

# 1984: Sikh Genocide

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### Goals of the Thesis

This thesis work on the 1984: Sikh Genocide is the culmination of a focused and rigorous year-long effort to study the academic approach and application of Oral History. It has been undertaken to bring into focus an issue of grave human rights violations and denial of justice which has afflicted the Sikh community in India for 37 years.

The opening chapter, 'Background & Context', traces the genesis of the conflict between the Government of India and the Sikhs of Punjab state, led by Congress party president and prime minister of India in 1984, Mrs Indira Gandhi on the one side, and the Shiromani Akali Dal—and later Damdami Taksal chief Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale—on the other.

It retraces the exact circumstances that led to the storming of the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar, Punjab, the assassination of Mrs Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in India's capital, and the genocide of the Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere. Also, the psychological, social, religious and political consequences of these events on the community, country, continent and the world we live in.

Chapter II, 'Methodology', details the Oral History process I have adopted to conduct the interviews of the narrators, who are the survivors of the 1984: Sikh Genocide. I have chosen this method to have them open their hearts and minds and share their experiences of loss, survival and struggle with me. And through me with the outside world, in what is

a relationship of kinship and trust. In this relationship, there is no 'us' or 'them', because 'I' am 'them' and 'they' are 'us'. And their embodied experiences differ from mine only in magnitude and scale, despite significantly different socio-economic backgrounds. Our egalitarian religious faith binds us. Our trauma binds us.

Chapter III, 'Why Call it a Genocide?', argues why the violence against the Sikhs after the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi was not a riot, and was, in fact, a genocide. It looks at the meaning of a genocide in international covenants and rules of engagement, and defends its use to characterize the pogrom of the Sikhs in the aftermath of Mrs Gandhi's assassination. It also attempts to deconstruct why the violence against the Sikhs was mischaracterized as a riot in 1984 when it was taking place, and subsequently, by vested interests as well as the media and the Indian civil society, and even the judiciary.

Chapter IV, 'Making Meaning', presents brief portraits of a diverse group of narrators who have been interviewed so far. It also presents excerpts from their accurately and ethically recorded trauma testimonies, including of some of the widows whose husbands were put to death in the most dreadful ways in front of them. It deciphers the meaning and patterns which have emerged so far from deep listening and analyses. It depicts their present condition and ongoing struggle for justice and what it could look like.

Chapter V, 'Way Forward', lists multiple steps that are being taken to record the Oral History testimonies of the survivors before they wither away. It also presents ways to

support the survivors, particularly the widows of 1984 who are languishing in penury and neglect, to secure justice, have a life of dignity and find closure.

Here, I have described how the goals of this thesis and my Oral History project on the 1984: Sikh Genocide are intrinsically linked. The thesis is a slice of scholarship on the Sikh genocide. It is an attempt to share what I know from personal experience as a lucky survivor, and what I have gathered, learnt and observed as a work-a-day newsman, and more recently, as a newly-minted Oral History practitioner, through closely watching the tragic events which unfolded in Punjab, Delhi and the rest of India in the last 40 years.

In doing so, I have specified how this Oral History thesis will metamorphose into the 1984: Sikh Genocide project in the foreseeable future, as the guiding manual and building blocks. I have also shared my vision about my immediate, medium and long-term objectives of accountability, memorialization, deterrence, compensation and closure. And how I am going to achieve them and the milestones and timelines I have determined.

Chapter VI, 'Conclusion', sums up the findings of the thesis. It is followed in the end by an annotated Bibliography and Acknowledgements.

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## Chapter I: Background & Context

On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984, the Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi, was gunned down by her Sikh bodyguards at her official residence in New Delhi.

It was a crime of revenge. Four months earlier, Mrs Gandhi had ordered the Indian Army to storm the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, in India's only Sikh-majority state, Punjab. This followed the breakdown of negotiations with an armed rustic Sikh preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. He, along with his band of 200-odd AK-47 wielding renegades, had taken refuge inside the Golden Temple complex. And she wanted the Army to flush them out because the police were not up to the task.

Bhindranwale's men had fortified this complex and become a threat to national security. Mrs Gandhi believed, based on her intelligence inputs, that they were planning to secede from India and declare a separate Sikh nation, 'Khalistan', with active help from India's hostile neighbor, Pakistan.

A few years earlier, Bhindranwale had been propped up and patronized by Mrs Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, and her key trusted aide and Home Minister, Giani Zail Singh, whom she had elevated to become the President of India. The Congress party wanted to use him against its political rivals in Punjab, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), but he turned hostile after a brief flirtation and also usurped SAD's authority, forcing a showdown.

Sikhs all over the world were incensed by the attack on the Golden Temple complex. Akal Takht, the spiritual and worldly seat of Sikh religion, was badly damaged in the Army operation, codenamed 'Operation Bluestar'. So, some Sikhs vowed to take revenge on Mrs Gandhi. Her bodyguards belonged to the Delhi Armed Police but had their roots in the Punjab hinterland. They had taken leaves of absence from work to visit their villages in the run up to her killing and had their fury fired by her enemies under a deep-rooted conspiracy to eliminate her.

When Mrs Gandhi was killed, her elder son, Rajiv Gandhi, was away on an election tour in the eastern state of West Bengal. The President of India, Giani Zail Singh, was on a state visit to Yemen. Both cut short their trips and returned to New Delhi by the evening.

On arrival, Giani Zail Singh drove straight to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) where Mrs Gandhi's dead body lay, and immediately swore in Rajiv Gandhi as the next Prime Minister of India, without his party having elected him its leader. It appeared to be a wise move on the part of the Sikh President to negate the disruption in the political life of the Indian nation caused by the assassination of the prime minister by two Sikhs; an immediate correction that would defeat the secessionists who wanted to break up India and create a separate Sikh nation, 'Khalistan'. But the Congress party still decided to teach the Sikhs a lesson to avenge Mrs Gandhi's killing.

So, between the evening of 31<sup>st</sup> October and 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2,733 Sikhs were killed on the streets of Delhi by rampaging mobs armed with sticks, petrol, diesel & kerosene, ammonium nitrate and old tyres. Thousands of their properties—including houses, business establishments and vehicles—were torched and destroyed. A similar number of Sikhs were killed elsewhere in India across many cities, towns and villages.

The Delhi Police, according to testimonies before multiple commissions of inquiry and courts, was verbally instructed not to intervene or respond to distress calls from the Sikhs. Eventually, three days later, when there was a huge public outcry, the Army was called out to get a grip on the situation, as about 50 heads of state had begun to arrive in the Indian capital New Delhi to attend Mrs Gandhi's funeral.

India's new Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi condoned the genocide of the Sikhs. At a public rally on 19<sup>th</sup> November 1984, Mrs Indira Gandhi's 67<sup>th</sup> birthday, at the Boat Club which faces the Presidential Palace in the heart of New Delhi, Rajiv Gandhi said, "when a big tree falls, the earth does shake."

The opposition parties objected to his brazen endorsement of violence and asked why the earth shook only in the Congress-ruled states. But he did not answer the question. He, in fact, didn't agree to setting up of an inquiry into the violence until July 1985, by which time he and the Congress party had won the national election with a three-fourths majority (404 seats out of 514 in the lower house of Parliament, the Lok Sabha).



When an inquiry commission headed by a sitting Supreme Court judge was eventually set up, its terms of reference were tweaked to cover up the ruling Congress party's culpability. Justice Rangnath Misra should have been told to investigate every aspect of the large-scale violence against the Sikhs which had left over 5,000 dead. Instead, it was mandated "to inquire into the allegations of organized violence which took place in Delhi following the assassination of the prime minister."

Members of the Sikh community, and many eminent jurists who were representing them, had such low confidence in this commission that it initially received just one affidavit. The Congress government had carefully picked a pliable judge who, expectedly, absolved it of any role in the violence, despite the evidence. It concluded that the violence was spontaneous and not organized; that a few members of the Congress party had taken part in it on their own but the party was not involved. The full text of the Misra Commission report was not made public.

Not surprisingly then, Justice Misra went on to become the Chief Justice of India in 1990. The irony was not lost on anyone when he was appointed the first chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in 1993 after he retired. The Congress party continued to pay its dues and nominated him to the *Rajya Sabha*, the upper house of Indian Parliament, in 1998 for a six-year term. He continued to receive plum positions and patronage till his death in 2012.

So, for 37 years, the Sikhs have been fighting for justice in various Indian courts at their own cost and peril, but with little success. Cases have dragged on for decades without a result or resolution; they have been scuttled and off tracked; attempts have been made to buy over witnesses to rescind their testimonies.

During these 37 years, the Congress party ruled India for nearly 23 years, either directly or in a coalition or alliance with other parties. The other leading political party, the BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) has ruled the country for over 13 years. And the Janata Dal-led United Front ruled for the remaining 11 months. Across parties, the needle on the scale of distress response has merely moved from apathy to sympathy and little else.

All this while, the families of witnesses have gone through every stage of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance and finding meaning. For over 5,000 killings in India in that fateful week, there have not even been 50 major convictions. These include only two life terms, which still are under appeals and reviews.

Justice has been delayed as well as denied to the victims and their families, particularly the widows and the orphaned children. And all four pillars of Indian democracy, the Executive, the Legislature, the Judiciary, and the Press, have failed to deliver justice due to ongoing institutional apathy and indifference. Much of it has stemmed from the undeclared hostility to the Sikhs by the Congress party, which actively supported violence.

As a Delhi-born Sikh who grew up in a harmonious multi-cultural multi-ethnic setting, I received the news about Mrs Indira Gandhi being shot by her Sikh bodyguards with considerable trepidation.

That morning, I was in west Delhi's Rajdhani College, attending my classes. When I learnt about the assassination, I paced up to my close friend and confidante Rajeev Jolly who was soaking in the sun on the wintery day and shared what I had heard. It instantly wiped off his beaming smile and sent him into deep thought.

"Are you sure," he asked, worried. "I hope you are not kidding."

"Yes, I'm sure. I heard that Mark Tully has reported it on the BBC," I replied.

"Sikhs would be buggered if she dies. You must go home immediately and stay indoors," he cautioned.

Profound words, I thought, and hoped they won't come true.

Just then, our friend and classmate M. Usha, walked up, equally alarmed.

"Hope you've heard. I tell you, this is going to have huge repercussions," she said.

Usha had signed up to take part in a declamation contest organized by Sri Sathya Sai Society at the main campus of Delhi University in the afternoon and the three of us had planned to go there together.

We stood in a semicircle, staring at each other's shadows on the floor. Rajeev suggested that we split up and go back home before all hell broke loose. Usha wasn't sure if the declamation would be cancelled and didn't want to miss it. So, we decided that I would accompany her to Delhi University, and we would go home from there if the event was, indeed, cancelled.

Within a few minutes, two of us boarded bus number 912 and found that everyone around us was discussing the attack on Mrs Gandhi. On arrival at the university, we found out that the declamation had been cancelled "due to Mrs Gandhi's assassination." So, I put Usha on a bus back to Vikas Puri deep inside west Delhi after telling her that I would quickly make my way home.

It was around 4 PM by then and some passersby at the bus stop were carrying special editions of the evening newspapers with screaming headlines on Mrs Gandhi. That whetted my curiosity to find out more. I looked up and noticed a route bus, number 101, approaching which was headed to Regal, next to Connaught Place, where the Central News Agency was located. I boarded the bus and picked up a copy each of all the evening newspapers from this wholesale vendor. Out of these, I was particularly taken in by the special broadsheet pullout of the *Indian Express* which had carried the confirmed news of Mrs Gandhi's assassination in English on one side, and in Hindi under its brand name of *Jansatta* on the other.

Clutching the newspapers, I walked to the bus stop and boarded route bus 157 to Ashok Vihar in north Delhi where I lived. There was an eerie silence among the commuters. As I sat down in the rear, I thought everyone was staring at me, checking me out. The vibes were hostile, the demeanor unfriendly. After about half an hour, I alighted from the bus at Deep Cinema and quickly walked back home as dusk began to descend into darkness.

I walked in and quickly switched on the television set. There was only one channel back then, state-run Doordarshan. At 6 PM, a devastated presenter opened the transmission with the announcement of Mrs Gandhi's death, officially confirming the attack on her at 9.14 AM which took her life in the afternoon. Gloom descended in the den as we sat around together, pensive: my father and mother, 93-year-old grandmother, elder brother and sister, and me.

My mother was a great votary of Mrs Gandhi for her work on women's emancipation. She welled up and broke down. No dinner was cooked. Within an hour, our phone started ringing incessantly as friends and family members started calling up to check on our well-being and safety and if all of us were back home. One of the calls late into the night came from my maternal uncle's son, Dr Harbhajan Singh from Long Island, New York. He was very concerned. He said TV news in the US was showing violence against the Sikhs and asked if we were safe. And he kept calling every few hours to check.

We had lived in this house in Ashok Vihar for 12 years, since 1972. We were two rows away from the main road at the back, the corner house in a row of 16 houses, next to a large park and plant nursery. There were 122 houses in nine rows in this block, 11 with Sikh families.

These were large independent houses, yet we were a very closely-knit neighborhood. There was a large Sikh joint family in the adjoining house, the Narangs. A large Sindhi joint family in the house next to it, the Rahejas. A large Punjabi family next to them, the Bajajs. A Sikh family next to them, who were related to the Narangs. There was the Gupta family across the street. The Khuranas were behind us, facing the main road. Kids of all the families had grown up together. We had played together. Laughed and cried together. Our parents were great friends with each other. We celebrated all our festivals together. In fact, we were a house on fire when we were together, much to the envy of other neighborhoods.

The patriarch of the Sindhi family was Nanak Chand Raheja, a towering man in his late '50s. He was a partner in Ganesh Sindhi Beedi Company. They manufactured cheap cigarettes which were made of raw tobacco wrapped in leaves. He had five sons and a daughter. They were a force to reckon with in the neighborhood.

Late evening, they stepped out and visited each of the three Sikh families in the lane. They told us that trouble had begun outside the All India Institute of Medical Sciences

(AIIMS) in south Delhi—some 15 miles away—where Mrs Gandhi had been operated upon unsuccessfully after being shot and had died. They firmly told us to stay indoors and not step out under any circumstances. They offered to arrange for our regular supplies of milk and vegetables, or even cooked food from their home if it was required. "Brace up, we are going into a difficult phase. We want you safe at any cost," Raheja uncle said. We felt blessed they were there for us and worried for our safety. We felt safe with them around.

It was a restless night, full of ominous signs, pointing to a lurking fear of violence.

The morning of Thursday, 1st November, broke early when the daily newspaper, bundled with a rubber band, fell on the front window with a swish after a parabolic flight of a few meters. The banner headline was quite predictable. After all, a sitting prime minister had been killed. There was also a prominent story on the front page on the attack on the convoy of India's first citizen, President Giani Zail Singh, a Sikh, near AIIMS.

In our neighborhood, it looked like a normal day though. So much so that menfolk started preparing to go to work. My father, too, thought it was safe to step out. So at 8.30 AM, he picked up his scooter and off he went. As he drove past Wazirpur village about two miles away, some people carrying sticks and stones flagged him down. Sensing trouble, he sped up only to be pelted with stones. He was lucky to escape unscathed. He reached his

industrial unit and downed the shutter from inside for safety. Luckily, he had a phone there. So he called us up, narrated his experience and told us to stay put at home.

Shortly thereafter, information started coming in about taxi stands, mostly run by the Sikhs in Delhi, being attacked and burnt by rampaging mobs, shouting '*Indira Gandhi Amar Rahe*' (Long Live Indira Gandhi) slogans. This was followed by information that shops, factories and houses owned by the Sikhs were being ransacked and burnt. The reality hit home when a taxi stand at half a mile's distance was reported burnt, along with the Deep Cinema building, also majority-owned by a Sikh family.

From our terrace, we could see plumes of smoke in the adjacent Wazirpur Industrial Area, separated from us by a perched railway line which was used for goods trains only. More importantly, the railway line had clusters of illegal shanties on railway land on both sides, housing industrial workers and other homeless poor.

These people had the protection of the local leaders to continue living on the encroached land and owed their allegiance to the ruling Congress party. We were H.K.L. Bhagat's constituents and our local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) was Deep Chand Bandhu. Bhagat was the Information & Broadcasting (I&B) Minister in Mrs Gandhi's cabinet and her key propagandist and fixer. Bandhu was his lackey. Since the time of Mrs Gandhi's assassination, they went around to various areas and fired up the fury of their supporters to take revenge for the assassination.



Consequently, people in such clusters across the city responded to the war cry and spread out in trucks or on foot in groups of 50 to 200, brandishing iron rods and sticks, glass bottles and canisters of kerosene.

At around 9 AM when I saw spirals of smoke over the Industrial Area next door, I ran to the phone and called up my cousin in Shalimar Bagh, Pritpal Singh Sachdeva, who was a chemist and ran his pharmacy in our neighborhood market. He didn't have a phone yet, but Dr Neeraj Chadha in the apartment below him did. So I requested Dr Chadha to call Pritpal to the phone. Pritpal, like my father, had also thought that it was safe to go to work and that no one would harm him. He was unaware of the mobs who had started marauding outside with murderous intent. Dr Chadha stepped up from apartment AD-85C to AD-85D in his building and was told by Pritpal's mom—my aunt—that he had just gone down. So Dr Chadha came back to the phone and told me that Pritpal had left for the pharmacy. Panicked at hearing this, I pleaded with Dr Chadha to somehow stop Pritpal from leaving for Ashok Vihar. Dr Chadha reacted quickly. He went to his balcony and called out Pritpal loudly who was still on the ground floor and about to take off on his two-wheeler. Pritpal came to the phone. I told him what was going on. He understood the seriousness and stayed back.

While Pritpal survived a possible attack, his pharmacy couldn't. People from the cluster of shanties across his pharmacy, besides others, broke its shutter with iron rods and smashed the glass panels which covered the cupboards containing medicines. Strips of

tablets were strewn around, bottles of antibiotics and elixirs broken, cash box looted, and refrigerator overturned and its compressor ripped out for the value of its copper. Even his *Pharmaceutical Directory* of drug names was torn up and flung by people who, ironically, were dependent on this pharmacy for their day-to-day medication needs.

Strangely, they made away with medicines they knew nothing about. Weeks later, one guy, Chela Ram, who was a teenager and school dropout and ran local errands, took out a pouch from his booty thinking it was a shampoo, washed his head with it and lost his hair because the pouch contained a hair remover. Similarly, another regular visitor to the pharmacy came back with a bunch of tablet strips and asked what they were meant for, only to be rebuffed.

By the afternoon, trucks began ferrying slogan-shouting marauders in both directions on the main road, some 100 meters away from our house. The large house at our back was owned by Sardar Ram Singh Khurana, who was a partner in one of India's largest transport companies at that time, 'Delhi UP Madhya Pradesh Transport Company' or DUMT. Suddenly, their house was attacked from the front by one such group. So Sardar Ram Singh Khurana's son and nephew ran to the back of their house, jumped over a nine-foot boundary wall into the service lane and started banging our rear door and asked for it to be opened.

I scaled the wall stealthily to check who it was. Both the cousins were barefoot, out of breath and totally shaken. We quickly opened the door and brought them in. They narrated their ordeal: Their main road house in Block B-2 of Ashok Vihar, about a mile-and-a-half away, came under attack and they fled from there in their Fiat car to take refuge in this house. Just when they were entering, the goons saw them and began attacking because they were wearing turbans and had beards. The mob also tried to torch the car, unsuccessfully.

My mother calmed them down and reassured them that they were safe now. When the mob dispersed in search of its next target, the two cousins brought their car into the open space at the rear of our house and drained its fuel in our kitchen garden to save it from being set on fire. They stayed with us until the end of the day and trudged back to the first floor of their house, which they then secured from inside. We kept in touch over the phone until we were surrounded.

So Thursday ended with greater anxiety amid mounting tensions all around. But the worst was yet to come.

My father spent the night in his factory and kept in touch with us on the phone. For his safety, we had called up my maternal uncle, Krishan Lal Harjai, a Punjabi and a member of India's RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh*), to rescue him. So before the crack of dawn on Friday, 2nd November, Harjai uncle went to the factory with a blanket, took out

my father, wrapped him in the blanket from head to waist and drove him home on the pillion of his two-wheeler. My father left his scooter inside the factory.

We were relieved that we were together again as a family.

On the same morning, *Nav Bharat Times*, the reputed Hindi daily of *The Times of India* Group, published a front-page story. The news report said that the Crime Branch of Delhi Police, which had started investigating Mrs Gandhi's assassination, had unearthed a conspiracy behind her murder. The source-based leak said that the killers of Mrs Gandhi had been indoctrinated in some *Gurudwaras* (Sikh temples) by religious preachers and the police had rounded up dozens of them from across the city since Thursday.

The news report also claimed that the investigators had found a phone book at the residence of one of the two killers of Mrs Gandhi, Beant Singh, which had the phone number of one Giani Charan Singh, one of the 46 elected members of the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC), the body that took care of Sikh affairs in the capital. The report said that Giani Charan Singh, a resident of C-3 Block in Ashok Vihar—our neighborhood—was on the run and police were looking for him and conducting raids.

This was a sensational story. It gave rise to suspicion over the role of Sikh preachers, particularly Giani Charan Singh, with no substantiation. It also made serious factual

departures. Giani Charan Singh did live with his son, Amarjeet Singh, in the fourth house from our corner home. Also, Darshan Singh Narang, in our adjoining house, was his son-in-law. But he was not a renegade on the run or hiding anywhere. He was a sagely, egalitarian man in his mid-'70s who rode a bicycle in spite of holding a high office in the community and led his life by example. A few days prior to Mrs Gandhi's assassination, he was returning from his office on the bicycle and had met with an accident and broken his leg. He was admitted to Sundarlal Jain Hospital in Phase III of Ashok Vihar where his leg was put in a cast and raised for traction of the displaced bone.

Within an hour of the story coming out in the morning newspaper, word spread like wildfire that one of the 'conspirators' lived in our neighborhood. That started bringing hordes of curious onlookers to our lane, who forced their way past the local guarding posts at the block's entrances which had been set up by the family elders and volunteers. Typically, the visitors would pass by the two marked houses of the Narangs and Amarjeet Singh's, stop for a moment to take a good look at them, and then move on after showering the choicest expletives.

The crowd started swelling from a trickle to a swamp by the afternoon, making all of us extremely vulnerable. The two houses in our lane had become objects of hate.

Alarmed by the unending deluge, Raheja uncle quietly shifted the Narang family to the second floor of his house. They also tried to disperse the onlookers, only to come under

attack for giving shelter to the 'traitors'. The windshield of their Ambassador car was smashed, so were the large glass panels on their doors.

We were advised to cover the talisman of the Sikh faith, the '*Khanda*' (three crossed swords and a *chakra*), which was engraved in concrete on the front railing of our balcony. It was attracting attention and the house was becoming a target. We followed the suggestion and covered it with a durée and placed bricks on it to hold the cover down. We also drew the curtains and decided not to switch on the lights of the front-side rooms.

Word also came in about the attack on 'Silver Plates', at a distance of two miles. The owner, a Sikh, had built this popular restaurant on the ground floor and lived with his family upstairs. He had a licensed gun. When his restaurant was surrounded by a mob and they began ransacking it, he moved to the terrace of the building and fired from his weapon, first in the air and then at them.

Fearful but incensed, the crowd dispersed briefly but reassembled in larger numbers after a bit. The tussle continued for over an hour. Once the owner ran out of ammunition, the mob swarmed the building, burnt the restaurant, went up and lynched the owner and his family, and then threw them in the blaze from above, killing them all. Police never came to the rescue of the victims in spite of SOS calls. Reports later indicated that the police in the entire city had been told to stand down and let the mobs teach the Sikhs a lesson.

By the end of the day, the air reeked of revenge as much as smoke from hundreds of fires. It was quite apparent that an attack on Block C-3, particularly the two marked houses, would be mounted, either that night or the next morning. Groups of goons had gathered on each side of the rectangular residency, bearing burning *mashaals* and raising aggressive slogans. Hundreds of neighborhoods elsewhere in Delhi also witnessed similar scenes. Since Wednesday night when rioting against the Sikhs had started, several eminent citizens, including decorated war veterans, issued appeals to the Government to call out the Army to control the situation, but these remained unheeded for 72 hours.

At night, my family huddled together in the den, tense and disturbed. My grandmother, Mata Hardyal Kaur, 93, sat calmly with her walking stick in one hand and rosary in the other. She had seen this madness twice before. The first time was after the onset of World War II when the family moved from Siam, now Thailand, to the then undivided Punjab of India, now Pakistan, to escape the effects of war.

The second time was in 1947 when the family moved again as a part of a mass and bloody migration, this time from the newly created Pakistan to India. Her advice was brief and as sound as she could give, based on her life experiences: Save your lives, don't worry about any material thing, she said. If you survive, you can put everything together again.

My father was more assertive: Be safe. Don't attack anyone. But if you are attacked then fight well. Go down fighting but take down the attacker too.

After this, everyone dispersed. No one ate anything. No one slept a wink.

The entire household was on its feet much before the sunlight pierced through the creeps between the curtains on Saturday, 3rd November, morning. Everyone was bracing themselves for the hostilities of the new day.

The 8 AM All India Radio (AIR) news announced that the Central Government had called out the Army to assist the civil administration in maintaining law and order. The Indian Army—for that matter, Air Force and Navy too—was a disciplined force which was the final bulwark against any calamity or crisis. Unfortunately, it had been repeatedly dragged into domestic conflicts which were outside its original mandate and which had hurt its reputation for swift and firm action. At long last, we said, as we all heaved a sigh of relief.

Just then, a police party of seven or eight men in civilian clothes arrived in two jeeps and pressed the door bells of both Amarjeet Singh and Darshan Singh Narang's houses. They said they had come to get both the son and the son-in-law of Giani Charan Singh. They said they would take the two to Ashok Vihar Police Station where they would be questioned about Giani Charan Singh's activities. There was a melee in the lane. Raheja



uncle and Gupta uncle told the officers they were ready to vouch for them as well as Giani Charan Singh. That none of them had any bad bone in their body about any politician or political party or any connection with Mrs Gandhi's killers.

