

## Poohla Brought to Justice

### **Joint efforts of Lawyers For Human Rights International, Col. Sandhu etc. brought Poohla to justice**

The controversial self-styled Nihang chief [Ajit Singh Poohla](#) who was always in news for his brutal actions, was set on fire by two jail inmates Navtej Singh and Harchand Singh inside the 'high security' central jail at Amritsar, Punjab, India. Poohla received critical burn injuries after he was set on fire. In a critical condition with 70% burn injuries after the attack, Poohla was first taken to the local Civil Hospital and then shifted to Guru Nanak Dev Hospital before being referred to the PGI, Chandigarh. He died at PGI at 8.05 A.M. on 29.08.2008.

Poohla who was an under trial in a mass murder case was doused with diesel and set aflame by the jail inmates Navtej Singh of Batala and Harchand Singh of Village Mari Kambo in Tarn Taran,

Poohla had come in the public eye during the militancy period in Punjab as a 'police informer' and had links with several high-profile police officers and politicians. Provided with 40 bodyguards and 72 arm licenses by the police, he used his clout to take over several Gurudwaras and other properties in Punjab and Chandigarh. He used to move in a fleet of vehicles with "red beacons" on the top along with his armed brigade on his side. He was charged with eliminating seven members of a family in 1991. Besides several murder charges, he had also been accused of kidnapping and raping a 14-year-old girl.

The first challenge to Poohla came from a retired Indian Army officer Col. G.S. Sandhu who floated the Majha Ex-Servicemen Human Rights Front in 2004 with retired Army officials as its members. Col. G.S. Sandhu, Capt. Sukhdev Singh and other members of the Majha Ex-Servicemen Front encouraged the villagers to stand up against the Poohla. Col. Sandhu and his men liberated several Gurudwaras from the clutches of armed men of Poohla. Some members of Majha Ex-Services Human Rights Front were also injured in clashes with Poohla's armed men. Several false cases were also slapped on Col. Sandhu's men by the police at the behest of Ajit Singh Poohla.

After reading in the news papers about the campaign started by an Ex-Army man namely Col. G.S Sandhu, against the out lawed, turned Nihang, Ajit Singh Poohla, the General Secretary of Lawyers For Human Rights International (LFHRI), Navkiran Singh, Advocate, practicing at Punjab and Haryana High Court Chandigarh contacted Col. Sandhu and extended full support on behalf of the organization to his noble cause of bringing to justice Poohla and his gang. Initially a petition was filed on behalf of Col. G.S. Sandhu in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, which was a Public Interest Petition, which was filed through Mr. Navkiran Singh Advocate on 31st March 2004, in which the details of his bad deeds were given in detail. The criminal acts in which he and his men

were involved ranged from Murder, Rape, Looting, Illegal Detentions and torture as well Trespassing into Public, Religious and Private properties and dealing in Narcotics. The said petition created enough pressure upon the Punjab police and the senior police officials who were providing him police protection in the shape of illegal and legal arms and security men and also protection from prosecution for any of his crimes. The PIL continued till 28th Feb 2005, when it was disposed off by the bench in view of the State of Punjab filing a report that they had arrested Poohla on 4thAug 2004 in one of the cases of murder which was registered at Nawan Shahar, Punjab.

Lawyers For Human Rights International provided free legal aid also at Nawan Shahar and Mr. Hardip Singh, Advocate was assigned the trial of the case. In this case the allegations were that Poohla and his men tortured and killed a person by the name of Jasbir Singh @ Jassa at their Dera in Sector 39 Chandigarh and later on the dead body was found at a Peer Dargah at village Behram, falling in District Nawan Shahar. Though the offence was committed in 2001, but there was no evidence available and when the campaign was started by Col. Sandhu, witnesses started pouring in and the case on investigation was found to be made against Poohla and his men. Unfortunately the trial ended up in acquittal on 1st Nov 2006, however his incarceration in this case for 2 years and 3 months created an impression in the minds of the victims of Poohla that Poohla was not above the law and witnesses started coming forward in other cases also.

