might help the police if they know what we are doing. So I can't seek support from them. I don't even tell my own family.

Q. Have you experienced any harassment: any threats or physical violence?

A. Before Harjit was abducted they had come to the house and threatened to kill my family. Since then there haven't been any direct threats. There have been attempted attacks on me but by good fortune and good timing I've managed to avoid it. It could be the police or their bodyguards. Sometimes it has been difficult to tell who is in the police and who isn't, they merge together.

Q. Do you worry for your other children.

A. Yes, of course I worry about them. I got my daughter married to have someone protect her. She is now living many miles away where she will be safe. I don't want to give details. I also have to be very careful about my other son.

Q. Could you tell me more about the death of Anoop? A childhood friend of Harjit who helped search for him and was found dead in mysterious circumstances.

A. They attempted to kidnap Anoop on two or three occasions, once when he was in a village but luckily his friends were with him and were able to help. Another time they attempted to abduct him from outside the High Court. He was a strong man. You could see there had been a struggle, his Sikh bracelet had dug into his arm. He managed to escape that time and ran into the High Court.

Q. Have there been attempts to kidnap you?

A. They have tried but I haven't allowed them. I know quite a few people and I always have people with me. If I have been on my own I have made sure that I've been on my motorbike. One time I saw people circling around the electricity board facility where I was working, but they didn't approach me.

Q. Does your religion give you hope?

A. I respect all faiths and I have got a lot of hope and motivation from my faith. It has meant a lot to me.

Q. Could you sum up how all this has affected your life?

A. Physically I have become weaker but in my head and in my heart I am still strong and will not give up the fight for my son. I have a single-minded attitude towards the whole thing. My life has become very different. At first I had an ordinary married life and now it is a life full of struggle. But for all those others that have "disappeared" I am prepared to keep fighting for them as well.

Interview with Myroslav Marynovych

Q. Why did you first get involved in Human Rights?

A. I joined AI in 1977 - but not as a member; as a prisoner of conscience! I was in Helsinki Watch, one of several Helsinki groups which existed in the former Soviet Union. Our only crime was to introduce

other opinion into the society, different from the state one. We tried to defend artists and writers who were persecuted by the Soviet Government and were in jail.

Q. Can you tell us about your arrest?

A. It was strange. It was 1977, early in the morning, when somebody knocked on the door and said "telegram! telegram!". I opened the door and 20 people from the KGB came in and that was the start of my arrest.

Q. What were your expectations at the time?

A. I knew that I would be arrested. We had already been working for half a year - from November 1976 to April 1977 and every day I was waiting for my arrest, every day, and there was strong psychological pressure on me and my friends - very strong. A special car was parked near my house every morning, a black Volga. When I went out of the house lights were switched on and I was walking in this beam of light - so there were many different types of psychological pressure.

Q. What were the conditions like in prison?

A. It was not the time of Stalin's prison regime, it was much better than in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, but there was very strong psychological pressure. The camp where I was in the Urals was very small - only 60 prisoners there and more than 100 persecutors, or controllers, in charge of us, so every person was very strictly controlled and it was difficult psychologically.

Q. How did you deal with that?

A. You just have to live your life. You try to find the way to be a human being in every situation. As prisoners we were a very tight group, very close to each other, united in a common struggle. We had a punishment cell where we were sometimes put in solitary confinement.

Q. Can you tell us a bit about your time in exile in Kazakhstan?

A. Exile was part of the sentence. The KGB find somewhere that is very far from civilization. The rule was that you were not allowed to go more than 30km in radius from your location, and the nearest village was 50km away!

Q. Were you tortured at all?

A. There was not torture in my case, but I know that my friends were beaten. We were all tortured psychologically and that is very strong pressure. They say to you, "Your wife is very ill. If you write down your excuses to the government you will be allowed out to see your wife for the last time. Your children will be put in a children's home." The KGB had a different approach to each individual case. My family was under strict control but it was not touched directly, but the families of many of my friends were persecuted.

Q. The Avignon Amnesty group took up your case. Were you aware of this at the time?

A. I hadn't received any letters from AI members in prison so I didn't know about AI then, but in Kazakhstan I received many letters from all over the world, in particular from Avignon and that is the way I realised I was a son of Amnesty. The Avignon group invited me to France when I came back to Ukraine. I came back in 1987 and I was a guest with them in 1990.

Q. What was your experience in France?

A. It was a wonderful time because it was the first time I made acquaintance with Amnesty people - and they are very special people. There is no difference between countries, they are the same everywhere - kind, open, very warm towards me.

Q. And was it that visit which inspired you to set up a group in Ukraine?

A. Yes our group was formed in March 1991. It was the first group in Ukraine. There are now groups in many other towns but at the moment ours is the only one recognized at the International Secretariat. [Since the interview, another group has been recognized in Ukraine.]

Q. What were the difficulties in setting up a group in Ukraine?

A. It is very difficult to work in Ukraine because there is a very serious economic crisis. People are in a very difficult situation and that is why our people need help too. It seemed to them quite strange that we wanted to help people outside Ukraine, but not in Ukraine. But I am an example of such help because nobody in Ukraine could help us at that time. Now it is our turn to help the rest of the world outside Ukraine.

Q. How many members do you have in your group in Ukraine?

A. Twenty-eight in our group and overall in Ukraine more than 100 members. but not all of them are really developed, educated in Amnesty International. Maybe we shall change this situation in the future, I hope so.

Q. How do you see the future for human rights in Ukraine?

A. I think other people must understand the human rights idea is not a Western idea. They still think this way. They don't understand that human rights is the best way of solving social problems. It is very difficult for people to understand this in Ukraine because we had 70 years under communist rule and the first reaction in that time was always the use of force, violence. It is a reflex we must overcome.