But the officers were adamant. They said they had orders from above. In fact, on learning about Giani Charan Singh's accident and subsequent admission to the hospital, they quickly contacted their control room and had armed guards placed outside his hospital ward to "prevent him from fleeing." This was a pathetic overreaction. The old man couldn't even turn to the side on his bed because his plastered leg was hanging from wires suspended from the ceiling.

By the time Amarjeet Singh and Darshan Singh Narang were whisked away in a police Jeep, word had spread about their detention. That started a fresh cycle of visitations from curious onlookers. But this time the crowds were larger and more militant. They openly talked about burning down the two marked houses. When Raheja uncle, Gupta uncle and Bajaj uncle tried to talk to them, they were threatened too. So Gupta uncle, who worked in the Indian Railways, phoned the police for help but it washed its hands of the problem saying the Army had taken over now.

The Dogra Regiment of the Army had, indeed, moved into Ashok Vihar by about Saturday noon. Their columns comprised machine gun-mounted jeeps, olive green trucks with helmeted men wearing full body armour carrying assault rifles, finger on the trigger;

armoured personnel carriers and tanks whose trundling sound could be heard from the main road behind us.

As per standard operating procedure, the Ashok Vihar Police Station became their base camp as they began to assess the situation in the area. Apparently, there was a fiery exchange between the Commanding Officer (CO) of the Dogra Regiment and the Station House Officer (SHO) of the Ashok Vihar Police Station over the patrol maps of the locality.

The Army demanded the patrol maps but the police refused to share them. At this, the CO threatened to take the SHO into custody. I don't know how this conflict was resolved, but the CO ordered his troops to fan out into the entire area with the help of the locals and prepare their own patrol maps. Within a few hours, they had mapped the whole area and identified vulnerable pockets as they began the rescue operation.

Folks from our block reported our presence to them and the imminent danger of a mob attack. Shortly thereafter, they arrived in our lane in a Shaktiman truck. The gun-toting men in olive greens took positions at vantage points in the lane to prevent the mobs on all sides from attacking us. Some of them walked across other lanes of the block to shoo away the troublemakers, instill confidence, and safely take out the Sikh families.

Once the area was stabilized, we were led to the Army truck by Raheja uncle's elder son Sri Chand, who assured us that he would keep everything safe in our absence. He also told us that they would bring us back as soon as the situation normalized.

It was a very painful moment. We were leaving the safety of our home and going into the unknown, unsure of whether we would ever return, despite repeated assurances. My father reminisced about the Partition of 1947 when he left Sheikhpura as a teenager in similar circumstances, never to return. My grandmother thought we would never come back and would be sent away, perhaps, to Punjab, directly from the police station or the refugee camp.

So we got out of our home with very little hope of returning, and very little else. I was wearing a white kurta-pajama and bathroom slippers, had a small phonebook in my pocket, besides 150 Rupees. My grandmother carried her medicines and Parle Glucose biscuits in a pouch. Most others came out with bare hands.

There wasn't much time to confabulate. There were brief goodbyes before we scaled the ladder into the rear of the truck and were driven away. I broke down on the shoulder of my close friend Surinder Pal's elder brother. Gupta uncle hugged my father. Kiran Bhabhi held on to my elder sister. It was a tearful send-off.

As the truck moved, the men in olives took positions atop it. It had an escort jeep. We made our way to Ashok Vihar Police Station in about five minutes. As we alighted, we were guided to a holding area and told to wait there.

My elder sister, however, decided to go inside the building and look for Amarjeet Singh and Darshan Singh Narang. The policeman on duty in the Reporting Room pointed her to the basement which had the lock-ups. She walked in the corridor from cell to cell and finally found them sitting inside. She told the guard on duty that she was family and went inside. She told them that everyone had safely arrived upstairs.

Raheja uncle, Gupta uncle and Bajaj uncle followed us to the police station. They knew that we had not eaten anything for several hours. So Gupta uncle brought us sandwiches from home. He said his wife had prepared them for all the kids. It was a difficult choice for her to make. Her youngest son Lokesh Gupta liked home-made butter. She had some lying in the fridge. There was sliced bread too. But she decided to feed us instead of him. She said we needed it much more than him.

There was another touching moment in the police station when Raheja uncle asked my elder sister—whom he had always loved as his daughter—if she needed anything. She asked for food. She told him, "Uncle, I want to eat something, I'm very hungry." It moved him to tears. He said she had never ever asked for anything from him all these years. By

this time, a strict curfew was being enforced by the Army. But Raheja uncle still managed to bring her food and waited till she ate it.

Gupta uncle also brought some food for Amarjeet Singh and Darshan Singh Narang. He requested the SHO to let him feed them. Finally, he was taken into the cell in the basement and told to have the food himself before he fed both of them. The cops mandated this to ensure the food was not laced with poison. He readily accepted the condition. They told him to wait for a while after consuming the food to see if reacted to it. When they were satisfied that he wasn't dizzy, they allowed him to feed the two.

While they were eating, the cops locked the cell from outside and the guard's duty changed. The new guard had no briefing on Gupta uncle. So when he got up to leave, the new guard told him he couldn't. Consequently, Gupta uncle remained incarcerated for a couple of hours for feeding his friends and neighbours. The new guard was told to speak to the SHO who confirmed that he had permitted Gupta uncle inside.

While in the holding area, I asked a trooper who was coming out of the police station building about when they had arrived and from where. He said they were from the Dogra Regiment and had driven non-stop through the night from Jammu, some 365 miles north, where they were posted. The soldier reassured everyone and said his regiment won't let any harm come to any of us. He asked us if we had eaten anything since the morning. We said no. He said he and his compatriots hadn't eaten a morsel either as they had driven

non-stop from Jammu. He then went back into the building and brought us some flat bread and mashed potatoes. We were reluctant at first because we didn't want to deprive him of his meal, but we took it when he said he was going to eat it too along with us.

By the evening, the Army had rescued some 50 Sikh families from the surrounding areas and the police station compound was full of men, women and children. As darkness descended, the Army men told us that we would be moved to Ludlow Castle Model School on Sham Nath Marg, opposite Delhi Police's then headquarters, some four-and-a-half miles away.

The officers brought two local private buses, but the operators/drivers of these buses were arguing against transporting the Sikhs in them. They feared that their vehicles would be torched, and they would be lynched. The Army men told them that the buses would move with an armed escort, but they were still refusing. After a lot of haggling and pressure, the two buses were lined up on the main road as a part of a convoy.

A machinegun-mounted Jeep led it as the pilot. A Shaktiman truck mounted with soldiers carrying automatic weapons was next. Then there were the two buses. Another Army truck and an escort Jeep. Names of heads of rescued families were noted down along with the number of accompanying members and addresses. Within half an hour, the convoy had started moving slowly.

It was dark, and deserted because of the curfew. The convoy moved through Grand Trunk Road, Shakti Nagar, Kamla Nagar, Delhi University, Northern Ridge, Civil Lines, Delhi Lieutenant Governor's official residence, Delhi Police Headquarters and we were at the entrance of Ludlow Castle Model School. The gate was opened, and we were released as sheep or cattle into the ground. As soon as the buses moved out, the gate was shut.

Ludlow Castle was a historic building. It was first built in 1813 as the home of Dr Samuel Ludlow, the Residency Surgeon of the British Empire at Delhi until 1831. Since then, it has been variously used: as the site of a battery of the British troops during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, home of the Chief Commissioner of Delhi Territory, including Sir Thomas Metcalfe, and as Delhi Club. It hosted Queen Victoria's second son Prince Alfred in 1870, US President Ulysses S. Grant in 1879, the wedding party of independent India's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1916, besides other people of eminence. After the Partition of India in 1947, it was demolished to make way for a model school which still runs here.

So we were among the first set of 'refugees' to arrive at the Ludlow Castle Camp. And an administrative officer allotted us 'Class XI-D' on the top—fourth—floor of the school building. The stairway was poorly lit. There was a mound of four or five worn-out blue-smearred-with-red cotton rugs with a foot-long blue border outside Class XI-D. The room had a lone light bulb at its center. There were multiple rows of student desks, made of

bent metal pipes and wooden planks. We were directed to empty them ourselves and spread out the cotton rugs and settle down on them.

We were 63 persons in this classroom from Block C-3 of Ashok Vihar. The movement of benches and spreading of the cotton rugs raised a lot of dust and its haze shimmered in the glow of light and created a mirage. It was windy and cold, and we had nothing to cover ourselves with. Only my grandmother and mother had their shawls over their shoulders.

Some of us wanted to go to the restroom. But when we checked them out on the fourth floor, they were leaky, filthy and appeared to have been lying in disuse for a long time. Even the loo next to the school principal's office on the ground floor was not functional. It was not a surprise then that many people were resorting to what we jokingly used to call 'drip irrigation' along the boundary wall, with their backs to us.

While we were looking around on the ground floor, the main entrance was opened and a tractor with a water tanker on its trolley was brought in and parked along the side wall. It was meant for drinking. Another Shaktiman truck also made an entry and several Sikh families alighted from it.

I stepped up to a young guy who had cuts on his face with dry blood. His hair had been cut bluntly but it was still standing up, as if frozen lifeless. I asked him where he was



from and what had happened to him. He said he and all the others in the Shaktiman truck had been brought to the camp from the Old Delhi Railway Station. He said he was a Sikh from the neighboring state of Haryana and was travelling on the Rohtak-Delhi train when he was attacked by some men with iron rods and sticks. They dragged him to the floor and pulled off his turban. Underneath, he had coiled his long hair into a bun, like most Sikh men do. They then surrounded him and pulled him from his hair in all directions. And one of them suddenly cut it with a knife. They pounded him with sticks and rods until he became unconscious. They then left him for dead. When he woke up, he was on a goods trolley at a platform and the Army picked him up from there.

There were horror stories all around, each more debilitating than the other. There were women whose husbands or brothers or fathers had been garlanded with tyres and set on fire by Congress party workers in front of them. They were mocked as jumping bears. Too many people had blunt object injuries, broken bones in slings, waiting to be treated.

Under the watch of the sentries, the entrance gate opened once again. This time, a bread van, bearing the Britannia signage on all sides, was driven in and parked next to the water tanker. An administrative officer announced that those who were hungry could queue up along with four other family members to secure a loaf of uncut bread. Individual refugees weren't entertained. Loafs of bread were accompanied by 'Kaveri' brand pickle which was poured over the loaf.

All of a sudden, we ran into Raheja uncle, Gupta uncle and Bajaj uncle. They had brought food from home and were looking for us. We took them up to Class XI-D. They distributed the food they had brought. Survival instinct had certainly kicked in amongst some of us. I noticed that the Loniyals' family in our room was snatching flat bread when it was being distributed and hoarding it under their stoles, only to be pulled up by Raheja uncle.

As the night progressed, stillness replaced the commotion, only to be interrupted by the roar of the wind. The windows had no glasses, typically for a government-run school in those days. Outside, we could see two buildings on Raj Niwas Marg: St Xavier's School next door and Raj Niwas—official residence of the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi—next to it, glowing in the street light.

Post 3 AM, it became very cold and everyone shivered, from knuckles to spine. As if in a commune, everyone huddled together skin-to-skin in groups of six to eight to insulate themselves from the chill. Some dragged the smelly outer edges of the cotton rugs to cover their toes. It was a nightmare.

All of us woke up disoriented on Sunday, 4th November, due to cold, fatigue and hunger and headed straight to the large open area on the ground floor to soak in the rising sun. The forecourt wore a dismal look. People with multiple injuries filled it up and more were still coming in. They shared each other's ordeal and began to grapple with their new

realities of loss of lives in their families and displacement and homelessness. Trauma was the glue that bonded them together.

At around 11 AM, the main gate opened, and a large van of the Missionaries of Charity came in and stopped near the entrance. Its occupant on the front seat was the apostle of selfless service: Albania-born Roman Catholic nun and missionary, Nobel laureate Mother Teresa. Her 20 volunteers alighted from the rear and they got into a huddle around her. They calmly surveyed the scene over several minutes. The forecourt was littered with refuse and there were puddles of water near the water tanker. The volunteers quietly moved back to the rear of the van and took out long twig brooms. They were then led by Mother to the left edge of the ground. They queued up and started sweeping the forecourt from one end to the other.

This was an unusual sight for the Sikhs to see. They are taught service before self and they willingly volunteer for community work, regardless of their social standing or financial status. The touching act of the missionaries had pricked their conscience. So without sitting on ceremony, they joined the cleaning effort from the other end. The result was truly soul-lifting: the entire forecourt became spick-and-span in a matter of 15 minutes.

As the sisters and Sikh volunteers moved into the building with their brooms, people milled around the Mother in the forecourt. She empathized with them and was generous

with her blessings. When my turn came, I folded my hands and bent my head. She put her hand on it and said in Hindi '*sab theek ho jayega*' (everything will be alright). Her words were therapeutic, her touch magical. I felt truly blessed.

By this time, some members of the international press also came in. They asked if anyone spoke English. I got into a broken conversation with a reporter of the *Washington Post*. As he began to take pictures of the victims, the administrative staff of the camp interrupted him and the others and told them to leave. "You can't talk to them. You can't take pictures. Please leave," they were told. Soon, they erected a barricade of ropes to hold back the refugees and the security personnel drove out the media persons.

We had a surprise visitor in the camp in the afternoon. My maternal aunt, Amrit Kaur, couldn't keep herself back in spite of the curfew in the city. She requested a senior paramilitary officer in her neighborhood in Gujranwala Town in north Delhi to take her to see us in his office Jeep. She had also seen the Partition of 1947 and thought, like my grandmother, that we would never return home. So, she said, she wanted to meet us before we were sent away and separated from her.

Some ladies living in the adjoining Oberoi Apartments also came in. They were offering help to anyone who needed it. They served food, took down names, phone numbers and messages from whoever wanted to reach out to their families.

When we were moving from Ashok Vihar Police Station to the Ludlow Castle Camp in one of the two private buses, my father had met the conductor of the bus who turned out to be his acquaintance. My father had told him to tell his transporter friend, Krishan Lal Trikha, of Trikha Travels, to take us back whenever possible. The acquaintance was diligent enough to convey the message the next day. Trikha uncle also responded well.

So in the evening, he brought his bus to the Ludlow Castle Camp and told us to accompany him. This was unbelievable. The ordeal was ending. As we got into the bus, he told us to sit on the floor instead of the seats so that we were not visible from outside, lest someone decided to attack us again. The bus moved as it got dark. Trikha uncle accompanied us. In less than an hour, all of us were back home, quite unexpectedly.

It took several weeks before we could go out again and resume our normal routines. The vibes were still hostile, the anger palpable. When I went back to my college a fortnight later, I received an extremely affectionate welcome. My friend Rajeev Jolly gave me an extended bear hug and bitterly cried. Actually we both cried.

All of us had had a harsh month. All of us were the victims of November. But friends and neighbours had saved our lives and restored our faith in humanity.

The shock of a near-certain assault, the humiliation of hiding, and a miraculous rescue forced me to introspect. It sent me back to the basics of why Sikhs were created: to stand up and fight against oppression. A lot of Sikhs felt similarly and looked inward.

‘Sikh’ in the Punjabi language means a disciple, learner or student. Sikhism originated in the state of Punjab in north India in the late 15th century. The spiritual teachings of its founder and first Master, Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539), spoke of one God and universal brotherhood. His three key moral lessons, which continue to resonate to this day, exhort all Sikhs to earn an honest living, remember God and pray, and share the earnings with everyone through anonymous charity and selfless service to humanity.

The Sikh order evolved further over the next 200 years through nine more Sikh Masters who succeeded Guru Nanak. And the tenth Sikh Master, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), formally created the Sikh religion as a monotheistic faith on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1699—Baisakhi day—at Anandpur Sahib in Punjab.

Guru Gobind’s father and the ninth Sikh Master, Guru Teg Bahadur, was beheaded in 1675 at a public square in old Delhi by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb for not converting to Islam and for standing up for the Hindus who resisted conversions. Guru Gobind also lost four sons in his lifetime – two in battle and two to the Mughal army which executed them.

Guru Gobind Singh named the Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth* (the book of eternal teachings), as his successor, bringing to a close the tradition of human Gurus or Masters. He established the scripture as the eternal and living religious and spiritual Master who would guide the future generations of Sikhs through its messages of distilled wisdom.

Guru Gobind, who was a saint, warrior, philosopher and prolific poet, also gave five articles of faith to the Sikhs through an edict: unshorn hair (*kesh*) as a symbol of distinct spiritual and worldly identity, comb (*kanga*) to keep the hair clean and tidy at all times, long breeches (*kaccha*) to keep the vices under control and maintain the dignity of the human form, iron bracelet (*kada*) to constantly remind the bearer to always act in a just and fair manner, and curved sword (*kirpan*) to defend and protect against oppression.

The other tenets of the Sikh faith are fraternal love, equality, freedom of religion, sovereignty of thought, protection of human rights, and community service. It rejects all distinctions based on caste, creed, gender, color, race or origin. It considers fighting injustice and persecution, first through peaceful persuasion and then by drawing a sword, a sacred duty. It doesn't mourn sacrifice. In fact, it celebrates martyrdom.

At present, Sikhism is one of the youngest major religious orders in the world. On the spectrum of following by population, it holds the distinction of being the fifth largest organized religion globally, after Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. There are

25 to 30 million Sikhs in the world. When combined with non-Sikh followers—who value the teachings of Sikh Masters but are not ethnically Sikh, like many Hindus—the faith is estimated to have a flock of 120 million. There are an estimated 700,000 Sikhs in the US.

Given its bravery and sacrifice in the face of oppression, the Sikh community gathered significant political influence in Punjab from the early years of its inception. It constantly battled Mughal emperors in India, from Shah Jahan to Aurangzeb, losing two of its Sikh Masters to them—Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Teg Bahadur—besides scores of their family members and followers. The consolidation of Sikh power resulted in the creation of a Sikh empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1799, with its capital in Lahore, now in Pakistan.

Ranjit Singh became the first Indian in a millennium to turn the tide of invaders back to the lands of the traditional conquerors of India, particularly the Afghans. He ruled over a large territory, from Khyber Pass in the northwest to the Sutlej in the east, and from Kashmir in the north to the Thar Desert of Rajasthan. But a decline began with his death in 1839 and the Sikh kingdom was annexed by the British in 1849. The British colonial rule continued till India secured independence in 1947.



But the independence from the British and emergence of India as a self-ruled dominion—and later a secular, democratic republic—came at a huge cost to the Sikh-Punjabi and Bengali communities. The British, before leaving the Indian shores, presided over the Partition of India and carving out of Pakistan as a second independent dominion on par with India—which evolved to become the Muslim-majority Islamic nation it is today.

Punjab and Bengal bore the brunt of this division: two-thirds of Punjab's territory went to Pakistan and one-third came to India. Since the Sikhs chose to stay with India, they had to give up everything of value in their native land and migrate to the Indian side.

Simultaneously, the Muslims on the Indian side moved across to Pakistan. But that migration was soaked in blood due to sectarian violence on both sides. It is estimated that over two million people died and 20 million were displaced during the Partition.

Thousands of Sikh-Punjabi families had to re-start their lives from scratch.

Once part of independent India, the Sikh community began to search for itself in terms of its role and identity, particularly in Punjab. After the Sikh majority PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union) state was merged into east Punjab in 1956, the evenly matched strength of two dominant political forces, the Congress and the Akalis, tipped in favor of the Congress.

'Akali' literally means 'timeless' or eternal'. The Akalis draw their strength from Sikhism, as religiously-oriented representatives of the Punjab peasantry, engaged in the

cultivation of land and other agricultural activities. They emerged as a political force of reckoning in the post-First World War Punjab but continue to struggle for relevance to this day, much like all other political parties in the state.

The notion of the rule of the majority, introduced by the British, didn't account for property or prowess. Only numbers mattered. In that arithmetic, the Sikhs were a mere 12 to 13 percent of the population of Punjab and a little over one percent of the population of India. This was reason enough for the Akalis to raise the demand for a Sikh majority state and start a campaign.

In the reorganization of states on a linguistic basis that followed a prolonged agitation, Punjab was divided further and states of Haryana (1966) and Himachal Pradesh (1971) were carved out. Consequently, the state saw a prolonged period of relative peace and prosperity. Punjab's agricultural output surged as it reaped the benefits of the Green Revolution and became the granary—or breadbasket—of India.

There were outstanding issues which continued to simmer on the margins, such as the issue of Chandigarh as the state capital and division of river waters amongst the new states. But these were regarded as work in progress and weren't considered a serious threat to the stability of the state, which has a long land border with Pakistan. The Congress and the Akalis continued to win state assembly elections alternately.

But a violent clash in April 1978 in Amritsar, Punjab, between the followers of the controversial heretical Sikh sect of Nirankaris, who worship a human Guru or Master when it is prohibited in the Sikh faith, and supporters of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale changed the dynamics and became a turning point in the state.

Bhindranwale's election in August 1977 as the head of the *Damdami Taksal*, a Sikh religious seminary near Amritsar, had given him the legitimacy to influence young minds and wield the power that came with his role. He was a fundamentalist who disparaged the Akalis for deviating from the welfare of the Sikh community. From the start, his views were extremist and his politics divisive and sectarian. He didn't think there was anything wrong in using violence to achieve religious and political objectives. He justified such use by quoting the scriptures, which he knew well as a preacher.

Bhindranwale was patronized by the Congress party, particularly by Mrs Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, and Giani Zail Singh. Singh was the former chief minister of Punjab who became the home minister of India in 1980 and then the President of the country in 1982. After the clash of April 1978, Bhindranwale kept up his campaign against the Nirankaris and continued to make intemperate remarks. He served a useful purpose for Singh—he thought he would use him against not only the Akalis but also his arch-rival Darbara Singh in the Punjab Congress. He was clearly playing with fire, as it turned out.

In April 1980, the head of the Nirankari sect, Gurbachan Singh, was shot dead in his house in Delhi. The needle of suspicion pointed towards Bhindranwale. When he learnt that his name had figured in the police report, he moved into one of the hostels in the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar. He stayed there until home minister Giani Zail Singh told the Indian Parliament that the preacher had nothing to do with the murder.

Then in September 1981, the owner of *Punjab Kesari*, a newspaper published from Jalandhar, Lala Jagat Narain was shot dead. Narain was extremely critical of Bhindranwale and had sided with the Nirankaris. Once again, Bhindranwale's name figured in the police investigation and an arrest warrant was issued. Giani Zail Singh rang up the Haryana chief minister who gave a safe passage to Bhindranwale to the security of his *Gurudwara*.

But when Bhindranwale was finally arrested by Punjab Police and lodged briefly in the Ferozepur Jail in the state, unidentified Sikh youth on motorcycles randomly killed Hindus in different parts of the state. There were attempts to damage train tracks. An airplane belonging to Indian Airlines was also hijacked to Lahore in Pakistan. Multiple bomb explosions followed. The lawlessness gave home minister Zail Singh enough reason to dismiss his own party's government in Punjab, led by his rival Darbara Singh.

In less than a month, Giani Zail Singh told the Parliament in Delhi that there was no evidence that Bhindranwale was involved in the murder of Lala Jagat Narain. The

Government subsequently released him. Bhindranwale drove to Delhi in a victory procession with dozens of armed supporters, in clear violation of law.

Within two months, in December 1981, Jathedar Santokh Singh, a prominent Sikh politician of Delhi, who was extremely close to Mrs Gandhi and her family, was shot dead in his car in Delhi by a rival Sikh politician. Bhindranwale attended his memorial service where home minister Giani Zail Singh, as well as Mrs Gandhi's elder son and heir apparent, Rajiv Gandhi, was also present. Bhindranwale and Zail Singh were caught together on camera for the world to see. While addressing the congregation, Bhindranwale indirectly humiliated Singh for dyeing his beard. The preacher had fallen out with his patron, though the opposite was not true yet.

The Akalis sensed an opportunity and quickly moved in to enlist Bhindranwale on their side. After all, he was a force to reckon with in and outside Punjab. Out of power and apprehensive that they would become irrelevant, the Akalis had already gone into their well-known agitation mode to revive their fortunes. They dusted up the old Anandpur Sahib Resolution—a charter of Sikh demands—and presented its revised version to prime minister Mrs Indira Gandhi in October 1981 under the leadership of Akali Dal president Sant Harchand Singh Longowal. The charter contained outstanding demands related to territory and water, besides some religious and economic concessions. Mrs Gandhi held several rounds of talks with the Akali leaders over the next few months but all the sticky issues couldn't be resolved.

To keep up the pressure, the Akalis launched a *Dharam Yudh Morcha*—religious war—against the central government on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1982 in the run up to IX Asian Games in New Delhi in November 1982. The Asian Games project was being handled by Rajiv Gandhi and he desperately needed it to succeed to shore up his political profile. His personal reputation was at stake. Meanwhile, Bhindranwale merged his might with the Akali agitation and Sant Harchand Singh Longowal was designated to lead it.

When Longowal announced the plans of the Akalis to protest in New Delhi and disrupt the Asian Games, the central government and the government of neighboring state, Haryana, went into an overdrive to defeat these objectives. All entry points into New Delhi were sealed. Policemen belonging to Delhi and Haryana Police were unleashed on all incoming Sikhs and even army veterans and war heroes were strip-searched and humiliated. This gave fodder to Bhindranwale who had moved into the safety of the Golden Temple Complex—where he remained until his death—and started holding daily congregations and spitting venom against the central government, particularly Mrs Gandhi. The clumsy handling of the Akali threat also diminished the peaceful agitation and negotiations with the government that Longowal was propagating, leading to a chasm between the two.

The hardliners having allegiance to Bhindranwale stepped up sectarian violence and there was a spate of targeted killings of the Hindus in Punjab which vitiated the atmosphere.