While the case of Nawanshahar was still under trial, 3 petitions were moved in the High Court by the victim families through Navkiran Singh Advocate, for marking a CBI enquiry into the cases, in which the Punjab police was dragging its feet to hold investigation in the matters. The FIRST case was relating to the incident which took place on 2nd June 1991, which was registered against Poohla and his men, in which they had killed 7 members of a family including children, women and a 8 months old breast feeding child at Village Khanpur, falling in Police station Beas, Police District Majitha. After killing them, the house of the victims was set on fire. In this case Poohla was able to get away with the crime by procuring a report on 24-11-93, from the police that he is innocent in the case and the case was sent untraced. Though the petitioner in this case namely Ranjit Singh had prayed before the High Court for CBI enquiry, however the court ordered an enquiry under the supervision of Kunwar Vijay Partap Singh IPS, who was posted as SSP Amritsar, the name of the said officer was suggested by the counsel as the said IPS Officer carried an impeccable reputation and the court and the state also agreed to it. The enquiry was supervised by the Lawyers For Human Rights International and the police had to file a charge sheet against Poohla and his men in the trial court at Amritsar. Then another problem arose that the police officials of police district Majitha could not arrest Poohla, which when brought to the notice of the Judge of the High Court ,he summoned the SSP Majitha and told him in the open court that in case he is incompetent to arrest Poohla, then he can request for the help of army, at which the SSP sought time and ultimately Poohla was arrested in the month of May 2008. Ranjit Singh the eye Witness and the only surviving member of the family deposed in the trial court and Bhai Mohkam Singh of Damdami Taksal also gave statement regarding his attending to the family and the Bhog Ceremony. The trial was being supervised by Mr. Parminder Singh Sethi Advocate ,who is District President of Amritsar Unit of LFHRI. Since Poohla has died, the trial will continue against other accused.

In the SECOND case which related to Ludhiana, which was in fact the first case registered against Poohla and was an attempt to murder case, not only had Poohla been able to defeat the process of law ,but he was a proclaimed offender since the year 1980. When LFHRI through their counsel at Ludhiana namely Mr. Parupkar Singh Ghumman, inspected the records of the case, it was found that the original file was missing from the court of Session Judge Ludhiana. It's interesting to note that the petitioner when was approached by the investigating team formed under orders of the High Court, under fear of Poohla gave a statement that he has not given any affidavit to Col. Sandhu or to any lawyer and resiled from his earlier statement.

Similarly in the THIRD case Amrik Singh, who is brother of Baba Kulwant Singh, the Mukh Sewadar of another Nihang Dera of Goindwal Sahib also resiled from his statement in which he had alleged that he had witnessed the killing of Baba Kulwant Singh on the night of 24-4-86. So in these circumstances the High court disposed off the petition filed by him.

Out of the total list of 9 cases, 8 cases are still pending against Poohla and his men and in almost all the cases Lawyers who are associated with LFHRI are pursuing the cases in ensuring that no witness is threatened and truth should be brought to the court. In 3 cases which were pending in Tarn Tarn and Patti are being taken care by Mr. Baldev Singh Gill, Advocate Tarn Tarn. Not only did LFHRI provide free legal aid to the victims of Poohla, but the team of Ex-Servicemen who were assisting Col. Sandhu in his campaign against Poohla were also given free legal aid and their cases, in which they were falsely implicated were also taken care by LFHRI. Mr. Tejinder Singh Sudan, president of Chandigarh unit of LFHRI took care of the cases which were in Chandigarh District Courts. Mr. Navkiran Singh, Advocate took care of the High Court cases and vigorously fought around more than a dozen cases. It is also being brought on record that the counsels pursued these cases under high security risk and threat to their lives, which still continues.

Such was the fear and threat of the personality of Poohla that ordinarily people did not dare to come forward to complain against his criminal acts. His close proximity to senior police officials, kept him above the law for 24 long years.

It's by sheer grit and persistence of Retd Col. Sandhu and his team of Ex-Servicemen, hard work & dedication of activists of LFHRI and also field work of Nihangs like Baba Deep Singh and Swaranjit Singh, that Poohla and his men were brought to justice.

Though we do not approve the manner in which he was punished on 28th Aug 2008 in Amritsar jail, but may be that was the destiny, as exactly 17 years back from the day he was burnt alive, on 28th Aug 1991, he burnt alive 4 members of a family of an alleged militant Balwinder Singh at Village Jatana, falling in District Ropar in retaliation to the bomb blast in which an attempt was made on the life of the then SSP Chandigarh Mr. Sumedh Singh Saini.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:  
NAVKIRAN SINGH ADVOCATE

**LFHRI**

<http://lfhri.org>

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GENERAL SECRETARY  
WWW.LFHRI.ORG  
98144-11494