Police officers were being killed too. The reign of terror was spreading and the situation was rapidly slipping out of control.

By this time, retired Major-General Shahbeg Singh had also moved into the Golden Temple Complex and was frequently seen with Bhindranwale. Singh was a hero of the Bangladesh war of 1971 who was dismissed from service on charges of corruption, a day before his tenure ended. He was also denied his retirement benefits. An aggrieved Singh continued to plead innocence and presented his case to various persons in the Indian bureaucracy and the political establishment but without any success.

Angry and hurt, Shahbeg Singh had visited the Golden Temple in Amritsar to offer prayers, when a visiting American Sikh told him to meet Bhindranwale. Singh and Bhindranwale had a common enemy in the government of India and Mrs Gandhi and decided to join hands to fight it. It was Shahbeg Singh who used his military mind and fortified the Golden Temple Complex against a possible attack by the security forces or the Indian Army.

In the months preceding the storming of the Golden Temple Complex by the Indian Army, Mrs Gandhi made last-ditch efforts to broker a peace deal with the Akalis as well as Bhindranwale. Because of concerns of Haryana Hindus, she had already walked back twice from a settlement which created a trust deficit and emboldened the Sikh hardliners.

The final blow to the chance of a peaceful resolution came when Bhindranwale rejected Mrs Gandhi's next offer of settlement. Longowal announced further escalation of the agitation by preventing the movement of food grains in Punjab. The battlelines had been clearly drawn.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1984, Mrs Gandhi ordered the Indian Army to storm the Golden Temple Complex to take out Bhindranwale and his armed supporters and others and end the siege. The army operation, which lasted over a week, was codenamed 'Operation Bluestar'. Punjab was placed under a strict curfew and all foreign journalists were expelled from the state to prevent any reporting by the world media. The army used its infantry units, specially trained para-commandos, artillery and even heavy armour to neutralize the resistance. It used tanks and machine guns to over-power Bhindranwale's men. The militants used assault rifles, MMGs, grenades and rocket-launchers. There were heavy casualties on both sides. The army lost 140 men, including nine officers. It was the highest casualty for any internal operation in India undertaken by the armed forces since Independence. The number of terrorists and civilians killed, according to the data in Amritsar's municipal records, was 557, though it is believed to be much higher.

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and Major-General Shahbeg Singh were killed in the army operation, besides other key operatives in the precincts of the Golden Temple Complex. The army killed at least a hundred Sikh pilgrims in cold blood after tying their hands



behind their backs and lining them up against a wall, according to multiple eyewitness accounts, though the army vehemently denies it to this day.

The troopers rescued Sant Harchand Singh Longowal and other leaders who were present in the Golden Temple Complex. Longowal was detained and sent to Jodhpur Jail in neighboring Rajasthan state. Others arrested from the Golden Temple Complex were jailed elsewhere in Punjab and other states.

In less than five months, Mrs Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards at her official residence in New Delhi. So the Congress party and its government at the Center and Congress-ruled states decided to avenge her killing by targeting the Sikhs and their properties, in what is widely regarded as a genocide. More than 5,000 Sikhs were killed in India in three days, beginning 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984 morning.

But by early 1985, the realization had dawned on the Congress party and the central government led by Rajiv Gandhi as the prime minister that it couldn't wish away the outstanding issues of the Sikhs. It certainly couldn't keep the political prisoners at Jodhpur and elsewhere incarcerated indefinitely.

That is when the central government started secret parleys through interlocuters with Longowal at the Jodhpur Jail to broker a political settlement of Punjab's demands. This process was led by Arjun Singh, Punjab's new governor and former chief minister of

Madhya Pradesh state. Singh was an astute politician and an efficient administrator. He had the trust of all the stakeholders. He kept out the old players, like the chief minister of Haryana, to safeguard the deal.

Once the spadework had been done, Longowal was released from prison, along with other detainees. He was then flown to Delhi to sign a charter of settlement with prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1985, called the Rajiv-Longowal, or Punjab, Accord.

It was an 11-point memorandum of settlement which addressed all the issues raised by the Akalis in their final demands letter submitted to Mrs Gandhi two years earlier. On the top was the compensation to families of innocent agitators who had lost their lives since August 1982 when the protest was launched. Three issues concerned the armed forces: recruitment from Punjab, cases of deserters following Operation Bluestar, and withdrawal of cases registered in Punjab under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

An inquiry into large-scale anti-Sikh violence following Mrs Gandhi's assassination was agreed to, more as a political concession than as a conscientious step that ought to have been taken as a matter of routine accountability. An all-India Gurudwara Act was promised through legislative action to extend the sphere of governance of the *Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC) which currently runs Sikh religious places in Punjab only. The issue of greater autonomy to Punjab was referred to a commission. Issues related to territory, including transfer of the union territory of Chandigarh to

Punjab, and sharing of river waters, were to be adjudicated through time-bound executive action. Representation and protection of Sikh minorities was promised, besides promotion of the Punjabi language across the country.

The Punjab Accord was hailed as a major breakthrough in the process of restoring peace in Punjab. It, indeed, kindled a new hope in the country, including among the Sikhs. According to a public-opinion survey carried by *The Times of India* at that time, 81 percent of the respondents gave a thumbs up to the accord and only 11 percent disapproved.

But the Sikh hardliners were unhappy because they had been sidelined. They dubbed the accord a 'sell-out' to the central government. They followed through on their threats to the political leadership on both sides and gunned down Longowal near a *Gurudwara* in Sherpur in Jalandhar district of Punjab, less than a month after signing the Punjab Accord.

Key parts of the accord have not been implemented by the government of India to this day. The delayed inquiry into the anti-Sikh pogrom has been frustrated. Chandigarh continues to be a union territory as it was never handed over to Punjab. Other territorial issues have remained unsolved. The water sharing pact is tied up in knots in the Supreme Court of India. Other concessions have remained mired in bureaucratic red tape.

Governments of all parties in Delhi have usurped more powers instead of devolving them.

I have watched the war of attrition between the government of India and various players in Punjab with horror. So while I didn't agree—and still don't—with either the violent campaign that was mounted by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and others in Punjab through late '70s and '80s, or the manner in which it was dealt with by the central and state governments of the day, I ended up bearing its scars for a lifetime for no good reason.

Similarly, other Sikhs living in Delhi and elsewhere in India—basically outside of Punjab—have had to endure the hostilities of both the warring sides as well as the hoodlums of the Congress party for playing no role whatsoever. We have become the collateral damage in this battle. And no one has made any serious or sincere effort to put balm on our wounds for 37 years. Or to find out what we have lost.

Also, it is a tragic state of decline and diminution for the Sikhs as a community, from being brave warriors against oppression who defended other religions with their valour and sacrifice, to pleading for justice for themselves and fighting to secure their right to life.

## Chapter II: Methodology

The Sikh genocide of 1984 had left over 5,000 persons dead, more than half in India's capital city, Delhi. Most of the survivors, including a large number of widows who are in their '60s, '70s and '80s, live in a ghettoed cluster of dilapidated one-room housing in west Delhi where they were 'rehabilitated'. Most of them are not literate and can barely write their name when signatures are required. Many make do with thumb impressions.

Several of these survivors have been interviewed by newspapers and magazines, TV news channels and digital media, from India as well as abroad. These interviews have become an annual event now. They are usually timed with three days of mourning in November that the survivors observe with protests and sit-ins, prayer meetings and memorials. This collective grieving makes for great storylines and visuals for hidebound media-persons.

If you ask the survivors who they were interviewed by, chances are that they won't be able to recall. Sometimes, they can remember the name of the publication or channel. Of late, they have been increasingly declining requests for interviews. They say they are tired of recounting their stories because the end result is a big cipher. No one has been able to make a difference to their condition. It reopens their wounds and they bleed for weeks.

They have clearly reached their threshold of pain and patience. They have no desire to see their names in print, or watch their tragedy on television. They open up if you are one of them and if your purpose goes beyond mere publicity. Some of them say they have cried themselves hoarse for decades and yet their repeated appeals for help and justice have fallen on deaf ears. They have been abandoned by the society as well as the system.

But before they wither away with age and time, their detailed first-person accounts ought to be recorded for future generations to know what they have endured. I have also found that no one so far has attempted to record their oral histories through a formal or planned Oral History project, though a handful of them may have had extended sessions with some documentary filmmakers or long-form feature writers or book authors.

In the circumstances, it is important to not frustrate them further and value their time and effort in opening up their hearts and minds to share their stories before they lose interest and clam up.

With that knowledge, I have used the snowballing method of approach through family and friends and started conducting formal Oral History interviews with them. I am presently interviewing those survivors whom I know well and for many years. And I plan to approach those I don't know through the ones I know so that there is a continuity of trust as well as comfort and confidence about speaking to me without hesitation.

My positionality as a survivor makes me a part of them, yet different from them. My narrators know me as someone who also faced the mobs but was lucky to have been rescued by the Indian Army and taken to a refugee camp; as someone who didn't have any loss of life in my immediate family, but one who had the same experience of fright and emotional trauma as them.

They know I have undertaken this project to put the Oral History spotlight on their suffering, not for any gain or glory but to create a record of their trauma to preserve it for posterity. They trust me. And I have an established ethical relationship with them, as Francine D. Spang-Willis says<sup>1</sup>. I belong to them and they belong to me.

Since I have chosen to record the trauma testimonies of *all* the victims over a long period of time, I'm not discriminatory in my approach to them—on the basis of age, gender, socio-economic condition, education or the lack of it, their place of residence, their ideology or political affiliation. I am only prioritizing my task by focusing on the elderly, sick and frail so that their testimonies are not lost.

As word spreads about my Oral History project and more narrators come forward, I will use a uniform sociological survey tool to prioritize the most aged and vulnerable for the interviews. Within this subset, I'll prioritize those who have lost someone. But I do not intend to keep anyone out. If a narrator is ready to share the 1984 story, I'll record it.

Besides the survivors, I also intend to interview the saviours or good Samaritans who stepped up to protect the Sikhs from harm at a considerable risk to themselves. Some individuals and families suffered the wrath of the mobs and had their vehicles and homes damaged. Some of them violated curfew to get food to their Sikh friends and neighbours.

Unfortunately, this aspect, which helped the Sikhs to restart their routines of life quickly and with confidence in the weeks after the violence, has not received the attention it deserved. If this help had not been extended to the Sikhs virtually everywhere, the death toll would have been at least twenty times higher than what it was.

I have chosen the tool of Oral History to record these accounts because it allows the survivors to share their trauma without any intermediaries and in all its detail. Even if I consider myself an interested intermediary, the framework of Oral History offers the least-loss option to the narrators, compared to news stories in any format, documentaries, web series, feature films, books, etc. Based on the interviews I have conducted so far, I can confidently say that the narrators feel heard after an Oral History interview. This is because their experience is presented in the first person in a clear setting and context. It is holistic. It is felt. There are fewer distortions. The narrators drive the story. There is no pressure of time limit on them. They own their story and have the power to revise it or take it back. To that extent, the Oral History narrative is the sound of their soul; a magnificent but melancholic memory that they want to hold on to as long as their hearts beat.



In the pre-interview meetings I have done so far, I have personally gone and met the survivors, rather than speaking to them on the phone. I think personal meetings breed greater confidence, allow for a deeper interaction, for allaying of fears, articulating the purpose of the Oral History project, in making them co-creators and putting them in the driver's seat in the actual recording.

I have also utilized these meetings to seek consent and discuss legal releases, to assure them about how and where the Oral History testimonies would be kept, and used with their permission. I have used the pre-interview time with them to outline the broad contours of the actual discussion so that they have adequate time and framework to plumb their memory, think their thoughts through.

I have chosen to record video interviews, even if I use only the audio in some cases to safeguard their identities. I also intend to use pseudonyms where necessary.

I have articulated my objectives and intent on tape again at the beginning of each interview I have conducted, and also asked for consent for the recordings.

I am mostly following the life-story approach in the interviews, starting with the background of the survivors, where they grew up and studied, their childhood memories, high points and low points of life, triumphs and tribulations, successes and setbacks. Also, how the tragic events of 1984 have changed the course of their lives.

I have conducted the first 10 interviews with minimal jottings on a single yellow slip since I don't want to go into these oral histories with a pre-set mind. And as Nyssa Chow teaches<sup>2</sup>, I am holding a dialogue with the narrators in the conversation, and responding to what they are saying, rather than them responding to my pre-ordained questions. This method also allows me to engage with the present state of the survivors, more than obsessing with the past. It is also a way for me to show respect to them, listen to their ordeal with attention and empathy.

But I do have an expectation from the narrators—that they would re-visit and recreate that moment in October/November 1984 when they last saw their loved ones whom they subsequently lost. To me, that moment in their eye-witness account is invaluable.

The challenge I have faced so far in these conversations is to start from a place of 'unknowing'. Since I am a survivor myself, the narrators tend to gloss over a lot of their experiences after saying, 'you know what happened, I don't need to tell you'. To overcome this, I have employed a solution offered by Professor Mary Marshall Clark: I tell my narrators to take out a photograph of a loved one from their family album, hold it in their hand, and talk to the person in the photo, rather than me so that she/he can benefit from their experience.

Barring cleaning up the video and audio clips to remove pre-roll preparatory instructions, and unexpected interruptions by way of a phone ringing or a visitor arriving unexpectedly to meet the narrators, I have retained everything each narrator has said.

I've disagreed with at least one narrator who openly asked for a 'blood-for-blood' revenge and use of violence against the perpetrators, but I have not stopped my narrators from saying anything. I have not censored them. I have recognized these differences respectfully, as advised by Luisa Passerini.<sup>3</sup>

Since most of my interviews are taking place in the narrators' native language Punjabi, I'm translating each interview with honesty and playing it back to them, along with the transcript so that they can check it for accuracy and approve it. I am also seeking a formal oral and written consent from the narrators at the beginning of each Oral History interview, besides a written legal release for usage after the Oral History is finalized.

I am watching and listening to each recording multiple times to fully understand its meaning and to metabolize it. I'm curating these testimonies individually and will be providing public access to them through my website, [www.1984sikhgenocide.in](http://www.1984sikhgenocide.in), with the permission of the narrators. I intend to present these oral histories by way of a thumbnail description, a highlight, and a complete Oral History testimony in the form of full transcription, audio clip as well as video clip. I also intend to use a migration map or location map with each narrator's account.

I intend to write my interpretation and analysis, and personal reflection, for each Oral History interview I have conducted, to give the end user my take for whatever it is worth. I would like to write like Alessandro Portelli, or at least work with that inspiration.

My audiences are all organs of the Indian State: the lawmakers, the executive, the judiciary and the media, each of whom have repeatedly let the survivors down. Also, the civil society, human rights practitioners and Sikhs everywhere in the world, and those who value human lives and dignity of women.

I am attempting to have this thesis and my project in sustained critical conversation with a body of relevant Oral History literature and work on trauma and memory, including *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* by Jill Stauffer, *The History of the Holocaust Told by Survivors/Montreal Holocaust Museum*<sup>4</sup>, *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* edited by Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, and the *1947 Partition Archive*<sup>5</sup> by California-based Dr Guneeta Singh Bhalla.

Dr Bhalla is a physicist by training. Her father's family moved from Lahore to Amritsar during the blood-soaked Partition of India in 1947. She was always curious about her genealogy and roots. Her creative impulse was sparked when she visited the oral testimony archives at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in 2008. She began interviewing the Partition survivors in 2010 and started the *1947 Partition Archive* the following year.

Over the last decade, she has created the largest digital archive of its kind of Partition memories by recording nearly 10,000 testimonies from across Asia and beyond.

The *1947 Partition Archive* is a people-powered project. Dr Bhalla has interviewed more than 100 survivors herself and then achieved scale through volunteers whom she trains online as Citizen Historians on an ongoing basis. She also runs an elaborate Story Scholars Program. There were many sceptics when she started her work. ‘Why reopen old wounds after more than six decades’, was a common refrain. Dr Bhalla answered her critics by highlighting the importance of collective memory in our cultural inheritance. She then painstakingly addressed the omissions and filled the gaps with grit, integrity, commitment and creativity. The naysayers are silent now and more individuals and organizations have followed in her footsteps to create similar projects.

The biggest inspiration in Dr Bhalla’s work is her successful capturing of the pain of sudden separation in 1947 and the desire for re-bonding between people, particularly the Punjabis, which has grown stronger with each passing year. The testimonies are vivid and moving. There is a lot of innovation and novelty in her effort to keep the memories kindled. It has also kindled my spirit to create something similar on 1984. She knows what I am trying to do and is extremely supportive of my effort.

*Ethical Loneliness* by Jill Stauffer captures the cruel failure of political and other institutions to recognize the trauma of survivors of violence. This is a universal

occurrence among persecuted groups, alongside thwarting of the survivors' claims for justice. This condition of neglect is not inevitable, but has been "imposed only by multiple ethical lapses on the part of human beings residing in the surrounding world."<sup>6</sup>

The neglect has been aggravated, Stuart continues, by "not only dehumanization, oppression, and abandonment, but also by the failure of just-minded people to hear well—from those who have suffered—what recovery or reconciliation after massive violence or long-standing injustice would require."

Stuart further argues that "the past cannot be changed, but it can resound in the present moment in vastly different ways, some of them more hospitable to human thriving than others. It is everyone's job to author conditions where repair is possible." I'll be examining this possibility in the 'Making Meaning' chapter and whether that path is viable for the survivors of the 1984 Sikh Genocide. I'll also look at the tragedy of 1984 through the prism of social accountability covenants, and metaphysics of repair and revision, as envisaged by Stuart.

Exploring the unique collection of survivor stories online at *The Montreal Holocaust Museum*<sup>7</sup> has been extremely rewarding. The existence of a brick-and-mortar, or more appropriately steel-and-glass, museum in Quebec, Canada; the possibility of a digital tour to match the experience of a physical visit; the selection and thematic presentation of stories in terms of time, place and experience; the rare and high quality photos under the

objects of interest; the integration with primary and secondary education. And above all, a true aural experience with minimal dependence on texts. It has been put together with tender hands even though it presents the trauma of sharp elbows and sinister sights. It is definitely going to inform my website's wireframe when I develop it.

I consider *Listening on the Edge* to be a ready reckoner for the survivors of trauma as much as oral historians. I have read it more to learn what not to do than what one ought to do as a practitioner: guard against vicarious traumatization, check chronological incoherence, not lose sight of a historical narrative and become a healer.

The work also discusses Carolyn Mears' Gateway Approach<sup>8</sup> to aid recovery, as a testament to the potential of healing through Oral History. In this method of inquiry, Oral History interviewing creates a gateway between a traumatized community and the larger society, helping to mitigate the alienation felt by the impacted community. And amid a diversity of Oral History projects and practices which are discussed with candor and placed in conversation with one another, there's a reiteration of the gold standard: "Each interview is unique. Each one can offer lessons, not only in Oral History methodology, but also in the complexities of the human heart and mind at the moments when the limits of individual fortitude and community cohesion face their greatest challenges."<sup>9</sup>

Through this process of internalizing the philosophical resonance of the above cited works and infusing my thesis with their foundational reasoning, my aim is to place my work on the intersection of Oral History and Human Rights as its rightful genre.

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*Notes:*

1. Francine D. Spang-Willis, *Navigating the Ethics of Oral History as a Cheyenne Woman*, Guest lecture in Oral History Method, Theory, and Interpretation, OHMA, Columbia University, New York, 15 September 2020. Recording in author's possession.
2. Nyssa Chow, *Power: Doing and Teaching Oral History from an Anti-Oppression Standpoint. Decolonizing Oral History*, Guest lecture, OHMA, Columbia University, New York, 14 October 2020.
3. Luisa Passerini, *Theoretical Perspectives on Memory and Subjectivity*, Guest lecture in Oral History Method, Theory, and Interpretation, OHMA, Columbia University, New York, 20 October 2020.
4. Montreal Holocaust Museum, *The History of the Holocaust Told by Survivors*, <https://museeholocauste.ca/en/>
5. Gunceta Singh Bhalla, *1947 Partition Archive*, <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org>
6. Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) Pages 1-6, Introduction
7. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, 1-6, Introduction
8. Carolyn L. Mears, *Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research: The Gateway Approach* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Page 7
9. Mark Cave (Editor) and Stephen M. Sloan (Editor), *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), Pages 1-14



### Chapter III: Why Call It A Genocide?

‘Genocide’ is an extremely loaded word. It implies different things to different people, depending on who is being accused of it and who is accusing.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines genocide as “the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group.”

But before I go into the question of why the large-scale massacre of the Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere in India in 1984 should be called a genocide, I would like to regurgitate what exactly happened between the time Mrs Indira Gandhi was shot at her official residence in New Delhi on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984, and the fading of her funeral pyre’s embers on the banks of river Yamuna on the night of 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1984.

Mrs Gandhi was shot at 9.15 AM on that Wednesday. She was declared dead by the doctors at 2.23 PM after an unsuccessful surgery to save her life. The official announcement was made on state broadcasters All India Radio and Doordarshan at 6 PM, after her son, Rajiv Gandhi, as well as the President of India, Giani Zail Singh, had returned to the capital from West Bengal state in eastern India and North Yemen, respectively.

That evening when President Zail Singh’s cavalcade was moving directly from Delhi’s Palam Airport to AIIMS where Mrs Gandhi’s body lay, it was intercepted and attacked

by Congress party's activists and supporters. While the President's military escort managed to drive him safely to his destination, his Press Secretary Tarlochan Singh (*read his Oral History interview in 'Making Meaning'*) had a miraculous escape and had to take a detour.

After seeing Mrs Gandhi's body, even the President had to face the wrath of protesting Congress activists when he was leaving AIIMS for the presidential palace to swear in Rajiv Gandhi as the new prime minister. Around that time, Sikhs had begun to be stopped and attacked near INA Market in south Delhi, a mile-and-a-half away from AIIMS, according to a report titled, '*Who Are The Guilty?*' prepared by the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) (*see Bibliography*).

The PUDR-PUCL report, or the 'black book' as it is widely called because of its stark black cover, was put together after a detailed survey of affected areas by fact-finding teams comprising academics, attorneys and activists. It was the first serious, civil society-led attempt to highlight the planned massacre of the Sikhs, and the deliberate inaction to stop it by the central, Congress party Government, which also controlled Delhi as a Union Territory. The first edition of the report, published in November 1984, was immediately lapped up by the concerned citizens. Its updated second edition, published as a 66-page booklet and priced at a mere Rupees 3 (US\$ 0.040), came out in December 1984 and continues to be regarded as a credible and timely effort to reveal the truth. It

certainly blew the lid off the role the Congress party leaders, including central ministers, had played in leading and inciting the mobs to kill the Sikhs.

These vested interests vitiated the atmosphere against the Sikhs by spreading rumours from Wednesday evening itself. There were mainly three rumours which were circulated: one, the Sikhs were distributing sweets and lighting lamps to celebrate Mrs Gandhi's death; two, a train full of Hindu dead bodies had arrived at Old Delhi Railway Station from Punjab; three, Sikhs had poisoned Delhi's drinking water. While the first rumour was highly exaggerated, the other two were patently false, as it turned out. But they added to the frenzy of the mobs. There is evidence that Delhi Police, too, peddled them through its public address systems and lent them credence.

In fact, Delhi's top brass discussed the security situation at the prime minister's house when doctors were still trying to save Mrs Gandhi's life at AIIMS. Present at this meeting were Delhi's Police Commissioner Subhash Tandon, Lieutenant Governor P.G. Gavai, Mrs Gandhi's political secretary and one of the two signatories to her will, M.L. Fotedar. A senior police officer present at the meeting suggested that the Army should be called out to prevent a holocaust but no one paid any attention.

So by Wednesday night, serious violence and arson against the Sikhs had broken out in various parts of Delhi. Panic-stricken citizens called up the police but they did not receive any help. According to Mr Tarlochan Singh, when the President's Secretariat started

receiving SOS calls, including from President's relatives, he woke up the President and apprised him of the situation. The President tried to talk to both the prime minister and the home minister on the phone but he was not able to reach them all through the night.

In other words, the President, who is also the supreme commander of the Indian armed forces, and who had sworn in Rajiv Gandhi as the new prime minister only a few hours earlier, could not contact his prime minister or home minister to suppress the violence against the Sikhs. He was told by the staff of the prime minister, as well as the home minister, that both were busy with preparations for the funeral of Mrs Gandhi. A number of senior Members of Parliament belonging to the opposition parties also anxiously reached out to the home minister. They were told that everything was under control.

The macabre dance of death and destruction continued all day and all night on Thursday, the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, Friday, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and much of Saturday, the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Reports of Sikhs being burnt alive through necklacing kept coming from crowded residential areas in East and West Delhi. After much dithering and delay, the government finally announced that the Army was being called out to assist the civil administration and curfew being imposed. But it started effectively patrolling the streets of Delhi only on the evening of Saturday, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, when a brigade strength of about 3,000 troopers, deputized to line up the route of Mrs Gandhi's funeral procession, became available to push back the mobs. However, sporadic incidents of stabbings, killings and arson continued to be reported from various parts of Delhi the entire week.

By 3<sup>rd</sup> November evening, over 50,000 Sikhs had moved into refugee camps for shelter. Delhi, at that time, had an estimated 500,000 Sikhs, about 7.5 percent of the total population of the city. The temporary shelters included many *Gurudwaras* or Sikh temples, which the government refused to recognise as camps and denied relief until the Delhi High Court intervened through an order on a petition.

Newspaper reports named Congress party leaders as well as Congress Members of Parliament, ministers in Rajiv Gandhi's government, state legislators and corporators, who led and incited the mobs everywhere. They showed up at various police stations, too, to secure the release of their party workers and supporters who had been detained for looting goods from Sikh homes and outlets.

In one instance, veteran journalist and author Shekhar Gupta, who then worked for *India Today* magazine, wrote in 2018: "You want to know if the Congress, at least at the local levels, was involved? I will repeat some stories I documented then: I witnessed a scene created by local Congress leader Dharam Dass Shastri (In 1993, the Jain-Aggarwal committee recommended registering a case against him, and in 2005, the Nanavati commission<sup>1</sup> found "credible evidence" against him, following which the Union home ministry ordered the CBI to reopen the case. But nothing happened, and Shastri is now dead.) at the Karol Bagh Police Station as he protested against the arrest of Congressmen caught with property looted from Sikh homes. Recover the property for sure, he said, but why arrest? They are "not criminals"."<sup>2</sup>

Senior journalist and author Sanjay Suri, who was a Crime Reporter with the *Indian Express* newspaper when Mrs Gandhi was assassinated, was also a witness to that scene.

Suri has written in his 2015 book, ‘1984: *The Anti-Sikh Violence and After*’ (see *Bibliography*), that the

“quarrel at Karol Bagh brought its own trauma, and it remains disturbing to this day. It was the trauma of witnessing a deliberately ordered abandonment of policing. It was one thing to have witnessed lawlessness on the streets, but another to see it followed up by orders from a top police officer to reverse a rare enforcement of law...The government had emphatically failed to protect Sikhs, at the political level through its decisions and indecisions, and at the administrative level through the inaction of the police...I believe Rajiv Gandhi carried prime responsibility for most of the deaths. He simply did not do what it would have taken to prevent them.”

Suri had a narrow escape from a gang of killers while on a reporting assignment along with three colleagues in the first week of November. He later filed affidavits that included eyewitness accounts relating to two Congress Members of Parliament, Dharam Das Shastri and Kamal Nath, and confronted Rajiv Gandhi at an election rally on this issue. He also testified multiple times before commissions of inquiry set up to investigate the massacre of the Sikhs but very little came of these.

The PUDR-PUCL report referred to the massacre of the Sikhs as a ‘holocaust that took place in Delhi in the first week of November’. It named several Congress politicians who operated at different levels in the party’s hierarchy or had roles in the local administration and government: HKL Bhagat, Minister of State for Information & Broadcasting; Babu Ram Sharma, Bhagat’s henchman and Delhi Municipal Corporation Member; Sajjan Kumar, Member of Parliament; Lalit Makan, trade union leader and Delhi Metropolitan

Councillor; Dharam Das Shastri, Member of Parliament; Jagdish Tytler, Member of Parliament; Mahendra, Delhi Metropolitan Councillor; Mangat Ram Singal, Shastri's henchman and Delhi Municipal Corporation Member; Dr Ashok Kumar Gupta, Delhi Municipal Corporation Member; Sukhan Lal Sood, Delhi Metropolitan Councillor; Jagdish Chander Tokas, Delhi Municipal Corporation Member; Ishwar Singh, Delhi Municipal Corporation Member; Balwant Khokhar, Youth Congress leader; Faiz Mohammad, Youth Congress leader; Ratan, Youth Congress leader; Satbir Singh, Youth Congress leader.

Veteran BBC journalists Mark Tully and Satish Jacob have written in their 1985 book, *'Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle'* (see Bibliography) that

“gangs of hooligans, often led by local Congress Party workers, roamed the streets, killing, burning and looting at will. In some cases, the police actively joined in the mayhem, in others, they turned a blind eye. Reports of Sikh railway passengers being butchered were ominous reminders of the holocaust of Partition.”

Tully further wrote that

“Satish Jacob stumbled on one of the worst massacres which did take place in Delhi. On Friday, 2 November, he crossed the income-tax office bridge over River Jumna and drove to Trilokpuri, a sprawling new working-class housing area. A small group of agitated residents told him to go to Block 32. They said, ‘Something dreadful has happened.’ When he reached the block, the first thing he saw was three charred bodies laid out on the verandah of a small brick house. As he walked down the narrow lane, he found bodies on the verandahs of almost every house. They were obviously Sikhs.”

Block 32 of Trilokpuri was, indeed, the epicentre of the pogrom. Four hundred Sikhs were killed and burnt here during those three days. ‘Almost all Sikh males were killed,’

according to the Nanavati Commission in 2005. In their seminal 2007 work, *‘When A Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and its Aftermath’*, the incisive and indefatigable duo, senior journalist & author Manoj Mitta and Supreme Court Senior Advocate H.S. Phoolka (*see Bibliography*), have written that

“it is remarkable that, even in a country inured to mass violence, the worst ever massacre in a single block or colony anywhere in India should take place right in its capital. Yet, the Indian state has little to show by way of enforcing the rule of law for a crime of such magnitude. The police registered just one case on 3 November for the entire Trilokpuri massacre, covering all the murders that had taken place over three days. The omnibus case made little progress for over a decade till a conscientious trial judge, SN Dhingra, split it into seventy cases in 1995, in an abortive attempt to uphold the majesty of the law.”

“None of the police officers accountable for the Block 32 massacre – SHO Soor Veer Singh Tyagi, Deputy Commissioner of Police Sewa Dass and Additional Commissioner of Police Hukam Chand Jatav – were penalised, whether in criminal cases or through departmental proceedings. All of them went on to get promotions, more than once, in their careers. Their crowning glory was that the Nanavati Commission did not indict any of the police personnel associated with east Delhi, despite being the worst affected district in the carnage. As a result, Sewa Dass retired ‘honourably’ as special commissioner of Delhi Police, almost at the top of the hierarchy, within three months of the publication of the Nanavati report.”

“As for the politicians involved in the Block 32 massacre, the Nanavati Commission indicted them in 2005: ‘It appears that Shri (HKL) Bhagat, Rampal Saroj and Dr Ashok (Gupta), who were local Congress(I) leaders, had taken active part in the anti-Sikh riots in this area.’ But since they had all been ‘acquitted in the criminal cases filed against them, the Commission does not recommend any further action against them, including Mr Bhagat in view of his physical and mental condition.’ The paperwork was complete even if all the big culprits got away.”

Dr Veena Das, a renowned author and Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University at Baltimore, Maryland, USA, worked for over a year with the



survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in west Delhi. She is widely regarded as a 'biographer' of violence because of her extensive work on the subject. She has written in her 2007 book, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, (see *Bibliography*), that

“Mangolpuri, a colony adjoining Sultanpuri, was mentioned in the newspapers for the first time on November 4<sup>th</sup>. A report prepared by four university professors (including myself) published in the *Indian Express* on November 11<sup>th</sup> gave the first full account of violence that had continued in peripheral places like Sultanpuri until November 3<sup>rd</sup> and showed that there was a strong element of organization and of involvement of prominent Congress politicians in the riots.”

Dr Das cites the report of a voluntary group, Citizens for Democracy, which gave its findings after interviewing hundreds of victims:

“On the night of 31<sup>st</sup> October, meetings of Congress functionaries were held in different parts of Delhi in which every act was planned in meticulous detail. It was decided there that on the morning of November 1<sup>st</sup> between 9 AM and 11 AM, attacks would be launched on Sikhs simultaneously in various parts of the city. The attacks came in four phases: first, *Gurudwaras* were attacked; then Sikh houses were looted and set ablaze; next, men were humiliated by shearing their hair and shaving off their beards, and then they were killed; finally, women were molested and raped, and some were killed. The purpose of this carnage was to get the sympathy vote of the Hindus to win upcoming elections.”

Genocide is not a nice word. But nor is the spilling of human blood a nice act. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a genocide is the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group.

So, was the killing of the Sikhs deliberate? Of course, it was. The Hindus were not killed, the Muslims were not killed, the Christians were not killed, only the Sikhs were killed.

All survivor accounts and evidence bear this out.

But was it systematic? Certainly, it was. All the evidence presented in the last 37 years by various eyewitnesses bears out this aspect. The murderers carried voter lists to identify Sikh dwellings, alongside firearms, sticks, petrol, diesel, kerosene, ammonium nitrate and old automobile tyres for ‘necklacing’ the Sikhs. The killings had a distinct pattern. There was a method in the madness. And the police or administration made no effort to stop the massacre.

But does it amount to extermination? Yes, without question. One Sikh life was snuffed out every minute on an average, for 72 hours between 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984 and 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1984.

But are the Sikhs an ethnic or national group? Yes, they are an ethnic and religious minority in India and constitute about two percent of the country’s 1.36 billion population. They formed roughly the same percentage of population back in 1984.

So how does the UN define a genocide? The ‘UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect’ states in its guidance document<sup>3</sup> titled, *When to Refer to A*

*Situation as 'Genocide'*, that the “legal definition of genocide is precise and includes an element that is often hard to prove, the element of ‘intent’.”

By that yardstick, the ‘intent’ of the then ruling Congress party of India was clear: to teach the Sikhs a lesson because two of their kin had killed their top leader. This intent has been repeatedly determined in the proceedings of three commissions of inquiry (both judicial and non-judicial), nine committees and three SITs over last 37 years.

The UN guidance document also states that “although genocide has been labelled ‘the crime of crimes’, it must be stressed that there is no established ‘hierarchy of gravity’ of international crimes.” So, the intensity or number of dead do not count for much.

But does the Indian State acknowledge the violence against the Sikhs as a genocide? Yes, now it does. Home Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, in the Congress party’s main opposition, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), who is now the country’s Defence Minister, emphatically said on 26 December 2014 that “it was not a riot, it was a genocide.”<sup>4</sup>

Singh also tweeted his assertion that day: “The anti-Sikh riots of 1984 was a genocide. Several persons who had a role in the carnage are yet to be punished.”<sup>5</sup> His cabinet colleague, then finance minister of India, Arun Jaitley, echoed this view three months before his death and termed the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 a genocide on 10 May 2019<sup>6</sup>.

The BJP's assertions definitely merit a comment. The party is accused of similar conduct in 2002—also in 2020 in Delhi, but that is another story—when a large number of Muslims were killed in Gujarat state under the chief ministership of Narendra Modi. He is India's prime minister now and more authoritarian and polarising than any of his predecessors. Even though he has been exonerated in the 2002 cases by the courts, the mud has stuck.

In that backdrop, one can argue that the pot has called the cattle black, and the BJP has dubbed the violence against the Sikhs a genocide for political expediency and to discredit its arch rival, the Congress party. Also because the BJP's assertions, that its heart beats for the Sikhs, are not followed up by any action of consequence on the ground that can provide succour to the 1984 survivors and put balm on their wounds.

So it is likely that the BJP government in India has peddled the genocide pitch to haul up the Congress party over the coals. But this could not have been done without considerable thought at the top level of the party as well as the government. Dr Das elucidates the 'naming' debate and quotes Atal Behari Vajpayee, India's benevolent prime minister in 2002 from the BJP, while speaking at the All-Party Panel on Gujarat Riots on 16 March 2002: "You should not forget that the use of such expressions brings a bad name to the country, and it could be used against India in international platforms."

Considerations of bad image of the government and the country have a legitimate counter argument: nations and their governments should not allow organised violence under their watch in the first place if they are so worried about such sully. So, as far as the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 is concerned, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and the world has seen it already. And accountability, in any case, can't be given a short-shrift.

When the testimonies and accounts of the 1984 victims are examined against the touchstone of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>7</sup>, to which India is a signatory since 1948 (even though it is not legally binding), it is evident that a large number of covenants of this charter have been disregarded.

More specifically, successive Indian governments have violated the UN pledge, in first allowing and abetting the violence against the Sikhs to take place, and then failing to deliver justice and punish the perpetrators, as below:

The Indian government violated Article 1 which assures freedom and equality in dignity and rights. All the actions of the marauders and murderers go against the spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2 has been violated to the extent that the government of the day in 1984 allowed some of its citizens, as well as lawmakers, to discriminate against the Sikh community on the basis of race and religion.

Article 3 was violated in its entirety and the minority community was denied the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 5 was violated to the extent that the then Indian government subjected its citizens to torture, cruelty, and inhuman and degrading treatment by “necklacing” the Sikhs with old tyres and burning them after dousing inflammables.

The Indian government violated Article 7 to the extent that it denied protection against violent assaults to the Sikhs. Also, it discriminated against them and incited such discrimination by allowing violent mobs to have a free run for at least three days without prevailing upon them.

It violated Article 8 by first delaying an effective remedy by way of an inquiry to investigate the violations of fundamental rights. It further aggravated the infringement by deliberately and maliciously skewing the terms of reference to prevent an adverse outcome. The judiciary of the country, too, failed its citizens in dispensing timely and efficacious justice and perpetuating and presiding over inordinate delays.

The Indian government violated Article 13 to the extent that it impeded the freedom of residence, and allowed that impedance to take place, to the Sikh victims in their homes by causing their destruction.

It violated Article 17 to the extent that it allowed, through coercion and design, arbitrary depriving of property to the Sikhs.

It violated Article 18 to the extent that it temporarily denied the Sikhs freedom to practice their religion. It forced the community to choose between life and religious identity, and forced dwarfing of that identity by cutting their hair against their edicts.

The Indian government violated Article 25 to the extent that it denied the right to a standard of living to the widows and children of the 1984 Genocide, by denying them suitable housing, medical care and subsistence, including the right to security.

So collectively, it violated one third of the charter and still faced no consequences at the high table of the comity of nations.

A question has repeatedly been raised about the widespread characterization of large-scale violence against the Sikhs as a riot. This requires some probing.

The origin, and occasion of use, of the term ‘riot’ in the Indian context has been splendidly explained by two Delhi-based professors of sociology, Dr Roma Chatterji and Dr Deepak Mehta<sup>8</sup>:

“In both literary and academic representations on Hindu-Muslim violence in India, the term riot—a noun with the force of a verb—is thought to be an exhaustive description of communal warfare. The theory of the riot excludes individual subjectivities as much as it argues for the anonymous, random and irrational character of violence.”

“The communal riot in Bombay as it exists in the colonial archive can be traced to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a prototype of how riots are to be ordered in their reportage, the discursive structure of the reports exercises a formative influence on the writing of the Hindu-Muslim riots... These reports stabilize a language which provides the lens through which communal violence is understood.”

“The reports to the government of India and press communiques issued by the director of information formulated the riot through a series of statements. These statements are important not because they allow us to analyse the relationship between the author and what he says, but because they established a template authorized by the government that explained how Hindu-Muslim violence could be meaningfully understood.”

“The riot, thus, became indexical but in a way that it was addressed in terms of administrative and legal criteria, not as a political expression marking the birth of new social actors. Through the riot, a future was set in play, even as Hindu-Muslim relations were located within a historical tradition of animosity. Also, the riot prevention response established the temporality of the riot—a linear sequence that would, henceforth, be written as causes, outbreaks and commissions of enquiry... Having accepted the riot as an administrative problem, its writing in postcolonial India has been informed by the same structure—cause, outbreak and commission of enquiry.”

Dr Das cites political scientist Paul Brass who argues that neither ‘riot’ nor ‘pogrom’ effectively capture the dynamics of most violent occurrences involving large crowds.

Though the presumption is that riots are spontaneous acts of violence in response to a



provocative event directed against an ethnic, religious or linguistic group, whereas pogroms are organized events of violence carried out through the agencies of the state, the boundaries between these are increasingly blurred. Dr Das further says that

“naming the violence does not reflect semantic struggle alone—it reflects the point at which the body of language becomes indistinguishable from that of the world; the act of naming constitutes a performative utterance.”

It is quite evident that it was the template of ‘riots’ which was put to use, first by the civil servants, and then by the media, the society and the judiciary to characterize the violence against the Sikhs. But inherent in that use was a misrepresentation, or mischaracterization, of what actually happened between the Sikhs and the goons unleashed by the Congress party.

A riot consists of a violent conflict which involves at least two sides. It is not a riot if one side is at the receiving end for the most part and loses 5,000 members of its community over three consecutive days. Add to it the element of planning and use of the machinery of the state, namely the police and elected public representatives—ministers, MPs, corporators—and the deduction is obvious: it was not a riot but a genocide.

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*Notes:*

1. Nanavati Commission was a one-man inquiry commission headed by retired Supreme Court of India judge, Justice G.T. Nanavati. It was appointed in May 2000 by the BJP-led NDA government headed by prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, to investigate the ‘killing of innocent Sikhs’ in 1984. It submitted its two-volume report in February 2005 (*see Bibliography*)
2. Shekhar Gupta, *Congress was involved in 1984 anti-Sikh riots – I saw & reported it*, (New Delhi: ThePrint, 2018), <https://theprint.in/opinion/congress-was-involved-in-1984-anti-sikh-riots-i-saw-reported-it/105745/>

3. UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *When to Refer to a Situation as Genocide*, Guidance Note 1, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/GuidanceNote-When%20to%20refer%20to%20a%20situation%20as%20genocide.pdf>
4. Press Trust of India, *Anti-Sikh riots of 1984 were a genocide, several persons yet to be punished: Rajnath*, (New Delhi: Firstpost, 2014), <https://www.firstpost.com/india/anti-sikh-riots-1984-genocide-several-persons-yet-punished-rajnath-2017149.html>
5. Rajnath Singh on Twitter in 2014, <https://twitter.com/rajnathsingh/status/548528336364769281>
6. Arun Jaitley on Twitter in 2019, <https://twitter.com/arunjaitley/status/1126710702255640576>
7. UN, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
8. Roma Chatterji and Deepak Mehta, *Living With Violence: An Anthropology of Events and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2007), Pages 28-34, Chapter II: Documents and Testimony: Violence, Witnessing, and Subjectivity in the Bombay Riots – 1992-1993.

#### Chapter IV: Making Meaning

By all accounts, including the ones that I have personally recorded over the past one year in Delhi using the life story approach of Oral History, the survivors of the 1984 Sikh Genocide are a resilient lot. They are sensitive, sentimental, tranquil and tenacious in equal measure. Most of them have accepted their circumstances of the past three-and-a-half-decades as the will of God. Most of them have also resolved to honour the memory of their loved ones by continuing to fight for justice and restore dignity to their dead.

In this chapter, I'm presenting excerpts of my interviews with eight survivors. These follow their brief profiles.

**KIRPAL SINGH, 47:** In the early '90s, he was a teenage teacher of *tabla* (Indian drum), an unusually young trainer of the musical instrument. His repertoire included a famous patriotic song written by the legendary poet, Mohammed Iqbal, '*Saare Jahan Se Accha, Hindustan Hamara*' (Oh better than the whole world, is my India). His singing had made him stoic and centered, particularly imbibing of religious hymns, which he knew by heart. His equanimity had completely camouflaged the contradiction in the meaning of that song and realities of his experience.

After all, India had wrecked his childhood and snatched away his father, Arjan Singh, in the most barbaric way, when he was tender at 10 in 1984. The storm was still brewing in his bonnet, triggering anger and bitterness, loss and longing. “I understood the contradiction, that feeling did cross my mind back then,” Kirpal reflects. But his response, punctuated by a survival instinct to become self-reliant, pushed back those feelings.

Kirpal was the fourth of six children, after two elder sisters and a brother. He studied in fourth grade in a nearby school in Sultanpuri in west Delhi. His lower middle-class life was beautiful, he says. He had no worry in the world. His father doted on him. He threw tantrums and had every wish, for mostly toys, fulfilled. That is, until his world went topsy-turvy in the aftermath of Mrs Indira Gandhi’s assassination.

He initially took refuge in a non-Sikh Punjabi family’s home nearby, after mobs of blood-thirsty men had started randomly killing the Sikhs around him. He remained cooped up in an upper floor attic for three days, without food and water because he couldn’t get out to go to the washroom for fear of being found out and killed. “It felt like being in a cave,” he recalls. But soon the host family began to fear an attack for offering shelter to Sikhs.

So on his hosts’ advice, his and his elder brother’s long hair were cut short to mask his Sikh identity. Consequently, he survived and was moved to a refugee camp by the Army,

where he stayed along with his family for a few weeks. His house had been burnt to cinders, so he had nothing to go back to. He spent the next two to three years moving – from the refugee camp to his maternal uncle’s house, then to Ludhiana in Punjab, and finally to his current home in the widows’ colony – Tilak Vihar in west Delhi.

His education was interrupted. He was too old to resume school where he had left it and too desperate to start earning to support his family. So he joined an academy started by a charitable organization in Tilak Vihar to learn typing in Punjabi language. He additionally joined *tabla* classes there. And he moved his formal education to an open school. Within a couple of years of training, he became a typing apprentice and then contract worker with the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC), and a *tabla* tutor. He has since learnt the use of computers and become a regular employee at DSGMC.

Now he is married and has two children. His 22-year-old daughter has completed her graduation and married last year. And his son, a computer science enthusiast, is still studying. Even after all these years of trauma and tragedy, Kirpal hasn’t forgotten the value of community. “When people in the neighborhood live in closed proximity with each other for many years in an inter-dependent way, their bonds grow,” he says.

Is he bitter about the past? “Yes,” he says, “but I keep it within. Whatever I have endured on my being, will only end with my body. It is so deeply ingrained in my heart and soul. I

cannot leave it, nor can I forget it. I cannot even live with it. But I am more disappointed with the judiciary of our country for denying us justice,” he says.

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH KIRPAL SINGH:

*“My father left at 5 AM on Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1984, for Raghbir Nagar with my brother. They left at that early hour thinking there would be no rioters on the streets as most people are sleeping at that time. And they borrowed a cycle from one of the Gujarati families in the lane. This cycle had a Muslim name inscribed on it. It was dark at that hour as winter had set in. My father put my brother at the front of the cycle and peddled off.*

*They crossed Sultanpuri and reached Mangolpuri, which was on the way to Raghbir Nagar. They were crossing the Mangolpuri Industrial Area, which is still there. There, a group of 10-12 persons were sitting around a fire they had lit to keep themselves warm. They were the same people who were killing the Sikhs during the day and into the night. They were watching the movements of all passersby from a vantage point at a crossing. They were clearly looking out for Sikhs and their vehicles. They were armed with swords, knives, spears. The fire was providing them warmth as well as light.*

*My father had covered himself with a wraparound from head down. He had covered my brother also similarly. So when they crossed this group of people, they raised their*

*suspicion and were stopped. My father, before he left, had removed his turban and opened his hair and pushed them towards his back. And he had covered his head with a scarf to escape being recognized as a Sikh.*

*This group questioned my father and brother about who they were. My brother told them that they were Muslims. He showed them the Muslim name on the bicycle. But they insisted that these men were Sikhs. Prior to leaving for Raghbir Nagar, my father had tutored my brother to maintain that he was a Muslim, that this was his bicycle and even had his name on it, and that my father was his neighbor whom he was going to drop somewhere.*

*So when my brother insisted to this group that he was a Muslim, the marauders told him to go back and bring his father along. He broke down because he was also a small child after all. He was 12 years old then. So they shooed him off angrily with the bicycle and detained my father. We don't know what they did to him or how they killed him. My brother came back and told us what had transpired. So we figured that our father had been held down by the killers and put to death."*

**PRITAM KAUR, 81:** Mrs. Pritam Kaur, Kirpal Singh's mother, and her parental family moved to Delhi at the time of India's Partition in 1947. She had seen a lot of displacement and turmoil at that time. After she got married and settled down with her

husband Arjan Singh, a tailor, her life had sufficiently stabilized and begun to bloom. Singh was a skilled and hardworking man. More importantly, he was a caring human being, she says.

Since she was not lettered, she fell into the traditional Indian role of a woman in the 1960s and became a housewife. This division of responsibilities clicked for them: he worked long hours and earned money, while she raised the family and took care of their house. His skill and polite behavior brought in regular work and a steady income. Over time, they had six children – four boys and two girls – and a happy household.

Arjan Singh was extremely aware of what was going on around him. He was also very active in the local community and regularly reached out to those who needed help. They thought their fortunes had turned when they bought their small, 25-yard, Sultanpuri house in west Delhi. He began to expand his work and involved his family. He also successfully created a small boutique in a part of their house. Everyone knew him.

But that widespread familiarity in the neighborhood cost him his life in the end. Singh got to know early on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984 that Mrs Indira Gandhi had been shot by her Sikh bodyguards. He was advised by his well-wishers to either lie low inside the house or move out to a safer place for some time. He, like thousands of others, was confident that no harm would come to him and his family because they had not killed the prime minister.



So when the Congress party politicians started mobilizing their supporters to attack the Sikhs, he had very little time to move to safety. Mrs Kaur says he knew that he had also become a target. His first instinct at that time was to send his wife and children away to safe houses. He managed to make phone calls and disperse them. Initially, he also hid himself in a friend's house but word about his presence there got out and he had to leave.

Even so, he was sure he would be able to move to safety. Singh chose the early morning cover of darkness for his escape to his brother-in-law's house a little distance away. Mrs Kaur, who was 44 years old then, remembers her last conversation with him before he stepped out on a bicycle with one of his sons. "He said, 'If I survive, I'll come back and I'm yours. Else, God will take care of me as well as you'. He said, 'If I survive, all of us will get back together again. But if I get into the hands of the mob, then I don't know'."

The castle Mrs Kaur had built with her husband over the years crashed with his departure. In one stroke of fate, she lost him, her home as well as their livelihood. She had six children to feed and educate and no financial stow. She has struggled for 37 years for a life of dignity and still doesn't know how she will secure her basic needs and medication for the new month. She looks at a portrait of her husband on her wall, sheds a few tears and goes off to sleep at the end of each day in the hope of a new dawn, which has been elusive.

## EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MRS PRITAM KAUR:

*“My husband didn’t take anything along. The bicycle belonged to a Muslim neighbor. My son brought the bicycle back. He came back and told me, ‘Mommy, Daddy was waylaid by some men near the crossing. So, Daddy told me to go back. He said, I’ll come back if I survive, else, you take care of your mother and brothers’. I don’t know what happened after that.*

*So later when my daughters went to the mortuary at Raghbir Nagar and looked at the dead bodies, my elder daughter recognized her father from his feet. His face was burnt, so there was no way to recognize him from the face. His clothes were also burnt. There was another Sikh there. She told him that it was her father’s dead body. She had followed his bicycle into the mortuary. He forbid her from saying anything. He told her that there was a cop standing nearby. He would shoot us. So it is best to leave quietly. Don’t turn back and look at your Daddy now. So she left the place and came away.*

*My daughter never returned to Sultanpuri. For two years, she didn’t even enter that colony. She didn’t want to go. Both sisters didn’t go there. Nor did my other children. We went off to Punjab. Came back from there. Even then they didn’t go to Sultanpuri. They said they were not going to go there because that colony took away the life of their father.*

*I sold that house in Sultanpuri, like, dirt cheap. Its sale was permitted by the government. I had the choice of selling it or returning it to the housing authority of the government. So I chose to dispose that house off and take this one for living in.*

*A local non-profit here had advised me to sell that house and marry my daughter off as soon as possible. So I sold it for less than fifty thousand Rupees (US\$ 671), I think. Maybe even less. And I married off my elder daughter. She was already 20 years old then. I married her off three years after the 1984 violence, in 1987. There was a lot of violence taking place at that time.*

*My husband had a kirpan (pocket dagger) on his person for self-defense, though, like all other Sikhs. He said 'I will try to save my life as far as possible'. But his captors threw a tyre around his neck from the front, doused him with petrol and then set him on fire. That's how they killed all the Sikh men. They didn't kill them with knives or daggers. Else, do you think the Sikhs could die that easily without a fight? They are well-built, have big hearts, and are brave.*

*My husband was highly skilled in four crafts. He was educated. He was a nice man. He had a status in the society we lived in. He was the local secretary and handled the affairs of four neighborhood colonies. There was a large signboard outside our house which had his name and title. The government had provided it. In fact, it was installed on the orders*

*of Mrs Indira Gandhi. That is why he had to leave the house. Everyone knew about him and his whereabouts. Otherwise he wasn't going to leave.*

*There was another Sikh man, Raj Singh. He was the local president of the colony. He lived in 'D' Block. The mob killed him first. Then they set out for my husband. That's why he had to leave. But he died because he left the house, because he feared an assault. He died because the mob got him. He thought, may be, he would survive if he left. But luck was not on his side. He couldn't save his life. I console myself by looking at his photograph. I cry my heart out. I reassure myself and carry on."*

**POPRI KAUR, 71:** Mrs Popri Kaur was born in a poor family in Teetarka Bolni village in Alwar District of Rajasthan state. Her parents married her off at a very young age in the nearby, Mandwapur Village, in the same District. She moved to Delhi with her husband, Saroop Singh, to work and earn a livelihood when their village home was ravaged in a flash flood. He was a carpenter and repaired wooden cots. She mostly managed the house. They worked and earned enough money to buy a small plot in Sultanpuri in west Delhi and then secured a loan of Rupees 2,000 to build a one-room house on it.

They settled down there and had six children, including a daughter. Ironically, the house she lost in the violence after Mrs Indira Gandhi's assassination in November 1984, was

allotted to her family by Mrs Gandhi under a housing scheme for the poor. Even the home loan they secured was sanctioned by Mrs Gandhi. “When her death was confirmed, we began to mourn it by squatting on the floor in front of our house,” she says. “The neighbours joined in; they were all beneficiaries of the housing scheme she had started.”

Early on 1<sup>st</sup> November, the family was warned about the violence against the Sikhs which had broken out elsewhere and advised to go into hiding. They didn’t pay much attention to it and only moved indoors. Trouble began that morning when the local *Gurudwara* (Sikh temple) was set on fire by a mob. She stepped out to check what was going on when she heard the commotion. She bolted her house from outside but didn’t lock it. She rues that decision to this day: “I wish I had locked it, my husband would still be around.”

When she stepped out, she says she saw five Sikh men being killed by Congress MP Sajjan Kumar’s goons. They began to search all the unlocked houses to take out the Sikhs. “They took out my husband also in front of me and broke his legs with bamboo sticks. They then put him in their truck and took him away. When I saw him being assaulted, I sprawled myself over him to protect him. But they picked me up and threw me aside. I fainted,” she recalls tearfully. That’s the last she saw of him.

Mrs Kaur, who looks stout and strong, vividly remembers an intrusion into her home at the height of the violence during the first week of November. “It was a south Indian vendor who used to come to our street every week to sell celery and other items.

Emboldened by the marauders, he broke into my house and started to pick up the utensils. I was so incensed that I, along with my sister-in-law, caught hold of him and broke his legs with the wooden laundry stick and immobilized him,” she says. “How dare he?”

Mrs Kaur’s children survived because two Muslim brothers in her neighbourhood had taken them to their homes and hidden them. Also, she had spread the long hair of her boys open and made braids so that they looked like girls. They remained ensconced for two days without food and water because that would necessitate going to the loo; they couldn’t get out for fear of detection and death. They were finally rescued by the Army and shifted, first to the local police station, and then to the Rani Bagh refugee camp.

With the refugee camp as a temporary base for her family, Mrs Kaur visited each Delhi hospital to look for her husband, dead or alive, but her search didn’t yield any result. “I checked every ward in every hospital to find him but he wasn’t there. I, then, determined in my heart that he was no longer alive,” she says.

There were scary moments in the refugee camp too. She and other refugees were surprised when they learnt that the same Congress MP, Sajjan Kumar, who had led the killers, had sent a truck load of food for them. They couldn’t believe this benevolence. So they insisted that the food was fed to a stray dog first. The dog consumed the food and died, she says. The driver of the food truck fled and was chased unsuccessfully.

The tragic killing of her husband and other events of that time changed the course of her life for the worse. She had no one to turn to for help and six children to feed. She had been pushed into penury. She says she cried so much that she spoiled her vision. She also developed blood-pressure and seizures. "I didn't have enough money to cover my children, so they shivered in their shorts in the winter," she says. Some voluntary organizations stepped up to help and she gradually settled down again. She also filed affidavits in various courts to secure justice for her husband, but nothing came of them.

It has been a rough life for Mrs Kaur. She had hardly had any education, so she could only muster a peon's job in a school for Rupees 250 a month. She says she considered committing suicide, but the thought of leaving six orphaned children behind prevented her from taking that step. Over the past 37 years, she has lost two sons, besides the desire to live. She is there but not there. "What does anyone expect from a woman who has seen what I have seen? Five Sikhs being killed as animals, some necklaced with tyres to their painful end, lack of care, lack of justice. I'm a human being after all. How much can I take? The events of 1984 continue to haunt me; I as well as my children, have flashes of fear even now."

"Yes, when I look back at that period, I bless the two Muslim brothers and their families in every breath I take for saving the lives of my children. They have strengthened my belief that the Protector is bigger than the Destroyer," she says.

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MRS POPRI KAUR:

*“What they did with us was extremely brutal. What Sajjan Kumar did with us was very brutal. My husband would have stayed on safely indoors and would not have died if Sajjan Kumar had not come. Sajjan Kumar only killed him. All the persons in that mob were his men, they belonged to his village. They killed my husband. I personally saw them killing five men in their vehicle. They were slaughtered like animals and dumped.*

*My young son Wazir also saw them. And he said, ‘Mummy, they are going to kill us similarly.’ I said, ‘No, son, they won’t kill you because your uncle is sitting here to protect you’. And our Muslim neighbor told him to get inside, away from the door. There is a general belief that Muslims are the enemies of the Sikhs. But our Muslim neighbor was not our enemy, he was our friend, he was a nice man. We had two Muslim neighbours, one inside the lane and the other on the main road. They were brothers. Both cooperated with us and helped us. Others in the neighborhood also helped us. They never allowed anyone to enter the lane and kill anyone. That is how my children survived.*

*But they took my husband away in a vehicle. They searched the houses for the Sikhs. And he was sitting inside. The others had scattered away to save their lives. I don’t know how and where they took him. I felt unconscious because they picked me up and forcefully threw me on the ground when I sprawled myself over him to protect him. They could have*



*killed me also. Then what could I have done. They would have taken me along too. That is how they killed my husband.*

*My neighbor and I went and searched for him in every single hospital, Hindu Rao, Safdarjung, AIIMS. I searched every single floor, every single ward. I thought he could be lying abandoned somewhere since the mob was breaking the limbs of all the Sikhs first. I thought, may be, someone could have taken him to the hospital for treatment. But I could not find him. He wasn't there.*

*Then I went to the Mangolpuri Police Station. They showed us photos of burnt bodies and told us to identify him. How can anyone identify a person from looking at such photos? I couldn't find him. My neighbor and I spent three to four days in the hospitals to search for him. I was locking up my kids inside and going. I told them to stay indoors, pee and poop inside but not step out. He was nowhere to be found. I searched the refugee camps, too, which were set up by the Army. We made enquiries everywhere. We were so baffled.”*

**GOPI KAUR, 66:** At the age of 66, Mrs Gopi Kaur is a frail frame of femininity with the firmness of resolve of a field marshal. She looks older than her years, owing to health issues related to heart, knees and eyesight, that she has developed worrying and weeping. Quite understandably. She lost her husband, Hotu Singh, a truck driver, in the Sikh

Genocide of 1984, besides 35 other family members – brothers, cousins, uncles. She still bears the trauma and scars of what she has endured in 1984 and subsequently.

Mrs Kaur was born in an agricultural family in Sikri in Rajasthan state, and also grew up there. She moved to Sultanpuri in west Delhi after her marriage and lived there for more than 15 years. She and her husband raised a family of five children, including three daughters. She says her husband was very protective about her and didn't let her step out alone for fear of harm. But he made time for his family and took them out every Sunday, including to the *Gurudwara* (Sikh temple) for prayers.

On that fateful morning of Thursday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984, she tried to protect her husband when the mob entered her street. She says they were led by Congress MP Sajjan Kumar. She pleaded with him with folded hands to spare her husband. She asked him what he had done to earn his wrath. He ignored her pleas and just said, 'kill the Sikhs, they are snakes and will bite again if they survive'. She has testified against him before the courts. He is serving a life term now, but she wants nothing less than death by hanging for him.

“They burnt my husband after pouring petrol on him in front of me. He didn't kill Mrs Indira Gandhi. We had no connection whatsoever with her murder. Why were we targeted? I want the same punishment for Sajjan Kumar. He and his family should feel the same degree of pain that I and my family have been subjected to,” she says. “I'm alive now only to see that happen.”

After her husband was burnt to death and house looted and set on fire, she was moved to the Rani Bagh refugee camp in north-west Delhi. She stayed there for about a week and then returned to her burnt house, unlike other widows of 1984. "I cleaned it up and started living there again. We arranged a prayer service for my husband in which everyone took part. I didn't depend on the food and other household articles which were being handed out by voluntary organizations. I didn't want to live on doles," she says.

But her life had been totally uprooted. She faced the same circumstances other widows faced. There were children to feed and raise and no source of livelihood and no one to turn to. So she sent off her children to her brother's place in east Delhi. He was a reader of religious scriptures and had survived an attack with injuries in Gandhi Nagar. And she started scouting for a job, which was hard to come by because she was illiterate.

She finally took up a peon's job and worked there for over a decade, till she retired. She also moved into a one-bedroom flat in Tilak Vihar which was allotted to her by the government, like most other widows. But life was hard. She constantly faced insults and ignominy at her workplace, which still echo in her heart. Also, her children couldn't study and were forced to take up odd jobs to survive.

There is no court or police station in Delhi where she hasn't testified to secure justice for her husband and family. She doesn't want to give up her pursuit, even though her power to comprehend has receded and energy levels have declined. She draws solace from her

grandchildren who have received a reasonably good education. One of her granddaughters has completed her MA programme and she is very proud of her.

The family holds an annual prayer for her husband now. “We hold a memorial service every year, even if we don’t have anything to eat in the house,” she says. “We also donate one-tenth from my family’s income in his name, as ordained by the First Sikh Master, Guru Nanak. But I am haunted by those images of my husband burning outside my house. I can’t sleep. My heart is full of sorrow.”

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MRS GOPI KAUR:

*“In the morning, we were all sitting together at home. My elder son was an apprentice at a unit in Moti Nagar. He had dropped out of school after passing ninth grade. He told his father that he wanted to work. So he had gone to Moti Nagar. All the other children and my husband were sitting around at home. We started hearing that Mrs. Indira Gandhi had been shot. We didn’t know who had shot her. We didn’t know what was going on anyway.*

*My maternal uncle’s son also came by. There were others, too, from the neighborhood. Everyone was apprehensive. No one knew what would happen. We had a television set at home and we watched the news. While we were watching the news, a group of people*

*came to our Gurudwara (Sikh temple) to attack it. So all of our menfolk as well as women went out to understand what was happening.*

*They said they wanted to burn down the Gurudwara. So our men returned home and took out their arms—daggers, sticks—whatever they had, to put up a defense. By then the police had also arrived there. They told our men to return home peacefully and reassured them that no one would attack the Gurudwara. They took away the weapons. And everyone returned home. Then after a gap of five to 10 minutes, a full mob of 50 to 60 people showed up. They were led by Sajjan Kumar (Congress MP of the area at that time), followed by police, followed by the mob. They entered the Gurudwara and defiled the holy book. They tore its pages, spitted on it.*

*So all our men again went there. Our men said Mrs. Indira Gandhi was everyone's mother, including ours, so why are you defiling our Gurudwara? Why are you doing all this? Our men were pushed back from there by the police. It started a cane charge. Our truck was parked outside. The mob poured petrol on it and set it on fire. They then lobbed a burning object into a room of our house. My husband told me to put out the fire in the truck and save it. I told him to not get agitated and let the truck burn because it was a huge mob and trying to do anything would be futile.*

*To safeguard our children, we opened the box beds and told all five of them to lie down inside and hide. I told my husband also to hide under the bed. We had two doors; it was a*

*corner house. I went out with folded hands and stood there crying. I asked Sajjan Kumar what our fault was. I said my truck has been burnt. My house has been set on fire. I don't know where my children are. So he said kill the Sikhs. Kill them. They are snakes. They will sting us if they survive. I spent the whole day crying like that. No one had eaten anything. We were thirsty, hungry. We had no food or water. In the evening again, there were fires all around. We didn't know where to go, what to do.*

*Then, there was a Gorkha family that lived behind our house. So the man of the house came over late evening. We knew him. He was a very nice man. He asked for my husband. My husband told him that he was hiding to save his life. We said we have hidden the children also inside. That we had no food or water. We had been like that for an entire night and an entire day. So he said you send your children over to my house—one at a time. So we sent our kids there. That left me and my husband in the house.*

*I had a brother-in-law. He, my husband and three other Sikh men, so five in all, then hid in their house. But someone got wind of it. So the mob came. They said there are Sikhs hiding here. So they set that room on fire. I was outside. They then dragged my husband out and broke his legs. Then they poured petrol over him and burnt his face. My husband told them not to kill him in front of the children. He said, 'if you want to kill me then take me away from here'. So they grabbed him from his hair. He had coiled them in a bun on his head. So they dragged him to the main square outside.*

*Then they went to the Gorkha family's house. They said there are children inside. The man of the house came out and told them that his wife was pregnant and about to deliver the baby and the doctor was already inside. He requested them not to break his door. That house, actually, had 10 to 15 Sikh children. Then, my son, in that melee, the military arrived and rescued all the children. Five children were mine, four of my sister, and two-three belonged to other neighbours.*

*Then the mob started abusing the head of the Gorkha family. They asked him why he had not told them about the presence of children in his house. He argued back. He said why did you want to kill the children when you had already killed their parents. So the military took everyone to the parks to sit in the open and wait. No one knew where to go. So when we were being taken to the police station, I saw my husband and that sight completely freaked me out. I turned cold as a stone.*

*I had lost my husband and my children were still not united with me. By this time, the police had started escorting the families to the waiting vehicles. My sister-in-law's elder brother-in-law asked me, 'aunty, where are your children?' I said I don't know. I was continuously crying and looking for them. I had no stole over my head and no woollens to wear. After all, the winter had set in and there was a chill in the air. He told me to sit in the vehicle. I said I would do that only when I was able to find my children.*

*So the military officer kept me back and dispatched the vehicle, saying that they would wait for my children to arrive and then send me in the next round. My children finally joined me. Then my elder son saw his father in that condition. He had been burnt. My son recognized him from the name which was inscribed on his forearm. He had long hair and they were flowing back. So my son walked around where his father's body lay and collected anything he could get: parts of broken cots, sticks, rags, wood, fuel from parked vehicles, etc. He then covered his father with these and cremated him there itself.*

*Then we sat down in the army vehicle. And he was still reassuring me about his father and said he was going to follow us shortly. 'I'm with you mother', he said. My youngest son was two years old at that time. So we were taken to the police station. I have started forgetting a lot of the details because my mind has become totally numb. When I was in the Gorkha family's house, there was no water to drink there. As I said, my youngest son was two years old then. And I had spent a night with that family in their house. That night, my son felt thirsty and gestured for water. I had no way to get him water. There was a pitcher with a broken cover there. So I got him to pee in that, dipped the edges of my stole and moistened his lips with that cloth. What could I do? I wet his lips with that cloth."*

**MAYA KAUR, 53:** Mrs Maya Kaur was born in a poor rural family in Bharatpur in Rajasthan state. She lost her mother after a protracted illness when she was still in her



early teens. Her uncle told her father that they should marry her off so that she can settle down in family life. They had no formal education to understand the pitfalls of such a decision. Nor did they send her to school to be able to determine her destiny.

So they solemnized her marriage to Jagdish Singh alias Jaggu when she was just 15 years old. Her husband was a daily-wage rickshaw-puller in Trilokpuri in east Delhi. He just lived in a shack and didn't have a regular brick-and-mortar house. Their cluster of hutments was just next to the infamous Block-32, which became the scene of India's biggest ever massacre in 1984 when over 400 Sikh men were killed there over three days.

Maya and Jaggu's marriage was quickly followed by the birth of a daughter who was eight months old in November 1984. Maya had visited her parental home in Bharatpur in the last week of October that year to look up her father who had not been keeping well. Jaggu subsequently travelled there to pick her up and bring her back to Delhi. They boarded a train from Bharatpur to Delhi on the morning of Mrs Indira Gandhi's assassination.

They heard on the train about the assassination but safely reached Old Delhi Railway Station in the afternoon. After getting down, Jaggu told Maya that he wanted to visit Sis Ganj *Gurudwara* (historic Sikh temple where the ninth Sikh Master was beheaded by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1675 for opposing forced conversions of Hindus to Islam), which is at a walking distance from the railway station. He also wanted to bathe

their daughter in holy water there and baptize her. So they spent some time at the *Gurudwara* and also took part in the *langar* or community kitchen.

Maya suggested to him that they should stay on in the *Gurudwara*, given the possibility of disturbances after Mrs Gandhi's assassination. But he remained adamant to travel the last stretch home, saying that his parents and family were alone there and they also needed looking after in case of trouble. She asked him if it was safe to travel on a local public transport bus and he said yes.

Once they boarded the bus to Trilokpuri, there was an altercation with a passenger who assaulted and abused him when he asked for a seat to be vacated for his wife who was carrying their daughter. So they reached Trilokpuri standing amid tension which had started building up. They got home and settled down for the night.

On the morning of Thursday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984, they had barely had tea when they started hearing the commotion outside. Maya was preparing her daughter for a bath when Jaggu stepped out to check what was going on. After a few minutes, she heard Jaggu calling her out loudly. She opened the door. He grabbed her hand, pulled her out with her daughter and told her to run. He said the killers were chasing him and will kill them.

They ran to his uncle's house in the adjoining lane where all the Sikh men were hidden in the loft. But they were found out and attacked. The marauders dragged Jaggu also out and

burnt him to death while she watched helplessly. Looking back, she says she wishes her husband had agreed to her suggestion to stay on in Sis Ganj *Gurudwara*. So she became a widow at 16 – one of the youngest widows of the 1984 Sikh Genocide. She also wishes she had more control over her destiny.

Maya has had a rough life over the past 37 years. She worked as an attendant at a school to be able to support her daughter. She sent her to school and then college. Last year, she got her married too. They live near each other in Tilak Vihar in west Delhi. And it is her daughter who supports her now.

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MRS MAYA KAUR:

*“We woke up in the morning and had just had tea when my husband said he was stepping out to check why there was so much commotion outside. As he went out, I started preparing my small eight-month-old daughter for a bath. Suddenly, I looked up and saw groups of people carrying burning torches moving towards us. They were calling out for the Sikhs to be killed. They were shouting ‘kill them, kill them.’ My husband was running back in panic from the opposite direction.*

*I didn’t have a stole on my head. It was cold as winter had set in. So my husband held me from my forearm and told me to run. He said people have come to kill us. I asked him why they were going to kill us and what had we done. I told him to wait for me to cover*

*my daughter at least. He said forget about it and dragged me quickly to his maternal uncle's house close by.*

*We lived in a shack. It was a hutment, not a room. He said they were going to burn our dwelling and we were all going to die in it. So we went off to his uncle's house and hid ourselves. Our uncle, by this time, had left home to go to work; he was a carpenter who knit and repaired cots. We wished we knew that there would be a clash, we would not have allowed him to leave the house. Our other relatives also came by to that house. So we hid ourselves here and there and saved our lives.*

*But once the assault started, it kept growing bigger and bigger. By about 4 pm on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, my husband's maternal uncle returned in a bad shape. They had torn off his clothes and he was badly bleeding from his head. He just had a small piece of his turban cloth left on him which he used to cover the lower part of his body. He was crying and screaming in pain. He was pleading, 'for God's sake, please let me go, please spare my life, please have mercy'. All of us cried when we saw him in that state. We had no means of getting him any medical aid. So we used our stoles and eye kohl to bandage him and stop the bleeding.*

*Outside, the mob was dragging Sikhs from their houses and assaulting them. I thought we weren't safe in this house too and they will kill us. To safeguard our menfolk, we emptied our attic and hid all three of them there and covered them with household items. All the*

*ladies kept sitting down. My brothers-in-law were still small, so we opened their hair and turned them into braids. We changed them into frocks, to give them a feminine look.*

*In the meantime, the marauders entered the house opposite ours and picked up a lady and raped her. Earlier, they were only killing the men. But now they had started raping the girls and women too. So we felt very scared and trapped and couldn't think of anything else we could do to safeguard ourselves. But we held out indoors. Then on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November morning, we thanked God and thought the worst had got over and three of our men had survived. But then those guys came back to our lane and asked us how we were still around.*

*My mother-in-law anticipated trouble and thought we could be picked on next. So she wiped her hand on the black soot of the clay hearth which we had used to cook our food and smeared my face with it to ward off the attention. She also scrambled my hair open to give them a disheveled look. So when they came to our door, she folded her hands and pleaded with them to leave us alone. She told them that there were only women and small children in the house and all the men had already been killed. They said nothing doing. You can't be here.*

*They abused us thoroughly and started moving away. We again thought we had survived. Then, one of them, a non-Sikh man, said we couldn't be sitting around just like that, something was definitely amiss, we should search the house. So they all came back and*

*forced their way in. They got on to a stool and removed the curtain of the attic and saw my father-in-law. He was a tall man. They then grabbed him from his hair and pulled him down. As he fell, he began to scream because he was in great pain. There was a rainwater drain at our entrance, covered by a stone slab. He slid under that to protect himself.*

*But they hit him with bricks and poked him with sticks and iron rods. They killed him there itself. Then they pulled down my husband and his uncle from the attic and assaulted them with sticks. There was a three-wheeler scooter parked outside. They took out petrol from its tank and poured it over them. My husband folded his hands and began pleading. He told them, 'You kill me but let me meet my daughter one last time for two minutes, talk to her'. But they didn't listen to anybody. They then hit him with a baton. While he was falling down, he was still telling me, 'You have my swear, run away from here. They are killing me; they will violate you also. Please go away and take my daughter along and take care of her'.*

*So we were pushed away from there. It was a long lane. While moving away, we kept looking back. They poured my husband with more petrol and set him on fire. As I stepped forward in that lane, I found the burnt and puffed body of my cousin brother who lived nearby. There was no space in the lane to put our feet on, it was strewn with dead bodies all over. I had four brothers and an uncle. All of them had been killed and lying there. They killed my whole family."*

**GURCHARAN SINGH, 62:** Mr Gurcharan Singh grew up in an agricultural family in Village Chhatarpur in Alwar District of Rajasthan state. He moved to Delhi in late 1970s along with his family in search of work and to set up an industrial unit. His family consisted of three brothers and a sister, besides mother and father. He was not married back then. The family bought a small piece of land in Nathu Colony in Shahdara in east Delhi and gradually built a house on it. He also started a factory where he manufactured auto parts.

Their house was situated on the main road. They had six commercial outlets which opened in the front, and the residences were at the back. When they learnt about the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984, they decided to close their unit for the day and downed their shutters. When they woke up the following morning, there was a lot of commotion outside. He remembers hearing 'kill the Sikhs, kill the Sikhs' from the street. The marauders were moving in groups and torching the houses.

Then, late evening on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, the attackers killed their neighbour, Gurmukh Singh, and also set his motorcycle on fire. That incident set off alarm bells in their house and they began to panic. They were sure they would be attacked next. Mr Singh had an anxiety attack and started puking. So, his younger brothers reassured him and sent him off to safety to a Hindu family friend's house nearby.

Someone noticed his movement and alerted the mob. So the Hindu family friend's house was surrounded and the crowd started swelling. Anticipating trouble, the family friend told Mr Singh to cut his hair and shave off the beard. He agreed. While Mr Singh's hair were being cut, the attackers started banging on the main entrance in order to break in. The family friend hid Mr Singh in a large mobile oil drum and he survived.

His brothers, in the meantime, were led by an acquaintance to a safe house – a store room on a large empty plot of land adjoining their house. They also had a cousin visiting from Alwar, Rajasthan, besides an uncle from central Delhi who had come over. The acquaintance led the five men into the store room and closed it from outside. He, then, alerted the killers about the presence of the Sikhs there.

The attackers opened the store room and all five Sikh men came out. The mob splashed a powdery substance on them, possibly a derivative of potassium which was widely used to set Sikhs and their properties on fire. The men screamed for help but no one came forward. All of them were burnt to death: Amarjeet Singh, 22; Malkeet Singh, 19; Ajeet Singh, 16; Santokh Singh from Alwar, 22; and Bachitter Singh, Mr Singh's relative, 55.

All the surviving members were shifted by the Army to two different refugee camps at Durgapuri and Shamlal College in east Delhi. Each thought that the other was dead. But they were united with each other after a few days. Since then, Mr Singh has moved out to



west Delhi where he lives with his father, after the death of his mother. He has since regrown his hair and beard and returned to the Sikh fold. But scars remain.

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MR GURCHARAN SINGH:

*“We learnt on 31<sup>st</sup> October that Mrs Gandhi had been shot. So we closed all our production units and returned home. All of us were together and slept that night. When we woke up, we heard some commotion outside. My father told all of us not to go to work and stay indoors. We passed the day by just sitting around. Then at around 4 or 5 pm, the marauders caught hold of a young Sikh in our neighbourhood, Gurmukh Singh, on the main road and killed him. They also burnt his motorcycle.*

*That got us worried. Our house was on the main road. We had six commercial units on the outside and residences on the inside. So I started having an anxiety attack and began puking. My younger brothers asked me why I was feeling the way I was feeling. I told them I was unable to bear the stress and trauma. So they told me to move to the nearby home of our family friends, Master Hoti Lal jee and his sister, Dulari Aunty. They said that it is a Hindu family and I would be safe there.*

*So, my father, mother and brothers stayed on in our house, A-79, Nathu Colony, Mandoli Road, Shahdara. And I, my wife and daughter went off to Dulari Aunty’s house. There*

*was a lot of disturbance outside. I heard the mobs say, 'kill the Sikhs, kill the Sikhs, kill them, kill them'. And while we were in Dulari Aunty's house, someone told the marauders that I was hiding there, along with my wife. So to dwarf my wife's identity, that family told her to change into a saree from her ladies suit to look like a Hindustani. She wore the saree.*

*Then, Master Hoti Lal jee turned to my wife and said, 'if you want to save your husband's life, we will have to cut his hair. No one will recognize him as a Sikh if you do that'. So he shaved off my beard. He had cut half my hair when the mob arrived. Just before anyone could see us, he hid me inside a large mobile oil drum which was lying there. And he covered it with a couple of duvets. While I was inside the drum, I was able to hear the mob. They were asking Master jee where he had hidden me. They were chanting 'kill them, kill them'. Luckily, they couldn't find me and left after a few minutes. Master jee, then took me out and cut the remainder of my hair and told me that I could go out because no one would recognize me. So, I left my wife and daughter there and got out and merged with the crowd. I watched what the mob was doing. That's how I spent the night.*

*When I returned to my house at around 11 AM on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, everyone told me that all my five brothers had been killed. I enquired about my father. They said they had no idea. I asked about my mother. They said she had fallen unconscious, but they didn't know where she was. She, it turned out, was sitting in someone's house in the*

*neighbourhood. So I asked them where my brothers were killed. They said they had been taken to that large plot with a small structure on it. They told me that my brothers were first locked up inside. They were told that they would be safe there, and no one would find them.*

*Then after about an hour or so, the same person who had taken them there, called the marauders and told them that five Sikhs were hiding inside. So the killers opened the door and threw a powdery substance inside. With that, the room caught fire and all five of them ran out. The mob then poured petrol on them and burnt all of them alive. They screamed for help but no one stepped up to save them. Everyone just watched the spectacle.”*

**PRITPAL SINGH, 59:** Pritpal Singh is my cousin. He grew up in a loving home in different cities of north India, including Delhi, since his father had a transferable job as a senior officer in the Employees State Insurance Corporation, a state-owned government insurer. He was a bright student and made it to the prestigious College of Pharmacy at New Delhi’s Pusa Institute after his schooling. So at age 19, he was a pharmacist, and soon thereafter, he had started his pharmacy in Ashok Vihar in north Delhi.

He worked sincerely and spent long hours at work to earn the trust of his customers and their consulting doctors on the one hand, and the pharma companies and creditor banks

on the other. By the time Mrs Indira Gandhi was assassinated, he was well-known as a reliable pharmacist in the entire neighbourhood. He was extremely affable and non-confrontational, which helped in conducting the business smoothly.

Since his pharmacy, City Chemists, was situated in the middle of a busy shopping center, he had a constant stream of visitors, even if they were not stopping to buy medicines. He heard fairly early in the day that Mrs Gandhi had been shot, but continued to dispense the medicines to patients who were walking in with prescriptions. The footfall increased in the evening as anxious patients began to stock up their regular prescription medicines.

Late in the evening, he was advised by some leading members of the shopping complex to wind down the work of his pharmacy and go back home. He heeded their call and exited from there by around 7 PM. Little did he know then that he would not return to the pharmacy the following morning, like every day. There were no signs of trouble in and around the area at that time.

Like many others, he got ready to go to work at 9 AM on Thursday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984, without any knowledge of the looting and assaults which had begun. I called him up on his neighbour's phone to stay back, just when he was starting from his home in Shalimar Bagh, less than two miles away. He heeded my advice. By 11 o'clock, his pharmacy had been broken into and ransacked. The attackers partially set it on fire too.

He was stunned but stoic when he visited his pharmacy one week later, when it was relatively safe to go out again. The grill of the shutter was twisted. The shutter was smashed. The glass panels on all three sides had been reduced to smithereens. The refrigerator, containing temperature-sensitive injections and vials, was lying face-down. There was a stinking puddle on the floor, of elixirs and expectorants, myriad coloured tablets and capsules. Medicines had been stolen. Cashbox had been emptied.

Luckily for him, he had the insurance in which rioting damage had been covered. But he needed a formal police complaint to submit his claim. It took him many days to register a First Information Report, that too, after he agreed to grease the palm of the police. He seriously considered moving out from there. Then gathered the courage to dig in his heels and restart from scratch. But he could never expand his operation because he always feared a repeat of 1984. He is still running his pharmacy at the same place. He still runs into the suspects and their patrons. They still refresh his trauma and deepen his scars.

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MR PRITPAL SINGH:

*“In 1984, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated (31<sup>st</sup> October), I got the news in the morning. But we kept doing the same routine things which we generally do at the pharmacy. In the evening, there was a heavy rush at the shop and some people from the market came to us and advised me to close the counter a bit early. So we closed the*

*pharmacy at around 7 PM and went home. We got some news about some mis-happenings in and around, in the whole of Delhi.*

*But in the morning, when I got up, I just started my day as usual and got ready to go to work at the usual time. We had no idea that there was so much of rioting going on in and around Delhi. When I was just about to start from home, I got a call from my friend on my neighbor's telephone that rioting had started at many places, and that I shouldn't go out of the house. So I stayed back. Soon after that, I also learnt that rampaging mobs were ransacking and burning all establishments belonging to the Sikhs all over Delhi.*

*Then suddenly at around 11 AM, I heard that my pharmacy had also been ransacked and looted. And along with that, all other shops belonging to Sikhs were looted, burnt in and around me. Because of the violence, I couldn't step out for the next five to six days. And finally, on 6<sup>th</sup> of November, I think, I got out, visited my pharmacy. That is the worst thing one could witness. All the shutters were broken, all the medicines were strewn around, all the glass shelves were destroyed, and everything was looted.*

*That scene was horrible. After that, it took us so many days, almost a month, to clean up everything. Later on, however, with the blessings of all the neighbours, friends and my father, we gathered the courage to start the operation again. Luckily, I got some reprieve from the insurance company because I had got my pharmacy insured and rioting was covered in it.*

*When we finally went to the Police Station to lodge an FIR (First Information Report), the police Inspector asked us to file a written FIR. So we lodged an FIR there. When, after a long wait, the Inspector came across to confirm the incident, he asked for a bribe, even in those circumstances. I had to pay him, because, otherwise, he was not registering the FIR, and it was a necessary document because we had to submit it to the insurance company and elsewhere. That was a horrible time.*

*All the culprits who were identified by so many people all over Delhi were let off by the police, courts, and some cases are still going on after 36 years. So many committees have been set up, SITs (Special Investigation Teams) were formed, people gave their testimonies in writing that these were the people who were involved. In India, the wheel of law takes such a long time. Nobody is convicted who has a political influence.*

*The political pressure is there on the courts as well. Even the higher judiciary is influenced by the politicians. It is very difficult to get justice in India. So many of the widows have given affidavits to so many committees and SITs which were formed. Even then, no justice has been done by any of the courts.*

*That episode has left a very bad scar in my heart. It is very difficult to forget those incidents. Every so often, I have visions of that scene when we went to our pharmacy for the first time after it was ransacked and looted. The mobs going around in the streets with lathis, sticks and even firearms. All of it is still very fresh in the mind. At that time, I*

*was very young. I could have thought of expanding the pharmacy. But that confidence was not there. It shook my confidence to a level that every time I considered an expansion, the thought crossed my mind that it could happen to me again.”*

**TARLOCHAN SINGH, 88:** Mr Tarlochan Singh is a distinguished member of the Sikh community who has regularly raised his voice against the Sikh Genocide of 1984 and demanded justice for the survivors and their families. It was his speech in the *Rajya Sabha* (upper house of Indian Parliament) in December 2009, that led to the reopening of murder cases against Congress party MP (Member of Parliament), Sajjan Kumar, and his subsequent conviction and life-term in jail. He also spoke against the mischaracterization of the large-scale 1984 anti-Sikh violence as a riot in that speech.

Mr Singh is himself a victim of the violence which broke out in New Delhi after the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984. He was the Press Secretary to the then President of India, Giani Zail Singh, at that time and a part of his cavalcade when he was attacked. He had a miraculous escape due to the presence of mind of his driver. He, in fact, was the first victim of the first assault in the 1984 Sikh Genocide.

He has been a Member of Parliament (*Rajya Sabha*) for six years, Vice-Chairman and Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities for three years each, Member of the National Human Rights Commission, among others. Earlier this year, he was awarded the



third highest civilian honour, the *Padma Bhushan*, by the President of India for a long and distinguished service to the nation.

A post-graduate in economics (1955) from Panjab University, Chandigarh, Mr Singh was born in Dhudial, Punjab, now in Chakwal District of Pakistan. At the time of India's Partition in 1947, he moved to Patiala in the Indian Punjab. He is a quintessential public relations professional who served in virtually every district of Punjab state before he was brought to Delhi by Giani Zail Singh.

Mr Singh firmly believes that the issue of 1984 Sikh Genocide has entrenched itself deeply in the hearts and minds of the Sikh community globally and will remain alive forever if justice is not delivered. "It is an old issue but a fresh subject. It is fresh in the minds of the people and it shall remain fresh for a long time to come," he says.

EXCERPT FROM THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MR TARLOCHAN SINGH:

*"Giani jee (Giani Zail Singh) as President of India, was on an official tour on the day of the murder. We first went to Mauritius. From there, we went to Yemen. We were in Yemen's capital Sanaa when information came that Mrs. Gandhi had been shot. So Giani jee's entire deputation headed back. On board the return flight were several members of*

*the press. There was Prabhu Chawla, Satinder Singh, Inderjit. Mr (Romesh) Bhandari who became Foreign Secretary later was there too.*

*So we landed in Delhi at around 4 pm. Giani Zail Singh said let's go to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) to see Mrs. Gandhi. Her death had not been declared yet. Soon, we were on our way. Everyone had a separate car. I was also alone in my car. As I passed R.K. Puram, there was a group of people there which was shouting slogans. They stopped my car. First, they kept banging on the window glasses with sticks. Then someone threw a burning torch inside it. I am grateful to my driver. He had the presence of mind. He picked it up and flung it outside. Else, the car would have caught fire and I would have died inside only. God was kind.*

*Next day, The Statesman newspaper had a big story, 'Tarlochan Singh Attacked'. I subsequently testified before Nanawati Commission and it was recorded. I was the first man who was attacked like this after the assassination. This happened when I was a part of the President's convoy. Also, when Giani jee (Giani Zail Singh) came down to the ground floor of AIIMS after seeing Mrs. Gandhi's body, he was shouted down when he was getting into his car. He was escorted out by the police amidst slogan shouting. The oath took place later that evening.*

*So Giani Zail Singh swore in Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister that evening. It was happening for the first time in India's history that a person was made prime minister*

*without having been elected leader by his party. Because, you see, the President has a power under the Constitution to swear anyone to this office. He can swear you and me in also. Then the chosen person has to seek the Parliament's confidence. So, Giani Zail Singh swore in Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister. Then Giani jee told him to induct Buta Singh as a minister in the Union Cabinet. He told Rajiv to include him to allay criticism that he was anti-Sikh. So Buta Singh's name was included later on.*

*I started getting calls that night that the Sikhs were being attacked and killed. There were no cell phones back then. So I called up the President from my home land phone. I said, Sir, trouble has broken out in the city. First, he did not believe me because the people around him weren't too interested. So I told the President that there was a constant stream of phone calls and people were asking us for help. What kind of help, he inquired. I told him that people are asking to be rescued. They want you to send the Army and the Military Police. I said, Giani jee, the situation is so bad that my relatives, your relatives, are all calling up as they are stuck, and they want to be taken to safer places.*

*They were calling me because they couldn't call the President directly. So I conveyed to him what I had learnt. He then, after our conversation that night, rang up the home minister. (P.V.) Narasimha Rao was the home minister at that time. The President couldn't talk to him. He was told to speak to the prime minister. So Giani jee called up prime minister Rajiv Gandhi three-four times but he did not come to the phone. The*

*President could not speak to either the prime minister or the home minister the entire night. And the assaults on the Sikhs continued.*

*Early next morning, a group of eminent citizens, including Inder Kumar Gujral (later prime minister), Air Marshal Arjan Singh, Gen. (Jagjit Singh) Aurora, ambassador Gurbhachan Singh, showed up to meet the President. They said the Sikhs were under attack and asked for his intervention. He told them to go and meet the home minister. So they went off to Teen Murti Bhawan to meet him. Mrs. Gandhi's dead body lay in state there. They were told that the home minister was busy. The excuse given was that Mrs. Gandhi was to be cremated and everybody was busy in making the arrangements. The second excuse that was used was that a lot of heads of state were expected to come from across the world to attend her funeral and they had to make preparations to receive them.*

*They used these as mere excuses not to stop the violence. Nothing was done the next day as well. In fact, till Mrs. Gandhi was cremated, the Government of India, the Army, the police, did nothing at all. The President was rendered totally helpless. You know that Gurudwara (Sikh temple) Rakab Ganj is adjacent to the Presidential Palace in New Delhi. It was attacked and set on fire in front of our eyes. Two Sikh preachers were burnt alive there. Their screams could be heard in the Presidential Palace. But we couldn't do a thing except sitting around.”*

It is heart-rending to read these Oral History testimonies of the 1984 Sikh Genocide.

After a point in time, the narratives tend to skid on the icicles of the numb heart and cease to resonate. That's when one requires emotional replenishing and re-arming of the gut for it to not wrench again quickly. In many ways, these embodied experiences are a moral teething—to borrow a phrase from Emily Bronte—and the full meaning emerges gradually and after a deep engagement with the narrators over a long period of time.

I noticed, through this process of learning and re-learning the meaning, that the narrators remember everything vividly, like it happened yesterday: names of perpetrators as well as saviours, places, house numbers, street names, even four-decade-old phone numbers. Their perspectives are not in flux. Their bodies remember what they were subjected to. The passage of time, mostly, hasn't diminished any dimension of their description.

The passage of time hasn't remedied the situation of the survivors either, and it is unlikely that it will in the absence of redressal. Their hurt is cast in concrete. Jill Stauffer postulates in her priceless work, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, that “ethical loneliness is the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard.”

In the case of the 1984 survivors, the reverse sequence of the double jeopardy is more relevant: most of the survivors have not been heard, and subsequently abandoned by those who have the power to help. That dehumanization and degeneration in the

surroundings is only perpetuating and accentuating harm that has already been done. That abandonment is producing loneliness which is far more profound than just isolation.

The dehumanization has resulted from an interplay of various disparate factors. One, the Indian society has become inured to violence and deaths, both man-made, and induced by natural calamities like floods, fires and famine. Since 1984, numerous episodes of politically motivated violence have taken place across the country. The advent of television, and subsequently Internet, has amplified these tragic events, and numbed the senses of the citizens and distorted their responses in the process. The advent of technology has also played out a strange paradox: people are more connected virtually but more distant physically. Most importantly, with more means at its disposal, the society has become more consumerist and self-centred. As a result, a lot of people don't really care anymore.

Another common theme which has emerged from the trauma testimonies of the survivors of 1984 is the time and manner in which the assaults occurred. Barring Mr Tarlochan Singh who was assaulted on 31<sup>st</sup> October evening, everyone else became a target the next morning, in different parts of Delhi, simultaneously: Kirpal Singh, Mrs Pritam Kaur, Mrs Gopi Kaur, Mrs Popri Kaur, Mrs Maya Kaur, Mr Gurcharan Singh and Pritpal Singh.

The mobs first attacked the *Gurudwaras* (Sikh temples), then the properties of the Sikhs, then Sikhs themselves, and finally Sikh women, some of whom were raped and then

either abandoned or killed. In all cases, the marauders were led by Congress politicians or their henchmen. Everywhere, Sikh homes and outlets were identified through voter lists. These voter lists were handy since the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC) elections were coming up shortly. The same playbook was used in other states.

Petrol, kerosene, potassium powder and automobile tyres were uniformly used to 'necklace' the Sikhs. Most Sikhs were burnt to death instead of being stabbed, which is a common method of serious crime across the world. This was possibly done to destroy the physical as well as forensic evidence. In each case, the police were totally irresponsible to distress calls, which were made in the thousands.

Another common occurrence in the Oral History interviews I have conducted is that no survivor has shown the inclination to visit the neighbourhood they had left amid violence and loss, or places or spots where their family members were put to death. The suggestion sent a sensation through their body and they became visibly uncomfortable.

Also, the conversations invariably and quickly turned to that week of November 1984, even though I had laid out the methodology and the progression from childhood to youth and from youth to middle age. The narrators seemed to be in a hurry to share their ordeals, get to the point. There was no need to dig up or excavate, it was sitting there.

In *Ethical Loneliness*, Jill Stauffer says

“returning to the moment of trauma is a symptom of trauma. But if such trauma is caused in part by a failure of protection, and failure of protection indicts not only those who inflicted harm but also all those who contribute to the world where such harms happen in widespread or systemic ways, then we are all responsible—to varying degrees—for recovery from and prevention of such harms.”<sup>1</sup>

I also felt implicated; hearing their testimonies sounded like a wake-up call to me to step up and do something about their situation, help the survivors.

Every single survivor remembers how prime minister Mrs Indira Gandhi’s son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, condoned the violence against the Sikhs by saying that “when a big tree falls, the earth does shake a little.”

The silver lining in the dark clouds of death and destruction was the sparkling role played by the neighbours and volunteers, belonging to all denominations of age, gender, religion and socio-economic background, to save the Sikhs. In most cases—with the exception of Block-32 of Trilokpuri in east Delhi—the neighbours gave shelter and food to the Sikhs and protected them from the marauders.

These survivor accounts bear out, and, in fact, revalidate the findings of the initial citizen-led inquiries which were published. They re-establish the complicity of the State, as well as the ruling Congress party at that time. Political mobilization was clearly at play by the party in the service of violence.



The survivors have also been sore about the then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi's brushing aside of demands for an inquiry into the 1984 killings. He agreed to it only because it was a pre-condition put forth by Shiromani Akali Dal president Harchand Singh Longowal to the signing of the Punjab Accord in July 1985. That delay reduced the paradigm of accountability to a farce.

So crooked and twisted has been the approach of the Congress party that when the second judicial commission into the 1984 Sikh Genocide submitted its report, it fielded a mild-mannered—and some say weak—Sikh prime minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, to wriggle out of the rabbit hole of responsibility. Singh, an economist, told the *Lok Sabha*, the lower house of Indian Parliament, in August 2005:

“Twenty-one years have passed, more than one political party has been in power, and yet, the feeling persists that somehow the truth has not come out and justice has not prevailed.”

A day later, the prime minister told the *Rajya Sabha*, the upper house of Indian Parliament:

“There were lapses in 1984. Several commissions have gone into this matter. We all know that we still do not know the truth, and the search must go on. It took the Sikh community a lot of time to regain its self-confidence after the tragic events of 1984. I have no hesitation in apologizing not only to the Sikh community but the whole Indian nation because what took place in 1984 is the negation of the concept of nationhood, as enshrined in our Constitution. On behalf of our government, on behalf of the entire people of this country, I bow my head in shame that such a thing took place.”

But these homilies, however solemn, failed to wash the sins of the Congress party for two reasons. One, the mention of the Congress party was conspicuous by its absence in the

prime minister's statement. And two, the Congress party negated the moral gain made by the prime minister by reiterating its old, though untenable, position that it had no role in the 1984 Sikh Genocide.

The Congress party has continued to state this lie for decades, much to the chagrin of the Sikhs and others. Rahul Gandhi, party Vice-President and son of Rajiv Gandhi, who was a 14-year-old boy in 1984, told '*Frankly Speaking*' host Arnab Goswami on *Times Now* news channel in January 2014<sup>2</sup> that his party was not involved in the violence against the Sikhs.

That position has not changed to this day in spite of the conviction of Sajjan Kumar as the poster boy of the perpetrators. Kumar was the Congress party's Member of Parliament from Outer Delhi in 1984, and led and instigated the marauders. He was convicted by a Sessions court for criminal conspiracy in the killing of a family of five Sikhs in Sultanpuri. The conviction was upheld by the Delhi High Court in December 2018.

The two-judge bench of the court made scathing observations against Kumar and said that he had evaded scrutiny and accountability all these years due to "political patronage." Kumar was awarded a life term and sent to Tihar Jail in Delhi. But since his incarceration, he has secured a shift to a prison of his choice citing Covid-19 pandemic

and his alleged medical condition. His plea for interim bail was rejected by the Supreme Court of India in 2020. His appeal in the top court has also been dismissed recently.

In that backdrop, can one proceed on the path of repair? The answer is, probably not.

But it is still worthwhile to explore the paradigm of repair and examine the possibilities that exist for the survivors to release the present moment of the past harm, at the least.

Jill Stauffer is an associate professor of philosophy at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. She is a distinguished voice on conflict and trauma, justice and closure. In her 2015 work, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, she discusses the pros and cons of using trials and truth commissions to respond to widespread injustice, framing the discussion as a question of repair. She argues that more scrutiny is needed before claims are made about institutional proceedings as healing and cathartic for survivors.

Stauffer lays out the reparative remedies and some of their motivations and then digs deeper into the concept and contours of repair:

“Political reconciliation, political forgiveness, and transitional justice, all of these big ideas are reparative: each in its own way seeks to mend significant harms. Their purposes for doing so may vary—across cultures and institutions and within a single organization. However, whether the aim be justice, a future less rife with conflict, improved personal relationships, political expediency, or any of the many other aspirations that may surface post-conflict, the processes all rely on an assumption that repair is possible. The assumption may not hold in all cases.”

“In order to discern whether repair is possible, we need to know what repair is. And, in the wake of oppression and violence inflicted on human beings by other human beings, in order to understand what repair is, we need to recognize what breaks selves and worlds. In turn, in order to comprehend what breaks a self or a world, we ought to know something about what selves and worlds are—how they are formed, what sustains them. Finally, we need to understand how to make judgements about what can be repaired, what should be repaired, what cannot be repaired, and, perhaps, what should be left broken.”<sup>3</sup>

Stauffer clearly cautions against foisting a remedy, or a combination of remedies, to attain the goal of repair, without first assessing the efficacy. In the context of the 1984: Sikh Genocide, all three big ideas she has outlined have proved to be inadequate for various reasons. Do the survivors keep silent and forget about what happened to them in the interest of reconciliation and forgiveness? Or do they continue to pursue court trials as their last hope for justice, even after it has been dashed repeatedly in scores of cases? Or press for a truth and reconciliation commission on the lines of South Africa’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to socially call out the perpetrators and blackball them? The goal of reconciliation has a starting point in admission of guilt and contrition, followed by seeking forgiveness. In the case of 1984, the chief perpetrator of these crimes, the Congress party, has neither admitted its guilt nor shown any contrition or remorse, much less sought any forgiveness or reconciliation.

In the backdrop of that factual matrix, I can’t agree more with Stauffer when she says that she sometimes suspects that

“some portion of the tremendous weight of hope tethered to forgiveness and reconciliation in the international justice community is symptomatic of a lack of

reflection on, for instance, what people are being asked to forgive. I don't intend that as an accusation against anyone who writes about forgiveness but rather as a reminder that forgiveness, for all of us but perhaps especially for survivors of grave harm, may be easier said than done."

"Those who focus solely on that goal, may neglect to dwell long enough on other questions, such as, what other old or new ways are there of redressing harm? What set of conditions would make forgiveness a goal worth reaching, or capable of being sustained (and what conditions render it less meaningful)? When might resentment and resistance be vital political expressions that should be heard alongside the discourse of repair? Might resentment and other negative affects even be, on occasion, more restorative than forgiveness?"<sup>4</sup>

Stauffer also weighs the equities of transitional justice and truth commissions and indicates that the former may be a relatively better goal to pursue than the latter:

"Even though trials are usually thought to be the best sites for giving alleged criminals what they deserve, some argue that truth commissions that name names also mete out 'just deserts' even if amnesty is awarded, since offenders will henceforth have to live in a society where everyone knows what they did. In turn, though truth commissions are thought to be the more restorative approach, many scholars and activists argue that trials do as good or better a job as do truth proceedings at building or rebuilding a shared world."

"The idea here is that court cases help to bring into being a society governed by the rule of law where all are treated with equal respect, and also help to establish the truth of what happened. 'Retributive' trials can be restorative and 'restorative' truth commissions can mete out retribution. The categories blur. All approaches are imperfect. And every nation or community struggling to move forward after violence or historic injustice will have a different set of limitations and possibilities to work with. And yet, despite the overlap, these forms are not the same."<sup>5</sup>

Based on regular interactions with the survivors, and as a lucky survivor myself who escaped bodily harm, I had avowed to achieve multiple goals when I set out to record the

trauma testimonies of the 1984: Sikh Genocide last year. These were: accountability, memorialization, deterrence, compensation and closure. To my mind, each goal has a starting point and a labyrinthine pathway to tread before the goal is fully achieved.

Individual court trials, however unequal and bereft of substantial proof to establish guilt of perpetrators beyond reasonable doubt, contribute to accountability and deterrence, and in some cases of conviction of the accused, even compensation. Memorialization contributes to repair and healing as it soothes the notion of the survivors that their loved one's life has been commemorated, at least belatedly.

But the most daunting goal to achieve is closure. Its pathway is equally difficult to determine. In the absence of reconciliation and forgiveness, I think it is the process of healing and repair that will lead to closure in the long term. To that extent, my above cited goals will contribute to healing in varying degrees. I think close listening of survivors' life stories, and continued rehabilitation efforts, too, will help the survivors release the present moment of the past harm.

The condition of the survivors, particularly the widows, is quite pathetic. They have meagre means and resources to sustain themselves independently. They are old and infirm. But they are also proud people. They hate to hold out a hand to anyone for their rations or medicines or other day-to-day needs. My conversations with many of them on multiple occasions revealed last year as well as this year that their medical supplies from government-run dispensaries had been interrupted due to the COVID-19-enforced

lockdowns and they didn't have the money to buy these from the pharmacies, in the absence of medical insurance. Some of them didn't even have their prescriptions handy.

At another level of existence, the survivors have recovered their lives and descended into the ordinary, like Dr Veena Das says. She argues that there was a mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary so that one would end up thinking of the event as always attached to the ordinary, as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways<sup>6</sup>. Most of the survivors have evidently accepted their ordinary condition as the will of God.

That, coupled with their overwhelming struggles to survive, has forced them to tread a lonely path. Jill Stuart explains this loneliness: it "begins when a human being, because of abuse or neglect, has been refused the human relation necessary for self-formation and thus is unable to take on the present moment freely."<sup>7</sup> This state of being has rendered them incapable of escaping their condition and asserting and aspiring and ascending toward a higher plane. That descent into the ordinary has robbed them of the imagination to see a future which is full of new possibilities, where talent meets opportunity and where success is a by-product of sheer hard work.

The survivors continue to live with a tragic sense of having been violated, with a sense of hurt, a sense of betrayal. They look at 1984 as an episode of abuse which has completely

alienated them from the national mainstream. They look at other people's lives from a distance but are not a part of those lives.

The violence has changed their lives beyond their imagination. Kirpal Singh could have gone to a regular school and fulfilled his dream of becoming an engineer. He ended up as a typist/data entry operator because of the circumstances which were forced on him. Mrs Pritam Kaur, Mrs Gopi Kaur, Mrs Popri Kaur and Mrs Maya Kaur could have all been living happy and fulfilling lives with their husbands instead of the penury and scars they have endured. Mr Gurcharan Singh could have been running an even bigger industrial production unit with his brothers instead of opening a neighbourhood grocery store. Pritpal Singh could have expanded his operation and launched a chain of pharmacies if the perpetual fear of similar violence had not hung over his head.

Except for Kirpal Singh, all other narrators have shared their tragic story of 1984 with their children. Pritpal Singh told both his daughters what had happened and they both thought that he was wronged and didn't get justice in the end. Both are super-successful software engineers and have moved to North America because they didn't see a safe future in India. Mr Gurcharan Singh has planned to send his children and grandchildren to Canada.

Kirpal Singh has consciously avoided discussing his story in all its gory details with his children because, as he says, "I don't want to transmit that feeling to the next generation,



because it is a bad feeling. Even if I let them into how I feel, it will make them bitter. They will start to harbor hate. I don't want them to have any hate in their hearts, which I am holding on to. I don't want that hate to become a hurdle for them.”

The memory of 1984 is an ever-present feeling in the hearts and minds of all the narrators. It has conditioned them to take precautions, check if anything is amiss in the city before stepping out. They are not too ecstatic when they find small joys, nor are they too sad when they suffer a setback. They have reset their compass.

But it bothers all of them that 1984 has become a mere annual story for the rest of the world, outside of the community and the immediate neighbourhood. It has been reduced to an annual observance of grief at the Tilak Vihar *Gurudwara* or Sikh temple in Delhi on the anniversary of the genocide, from 1<sup>st</sup> November to 3<sup>rd</sup> November.

During the rest of the year, the outside world registers their presence and pain when a court pronounces someone guilty of the crimes committed in 1984, or if it gives someone the benefit of the doubt and discharges them, which occurs more frequently. Securing justice is an uphill task and the narrators know this well.

That is because there is a lack of substantial material proof against the perpetrators because the police never responded to the distress calls, never registered FIRs, never secured the crime scenes, never collected any forensic evidence, never got post-mortems

done, never recorded the statements of the eyewitnesses, never arrested the suspects, never sent them to trials in a majority of the cases.

In the few hundred trials which were held after endless hurdles, the courts have focused only on individual criminal liability in the absence of cogent proof of culpability—not because the proof wasn't there, but because it wasn't collected by a complicit police apparatus at the insistence of a complicit political authority at that time. The courts have employed the usual method of individual scrutiny for crimes which were committed collectively against a backdrop of widespread abuse and indifference. It is not surprising then that the perpetrators have been given the benefit of the doubt and got away.

All the survivors believe that the process of justice begins with an acknowledgement of a wrong. The only belated acknowledgement that has come from the government of India so far is that the families of the survivors were wrongly targeted. That the killings were the result of the Congress party's anger and desire to teach the Sikhs a lesson has not been acknowledged even after 37 years of the violence. On the contrary, the 'known' has been reduced to the 'unknown' because the organs of government and legal systems have deliberately closed their eyes to the reality of unjustifiable aggression against the survivors and their families who had no role in Mrs Gandhi's assassination.

The result of this aggravating state of ongoing distress is psychologically devastating. As Jill Stuart says, "A trauma survivor's sense of the self's independence has been

interrupted by violence. That sense is part of what should be restored by transitional justice or reconciliative efforts.”<sup>8</sup>

So justice to the survivors after so many years means a process of recovery through social support. It is equally a narrow legal end which they want to pursue and achieve at any cost. All the survivors I have spoken to are frustrated by the delay as well as denial of justice. That frustration has triggered the thought of revenge and retribution in the minds of many of them.

In *Ethical Loneliness*, Jill Stauffer revisits the roots of ‘retribution’ in the Latin verb *tribuere* and says that

“calls for retribution always reflect a sense that something has been unjustly taken and that a balance must be put right. One must redo, offer again, something that should have remained intact. Retribution is thus a revisionary practice. In many circumstances, the punishment of perpetrators is not sufficient to accomplish such a goal. That is why retribution needn’t appear as an antonym of repair: in some cases its best goal is *tribuere*: to bestow, confer, grant, allow, or devote something deserved to one who deserves it. As such, ‘reparative retribution’ repays those harmed for their harm. It offers compensation for loss. In addition to opening up our sense of the meaning of the word, defining retribution in this way also helps us understand why anger and resentment are not only negative affects: they express a person’s righteous indignation at being treated unjustly and so may be important positive expressions of a relationship to the past, present and future that is both reasoned and affective.”<sup>9</sup>

The righteous indignation of the 1984 survivors is not limited to mere anger and resentment. Most of them have been cooking up a storm in their bonnet and are ready to stake their lives to take out the lives of their perpetrators in the absence of justice through court trials. They have unequivocally told me that they would like to be left alone with

proven perpetrators like then Congress party Member of Parliament Sajjan Kumar so that they can clobber them to death, even when Kumar is serving a life term in a Delhi jail and still trying to get out on health grounds or through an executive fiat, while his appeal against his sentence awaits a hearing in the Supreme Court.

So, the desire for revenge in the eyes of the survivors is a form of ‘reparative retribution’ through which revenge will repay them for their harm. But it is a dangerous transaction to make and it, in all likelihood, will continue the cycle of harm and repayment in ways which are inhuman and destructive. I know how, and also why, the narrators feel the way they do, but I respectfully disagree with them. I can’t be a party to such a violent step in all consciousness or endorse it.

Even so, if affirmative judicial action is initiated by the Supreme Court of India, the survivors will feel heard and move towards a possible closure. For instance, if the Supreme Court re-assesses all the evidence which is lying before multiple commissions of inquiry and holds the Congress party guilty of the Sikh genocide, it will move the needle from apathy to empathy for the survivors.

Additionally, if it orders the arrest and prosecution of a dozen Congress leaders who have evaded scrutiny and held powerful positions in public life owing to political patronage, it will reaffirm the citizens’ faith in the judiciary. Alternatively, the Supreme Court could de-register the Congress party and bar it from contesting any future elections. That could

also be done through the International Criminal Court at The Hague if someone were to invest their time and talent in the process.

At the level of the Indian government, if it orders a fresh survey of the survivors to assess their needs and commits to support them financially, it will further the objective of repair.

But a million dollar question is: Can these decisions go through in a fermenting democracy?

As things stand, the trauma of the survivors has transcended from fact to fiction to folklore and it is a fertile ground for soulful creativity. There are a couple of feature films, besides a recent web series, on the 1984 theme, to see, a powerful pantomime to watch, an art exhibition to admire, a book of fiction to read. Also, there are documentaries, podcasts and plays (*see Bibliography*) to keep the issue alive and fight abandonment.

It is tragic that even after so many years, so many reports, so many documentaries, books, etc., the survivors don't feel heard. The reason is that while they have emotionally bled and struggled for survival on the margins of the society, the perpetrators and their patrons have led privileged lives and enjoyed complete immunity from criminal prosecution and accountability by manipulating the system. In many ways, they have used the Indian democracy to destroy it, weaken the faith in it.

So while the expectation from the survivors is that they would abide by the law of the land and not do anything untoward in their anger, bitterness and frustration, the perpetrators continue to cock-a-snook at the same law with a mocking glee because they have succeeded in normalising a genocide as a routine conflagration. The survivors cannot accept this duality and, therefore, are continuing to fight the legal fight. As Jill Stuart says, “the survivors want the harms they have undergone to be heard and the wrongness of them affirmed in a lasting way not only by the perpetrators but also by the surrounding society.”<sup>10</sup>

But in spite of such a colossal failure of all organs of the Indian State to hear the survivors and remedy their wrongs, pressing for rehabilitation is an honourable goal to pursue. Like Jill Stuart says, “all of us—not only perpetrators of harms—*all of us* are responsible both for rebuilding destroyed selves and worlds and preventing their destruction in the first place.”<sup>11</sup> It is this desire to play my part in this process that has given me the motivation and energy to turn consciousness into communication and thought into action.

I believe—in the words of Jean Améry<sup>12</sup>—that if I can help the survivors with the release from their abandonment that has persisted since the tragedy of 1984 struck us, I would have partially succeeded in my mission to assuage their sense of hurt. I would also be able to sleep peacefully then.

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*Notes:*

1. Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) Page 13, Ethical Loneliness
2. Arnab Goswami interview with Rahul Gandhi, *Frankly Speaking* show on Times Now, January 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB\\_eWW5ttaM&list=WL&index=19&t=1469s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB_eWW5ttaM&list=WL&index=19&t=1469s)
3. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Pages 1-22, Repair
4. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Pages 1-22, Repair
5. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Pages 1-22, Repair
6. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), Page 7, The Event and the Everyday
7. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Page 12, Ethical Loneliness
8. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Page 11, Ethical Loneliness
9. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Pages 5-6, Introduction
10. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Page 14, Ethical Loneliness
11. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, Page 9, Ethical Loneliness
12. Jean Améry, *Resentments*, 1965

## Chapter V: Way Forward

One of the key goals which I started out with was to record the Oral History testimonies of the 1984 Sikh Genocide survivors, particularly hundreds of widows, in Delhi and elsewhere. I began this process last October, and subsequently conducted more interviews in March this year. I am going to continue to record these interviews in the weeks, months and years ahead.

Luckily, after I published excerpts of some of these interviews as a part of my Oral History exhibit titled 'The Victims of November' earlier this year, an Indian Sikh family settled in Birmingham, UK, came forward with an assurance of support for this work. I'm sending them a grant proposal later this month and I am hoping that I would be able to focus on this task without any hindrances and delays.

My grant proposal has three components. One, I have outlined the financial resources I will personally need to be able to sustain myself full-time in the pursuit of this project. Two, I have prepared a unit-based budget, along with a target number of testimonies I can personally record in the next year. I will scale it up or down based on what kind of resources are committed.

Three, I have outlined a ballpark, basic subsistence allowance that the survivors of the 1984 Sikh Genocide, particularly the widows in their '60s, '70s and '80s, need to take care of their day-to-day needs, like ration and medicines, to be able to spend the rest of



their lives with a degree of dignity that they have been denied so far. This support is apart from the honorarium I shall pay them for their time for the Oral History interviews.

My attempt to secure some kind of subsistence for these survivors is a part of my *gateway approach*, the building of a bridge between the community and the society. I strongly believe that this will significantly contribute to the mitigation of their alienation, and possibly their healing and closure of some sort.

My minor experiment in this regard in March 2021 in Delhi brought a wry smile, alongside a stream of tears of sorrow, to the face of Mrs Pritam Kaur. In the process, I secured a thousand blessings which re-energized me and strengthened my resolve. Of course, it helped me in creating a historical narrative which is also emotionally coherent.

As advised by Professor Mary Marshall Clark, I'll train and involve more Oral Historians in this endeavour from the second year. That way, I will be able to cover the most vulnerable survivors and record their testimonies before it is too late. I have carefully looked at a module Dr Guneeta Singh Bhalla from California has successfully developed to record the testimonies of Partition families at scale for her unique project, The 1947 Partition Archive (<https://www.1947partitionarchive.org>). I will request her for guidance.

I have already thought through the span and scope of the digital home for these Oral History testimonies of the 1984 Sikh Genocide. I found that the Montreal Life Stories

Project run by the Community-University Research Alliance at Concordia University, is an excellent resource for inspiration and emulation.

I have taken the first definitive step in this direction by registering a domain:

[www.1984sikhgenocide.in](http://www.1984sikhgenocide.in). I'll work with a designer and programmer and build it, alongside my interview work. I'll also secure the hosting and archiving services from the Columbia University Library.

I have developed a social media blueprint for these oral histories. I'll move forward with these after the digital repository is public and has attained a critical mass. There are some other forms which these testimonies can take, as moments, monologues, podcasts, plays, documentaries, short-films, web series, and possibly, even a feature film later on. I'll crystalize these ideas and reach out with pitches for creative collaborations.

As a part of the digital repository I am putting together, I have planned a Legal Tracker on the 1984 Sikh Genocide cases which are pending in various courts in India. I'll start working on this component by the end of this year.

The Legal Tracker is another attempt to fill a critical information gap and support the survivors. It is also a kind of vigil on the delay as well as denial of justice even after decades. I reckon that reporting on unfair acquittals could demoralize the survivors. But

reporting fairly and accurately could also strengthen their resolve to keep up the fight. This is a part of the paradigm of accountability and deterrence I have set as my goals.

I would try to enlarge the field of my vision and look at the tragedy of 1984 from the stratosphere, to be able to see and understand the other intrinsic associations that exist, which my current fisheye vision prevents me to see.

For instance, I would like to overcome my aversion for Congress politicians and activists who have either served their brief prison terms, or are still serving jail time, and meet them to record their oral histories.

I can think of Congress Member of Parliament in 1984, Sajjan Kumar, as one of the narrators. He is serving a life term in a Delhi jail and desperately attempting to get out, unsuccessfully so far. It could be an interesting opportunity to understand Kumar's motivations and hatred for the Sikhs and what prompted him to target them.

I would also like to pair the testifiers with the survivors of the 1984 Sikh Genocide as an experiment and then examine the outcomes. Typically, under the Indian Criminal Procedure Code, petitioners can take the witness box in support of their own cases. But they, in most cases, are considered interested witnesses. So corroboration is desired from independent witnesses who have no stakes in the case. In many instances, the neighbours who had saved the Sikhs had also accompanied them to the courts to help them secure

justice. There were also instances where testifiers submitted false evidence to negate the cases of the survivors. I would like to identify such cases and bring both types of testifiers face-to-face with the survivors and attempt an Oral History conversation to gauge the gratitude for the truth as well as the fury against falsehoods.

Another key goal I had set out for myself was to build a digital memorial to honour the lives of those who were killed in the Sikh Genocide of 1984. I have done some spadework and studied objects of a few Holocaust memorials and I intend to firm up this memorialization plan by the middle of next year.

I will register a non-profit in India after I return to Delhi so that this huge task can be transitioned from an individual to an institution and have longevity and latitude beyond my life. Also, because I would like the 1984 Sikh Genocide project to work with transparency in its functioning and accountability in its resources as it grows.

I had also set a Truth Commission goal for the 1984 Sikh Genocide. Based on my learnings from Professor Zoë West and the eye-opening readings on the South African TRC which she shared, I have developed doubts about the efficacy of such an initiative in India. I would like to spend some more time in fermenting this idea and also examine what would work best to achieve closure.

I'll do a deep dive into the covenants, protocols and functioning of the International Criminal Court at The Hague. I'll study how other countries have accessed this avenue for accountability and justice for large-scale human rights violations, and determine with expert legal help if it is a recourse for the survivors of the 1984 Sikh Genocide.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

After a long arc of academic assimilation, assessment and articulation, my conclusions on the 1984 Sikh Genocide are brief and pointed.

One, the assassination of Indian prime minister Mrs Indira Gandhi on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards, regardless of the provocation, was an act of treachery when one applies a high standard of conduct on those who were supposed to protect her.

Two, the whole Sikh community was implicated for the assassination of the prime minister by two Sikhs.

Three, the killing of more than 5,000 Sikhs in India was deliberately orchestrated by the ruling Congress party to seek revenge on the Sikhs and teach them a lesson.

The police were not only derelict in their duty to the citizens, but also became a handmaiden of the ruling party to first disarm the Sikhs and then assault them.

The violence was planned and followed a distinguishable pattern. Congress leaders led the mobs, provided resources for the genocide and even gave incentives to the killers.

The State of India was complicit and failed in its constitutional duty to protect the Sikhs like other citizens.

The neighbours, almost everywhere, stepped up to save the Sikhs, and suffered the consequences in many cases.

The violence against the Sikhs was not a communal riot in the classic sense of a Hindu-Muslim clash in India. Hindus or Muslims weren't killing the Sikhs; activists and supporters of the Congress party were killing them who happened to be Hindus or Muslims.

The large-scale violence against the Sikhs was mischaracterized as a riot by everyone when it was actually a genocide.

The government of the day dragged its feet and avoided an inquiry for several months. It then tweaked the terms of reference of the judicial commission to get away.

The Congress government also protected its ministers and MPs from prosecution by withholding the permission to register FIRs against them and start trials.

The survivors were treated very badly when it came to their rehabilitation.

The perpetrators of the Sikh Genocide have not been punished to this day, and, in fact, have got away.

The Indian judiciary, the last vestige of hope in the country, has failed to deliver justice to the Sikhs.

Successive governments formed by different political parties have failed to assuage the hurt of the survivors.

Political parties, particularly in Punjab, have abandoned the survivors because they don't belong to the dominant *Jat* community.

The civil society has developed an apathy towards the condition of the survivors.

Not enough has been done by the Sikh community to awaken the conscious of the world so that it can step up and extend care and support.

All official reports and documents related to 1984 need to be de-classified and made public in their entirety.

There is a need for the perpetrators to be punished for their crimes.

There is a dire need to give a life of dignity to the widows of 1984.

Nineteen eighty four needs to be looked at from a human rights lens, not a religious lens.



The loss of lives in 1984 needs to be memorialized for various reasons: law & order breakdown, human rights violations; religious, social & political polarization; barbaric behavior of Congress party activists and supporters, and above all, to pay a tribute to the dead. The loss should not go in vain. It should not be normalized. It should not be forgotten. It must serve as a deterrent for the future.

There is also a need for the society to engage with the survivors and give them validation because they see the members of the civil society as ‘agents of the community’s collective memory’, in the words of Mark Cave (*Listening On The Edge*)<sup>1</sup>. This is important because making sense of, and finding meaning in, what had happened in 1984 is a necessary first step to healing, because hearing is also healing.

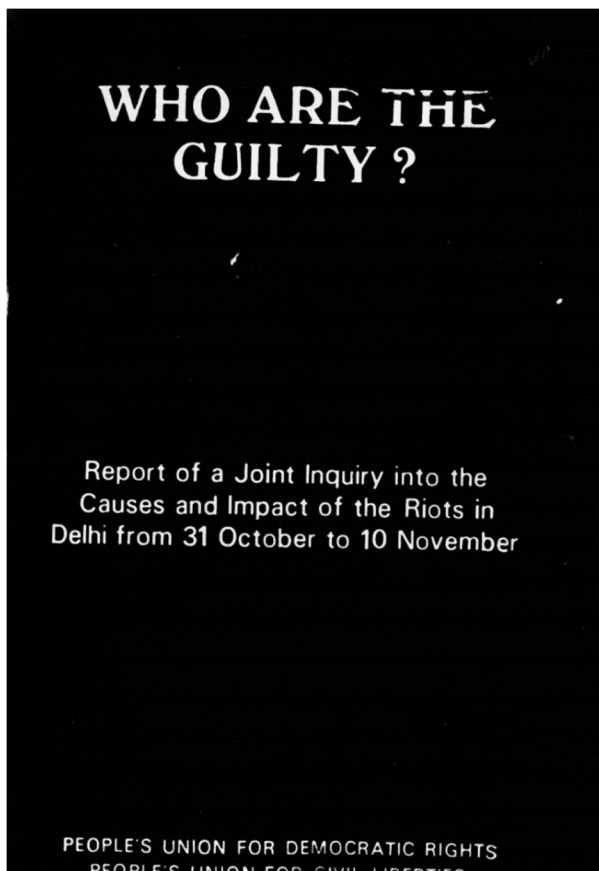
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*Notes:*

1. Mark Cave (Editor) and Stephen M. Sloan (Editor), *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), Pages 1-2, Introduction: What Remains: Reflections on Crisis Oral History

### Annotated Bibliography

This annotated bibliography lists out non-fictional and fictional books, booklets, reports of inquiries and commissions, plays, pantomimes, exhibitions, documentaries, feature films, etc., related to the 1984: Sikh Genocide. This, by no means, is a comprehensive list; it is more of a guide to essential reading and watching. It is meant to aid a better understanding of the killing of more than 5,000 Sikhs in India after the assassination of India's prime minister Mrs Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984 in New Delhi, what led to it and what were its consequences.



***Who Are The Guilty? (First Edition)***

By People's Union For Democratic Rights (PUDR) and People's Union For Civil Liberties (PUCL)

PUDR-PUCL

First published: 1984

Genre: Inquiry Report

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/10MzF1CzM1kpanl0K5Ty0VRe2pjYeTH\\_b/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/10MzF1CzM1kpanl0K5Ty0VRe2pjYeTH_b/view?usp=sharing)

Description: The first edition of *Who Are The Guilty?* came out as a 41-page booklet with a black cover in November 1984 – within three weeks of the anti-Sikh violence. Widely referred to as the ‘Black Book’, it was published jointly by well-known civil rights activists, Mr Gobinda Mukhoty, President, PUDR, and Dr Rajni Kothari, President, PUCL. It was a broad-sweep volunteer-led fact-finding inquiry which was conducted in Delhi between 31 October and 10 November 1984. It focused on the composition of assailants, role of police, local administration and the army, role of the Congress party, the media, the opposition and the civil society. It presented case studies from the most affected areas. It also enlisted the relief and rehabilitation work. It made damning conclusions and named names based on its findings. It presented demands to the Government on behalf of the citizens. This report was widely considered to be credible and accurate and its first edition, priced at Rs 3, was instantly sold out in the absence of any official probe.

***Who Are The Guilty? (Second Edition)***

By People’s Union For Democratic Rights (PUDR) and People’s Union For Civil Liberties (PUCL)

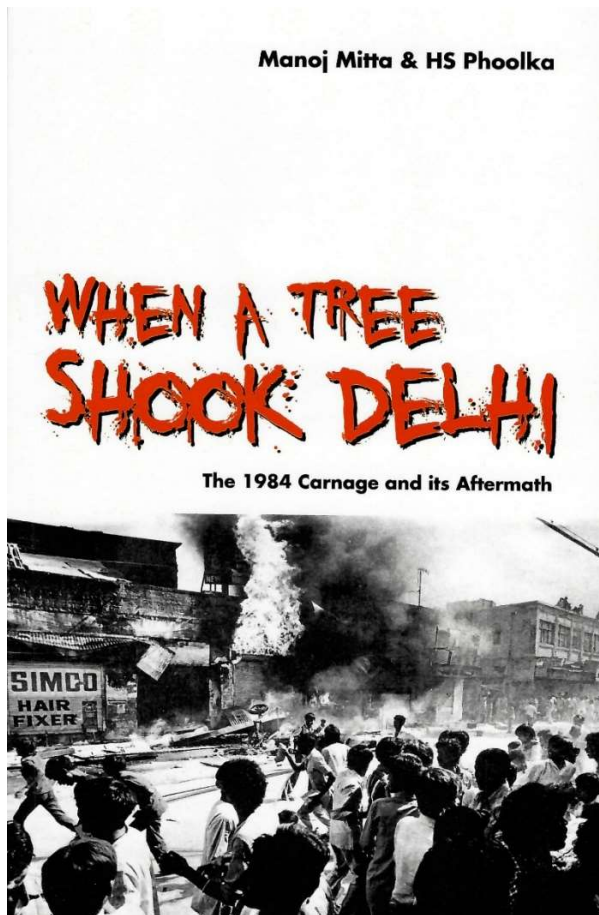
PUDR-PUCL

First published: 1984

Genre: Inquiry Report

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x8cMC4pqw68eV3X\\_hXovFvgRSUYX4Ypz/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x8cMC4pqw68eV3X_hXovFvgRSUYX4Ypz/view?usp=sharing)

Description: The second edition of *Who Are The Guilty?* came out in December 1984 as a 66-page book with the same black cover as the first edition. This ‘Black Book’ expanded on all the inquiry parameters of the first edition and went down to detailing the assaults at the block level in various residential areas. It added annexures, including the city administration-led and non-official refugee camps. It again minced no words to list out the perpetrators, including the Congress party politicians. To this day, it is widely regarded as a timely and effective civil rights initiative undertaken by public-spirited citizens which put the blame for the anti-Sikh violence where it belonged.



***When A Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and its Aftermath***

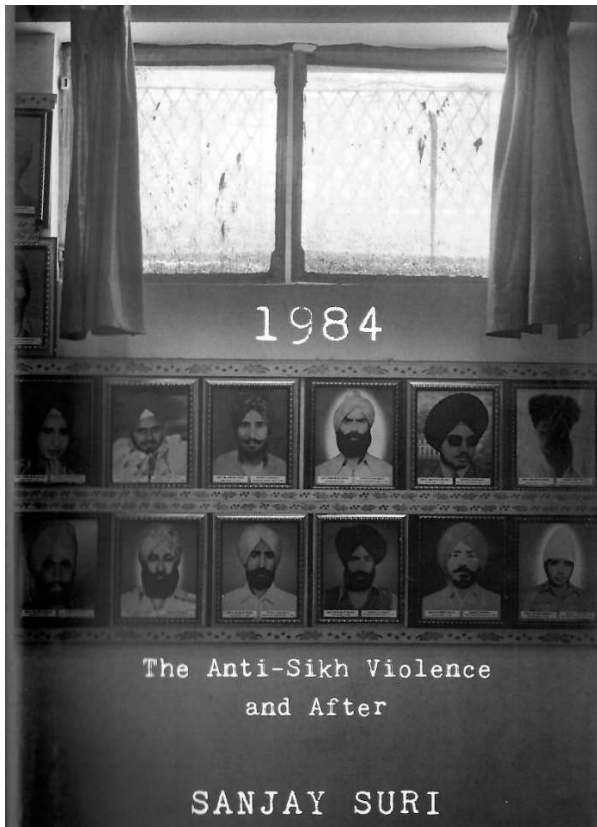
By Manoj Mitta and H.S. Phoolka

Roli Books

First published: 2007

Genre: Non-fiction

Description: The killing of 3,000 members of the minority Sikh community slaughtered over three days in 1984, right in India's capital, stands out even in a country which is inured to mass violence. Thirty-six years on, neither the organizers of the massacre nor the state actors who facilitated it have been punished, despite prolonged inquiries and trials. This book seeks to uncover the truth on the basis of evidence that came to light during the proceedings of the judicial inquiry conducted by the Nanavati Commission. Authors Manoj Mitta and H.S. Phoolka, among the most knowledgeable voices on the subject, present an unsparing account, filled with insights and revelations, on the 1984 carnage and its aftermath. This book, by far, is the most comprehensive work based on facts and evidence on the pogrom.



***1984: The Anti-Sikh Violence and After***

By Sanjay Suri

HarperCollins

First published: 2015

Genre: Politics & Government

Description: “The call to the office of *The Indian Express* newspaper in New Delhi came in the afternoon. ‘The police have arrested many men for looting Sikhs,’ the voice said. ‘A Congress Member of Parliament has come to the police station. A big confrontation is taking place now because he wants the men from his party to be released.’

That call was received by Sanjay Suri, a young crime reporter at the daily newspaper at the time of Mrs Gandhi’s assassination. He was among a handful of journalists to experience the full horror of the violence against the Sikhs that followed, and carried on unchecked for the next few days while the police looked the other way.

In this book, he makes fresh revelations and apports blame based on his eyewitness accounts, and extensive interviews with police officers who were in the forefront of facing the violence back then. He filed sworn affidavits, deposed before inquiry commissions multiple times, confronted Mrs Gandhi’s son and successor, new prime minister Rajiv Gandhi during his election campaign, and made every possible effort to have the perpetrators brought to justice, but with little success. This is a humane but chilling account of what he saw and experienced, backed by a thorough examination of

existing records and provisions of the Indian legal system, which he is quite well-versed with.

JUSTICE NANAVATI  
COMMISSION OF INQUIRY  
(1984 ANTI-SIKH RIOTS)

REPORT

VOLUME - I

***Justice Nanavati Commission of Inquiry Report: Volume I and II***

By retired Chief Justice of India Justice G.T. Nanavati

Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India

Published: 2005

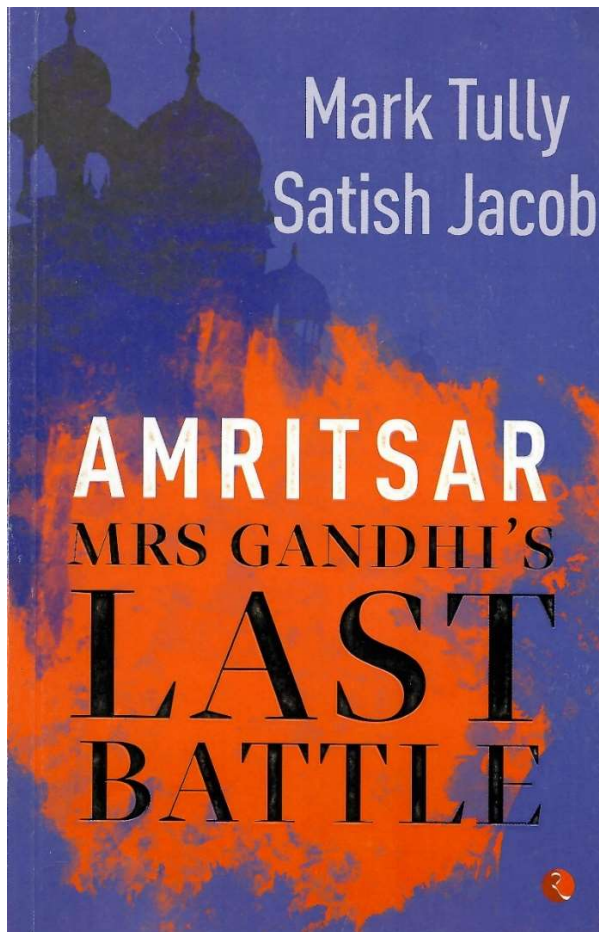
Genre: Inquiry Report

[https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Nanavati-I\\_eng\\_0.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Nanavati-I_eng_0.pdf)

[https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Nanavati-II\\_eng\\_0.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Nanavati-II_eng_0.pdf)

Description: The Nanavati Commission was appointed by a unanimous resolution passed in the upper house of Indian Parliament, the *Rajya Sabha*, after the Congress party was voted out at the Center and a right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government came to power. The commission, set up in 2000, perused 2,557 affidavits and submitted its report in February 2005. By that time, the Congress party was back in power at the Center. This second judicial commission belied the hopes of the Sikh community, and those citizens who believe in the rule of law in India, as it reiterated the first judicial commission's clean chit to the Congress party as well as former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. It, however, indicted two other Congress Members of Parliament and recommended their prosecution. Unlike the first judicial commission whose proceedings were conducted behind a veil of secrecy, the Nanavati

Commission conducted its proceedings in a transparent way. The *Justice Nanavati Commission of Inquiry Report*, therefore, is a document of record.



***Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle***

By Mark Tully and Satish Jacob

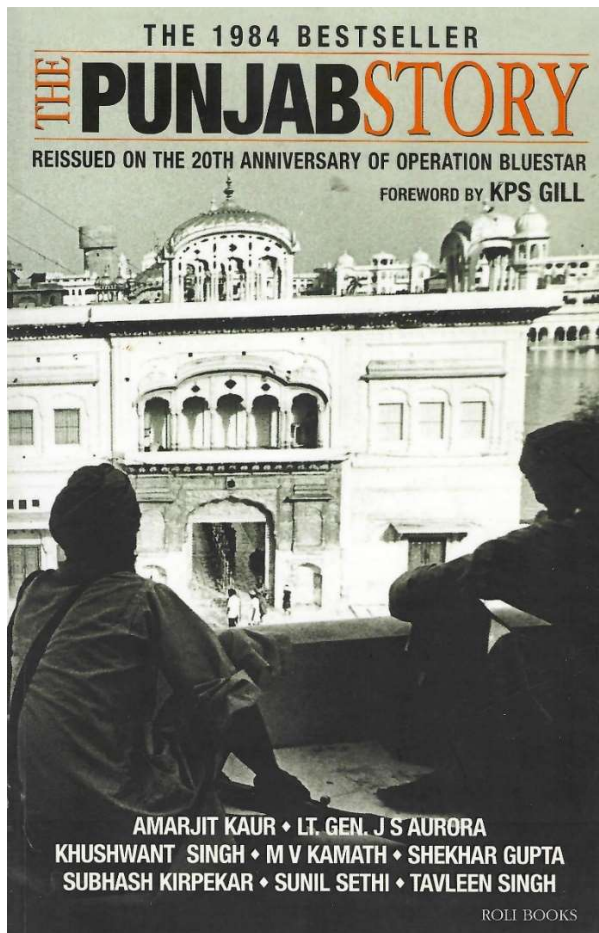
Rupa Books

First published: 1985

Genre: Non-fiction

Description: *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle* is inarguably one of the best works on the twin defining events of 1984: Operation Bluestar in Amritsar and the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi which triggered the large-scale massacre of the Sikhs in India, particularly Delhi. Based on first-hand eyewitness accounts, this book captures all the twists and turns in the journey of the small Sikh community in India, its trysts and tragedies, triumphs and tribulations, as it struggled for its identity and autonomy, rights and aspirations. The authors are among the most credible journalists and writers who worked for the BBC for three decades each and kept a close watch on all major developments from their vantage position in New Delhi. The book provides their unique

perspective with context, equanimity and wisdom. It is a must-read scholarly work to understand the Sikhs hold in the Indian social structure. The opening chapter is particularly relevant to the 1984: Sikh Genocide as it gives an overview of the violence that followed Mrs Gandhi's assassination.



***The Punjab Story***

By Amarjit Kaur, Lt. Gen. J.S. Aurora, Khushwant Singh, M.V. Kamath, Shekhar Gupta, Subhash Kirpekar, Sunil Sethi, Tavleen Singh

Roli Books

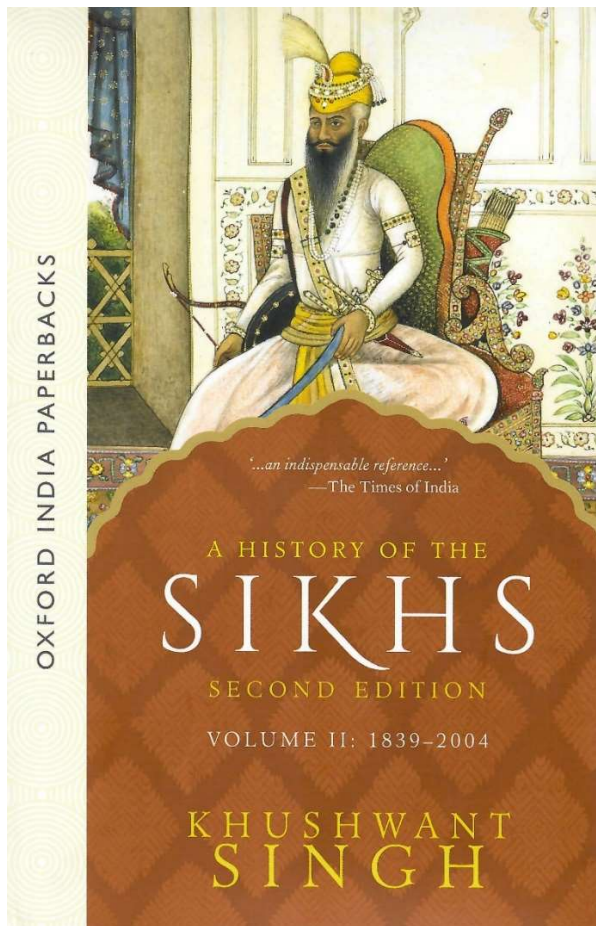
First published: 1984

Genre: Non-fiction

Description: First published two months after Operation Bluestar, *The Punjab Story* pieces together the complex Punjab jigsaw through the eyes of some of India's most eminent public figures and journalists. Writing with the passion and conviction of those who were involved with the drama, they present a wide-ranging perspective on the past, present and future of the Punjab tangle. The interesting thing about this book is that it



presents varied viewpoints from different positions of the stakeholders and allows the reader to form her/ his own opinion about the tragic developments in the state of Punjab.



***A History of the Sikhs: Volume II: 1839 – 2004***

By Khushwant Singh

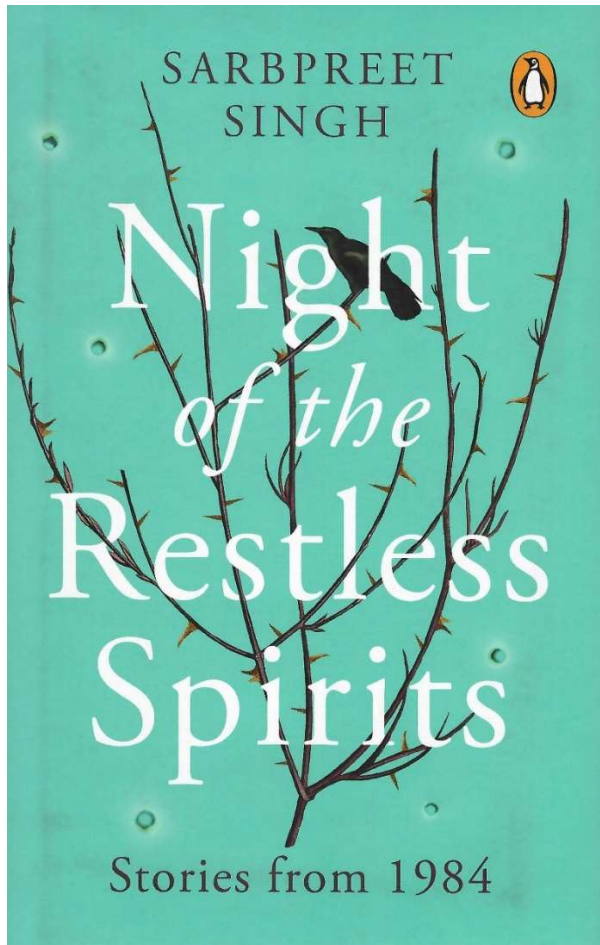
Oxford University Press

First published (Second Edition): 2004

Genre: History

Description: *A History of the Sikhs* remains the most comprehensive and authoritative book on the Sikh community. This volume picks up the historical thread at the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 and covers the period until 2004. Although based on exhaustive archival research, it is highly accessible to the general, non-scholarly audience because of the inimitable writing style of its author, Khushwant Singh, who (now deceased) has been a world-renowned writer, editor, journalist and parliamentarian. Chapter 22 of this book titled ‘Assassination and After’ (pp 373-384), closely deals with the widespread violence against the Sikhs after the killing of Mrs Indira Gandhi, which the author terms as ‘holocaust’ and ‘pogrom’. An eminent citizen and New Delhi

resident, the author himself had to take refuge in the Swedish Embassy in the city to save his life when the violence broke out against the Sikhs.



***Night of the Restless Spirits: Stories from 1984***

By Sarbpreet Singh

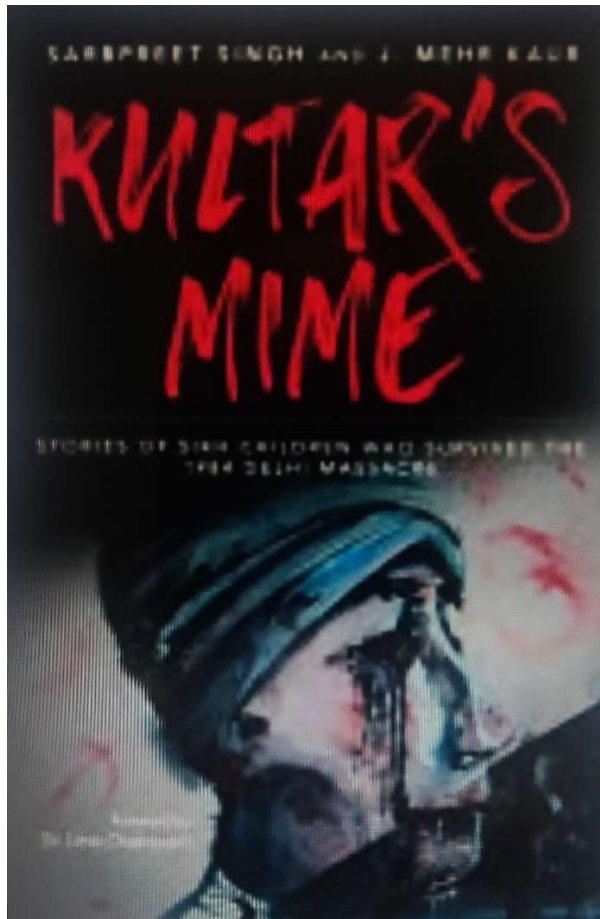
Penguin-Viking

First published: 2020

Genre: Fiction

Description: A young Indian in the US embraces a cause rooted in his motherland, one he doesn't fully understand. A student's world is turned upside down when his friend and her family are caught in the crosshairs of volatility and violence. A train burns as it enters Delhi, and the sole Sikh survivor shares his haunting tale with the nation. These and many other stories form this heart-rending collection. It evokes the horrors and uncertainties of 1984 through the tales of ordinary people, caught in something bigger than themselves. Set during a time of monumental upheaval, *Night of the Restless Spirits* blurs the line between personal and political, and takes the reader on a journey fraught

with love and tinged with tragedy. The author takes creative liberties and transforms stories of true facts into magical fiction, transcending form as well as function in the process.



***Kultar's Mime: Stories of Sikh Children Who Survived the 1984 Delhi Massacre***

By J. Mehr Kaur, Sarbpreet Singh

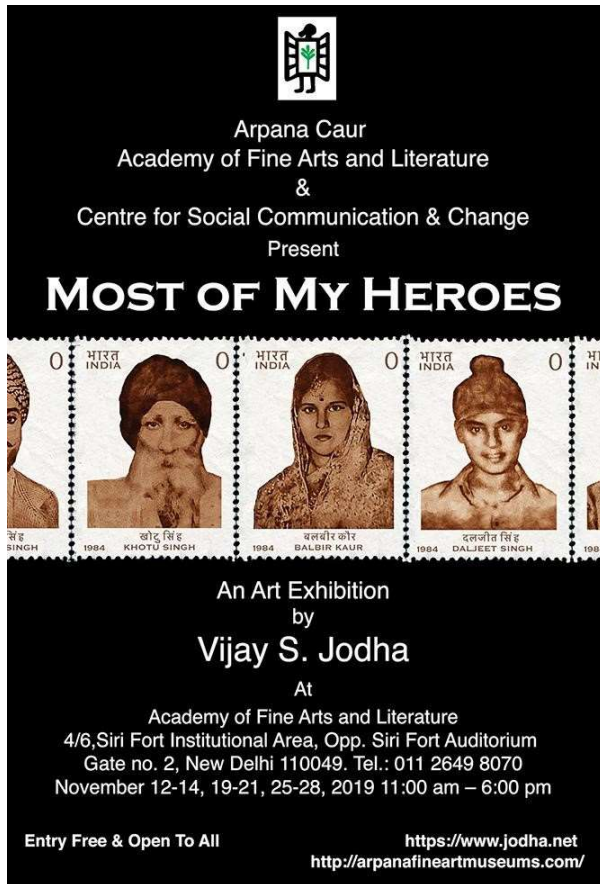
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform

First published: 2016

Genre: Play and pantomime

Description: Kultar's Mime tells the stories of Sikh children who survived the Delhi massacre through a poem that grew into a play, made its way from Boston to Delhi, and restarted the conversation about a forgotten chapter in history. In April 1903, a pogrom targeted the Jewish population in Kishinev, Russia, leaving many dead and wounded and thousands homeless. Upon visiting the aftermath, the Hebrew poet, Hayim Nahman Bialik, composed one of his most famous poems, "In the City of Slaughter." In 1984, after Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was shot dead by her Sikh bodyguards, an orgy of murder, rape, and arson was unleashed upon the Sikh residents of Delhi. When he

eventually discovered the hidden truth, Sarbpreet Singh, then a young Sikh living in Milwaukee, wrote the poem "Kultar's Mime." The play *Kultar's Mime* synthesizes the suffering caused by these two events, separated by thousands of miles, many years, and vast cultural differences. Through the raw imagery of the two poems, it reminds us that, in the end, all innocent victims are the same.



Arpana Caur  
Academy of Fine Arts and Literature  
&  
Centre for Social Communication & Change  
Present

## MOST OF MY HEROES

An Art Exhibition  
by  
**Vijay S. Jodha**  
At  
Academy of Fine Arts and Literature  
4/6, Siri Fort Institutional Area, Opp. Siri Fort Auditorium  
Gate no. 2, New Delhi 110049. Tel.: 011 2649 8070  
November 12-14, 19-21, 25-28, 2019 11:00 am – 6:00 pm

Entry Free & Open To All <https://www.jodha.net>  
<http://arpanafineartmuseums.com/>

### *Most of My Heroes*

By Vijay S. Jodha

Centre for Social Communication & Change

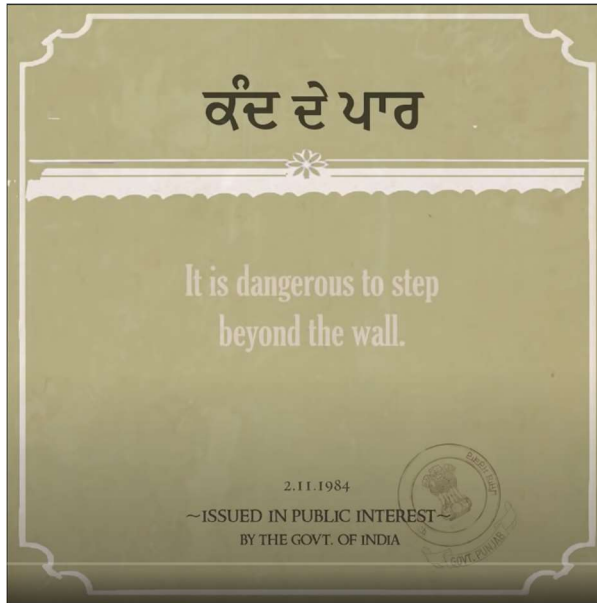
First viewing: November 2019

Genre: Art exhibition

<https://www.jodha.net>

Description: Postage stamps are the preserve of the famous or the powerful, and not of the ordinary or the forgotten. This art exhibition subverts that idea. It features some of the men, women, children and even an infant who were killed in broad daylight in Delhi exactly 35 years ago. Even going by the lower official figures, on an average, one Sikh was brutally murdered in full public view every four minutes in the heart of India's capital over three days of mob violence in November 1984. The absence of justice where

almost all the perpetrators and enablers have never been held to account is a sad reflection of the zero value attached to these lost lives. Hence the value denoted on these stamps. This project is as much a tribute to these victims as to anyone anywhere in the world: assaulted, displaced, discriminated against or murdered on grounds of religion, race or any other personal attribute.



***Kandh De Paar (Across the Wall)***

By Garima Pura

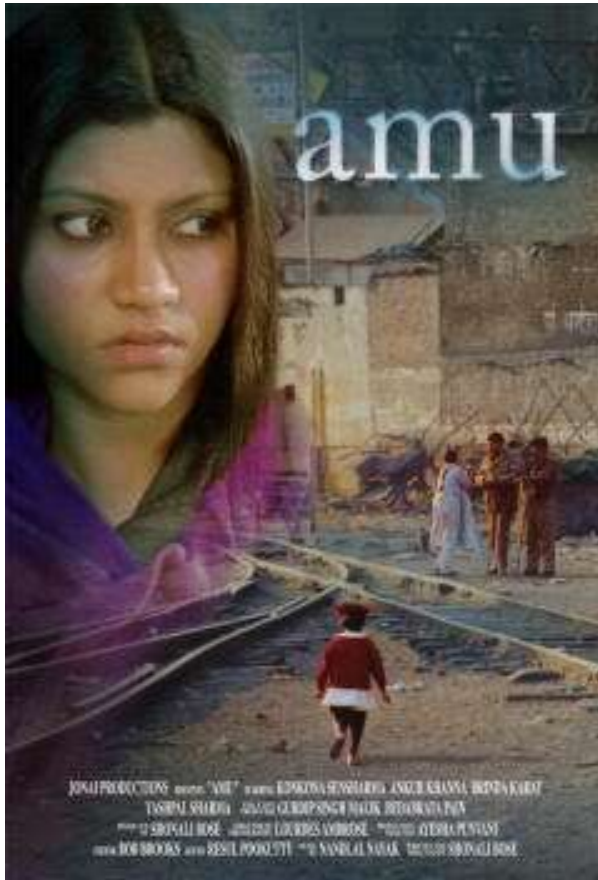
Pocket Films

First released: April 2020

Genre: Short film

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSF8\\_AY7FQI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSF8_AY7FQI)

Description: This short film depicts the story of a Sikh family caught in the communal fires of the 1984 genocide that took place after the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi. This is a tale of a father and son who do not look eye-to-eye on their views about the establishment, a mother who strives for peace and keeps violent secrets to herself, and a 10-year-old who is just looking for a playmate. When the assault on their community occurs, they are forced to make emotionally challenging choices which tear them apart.



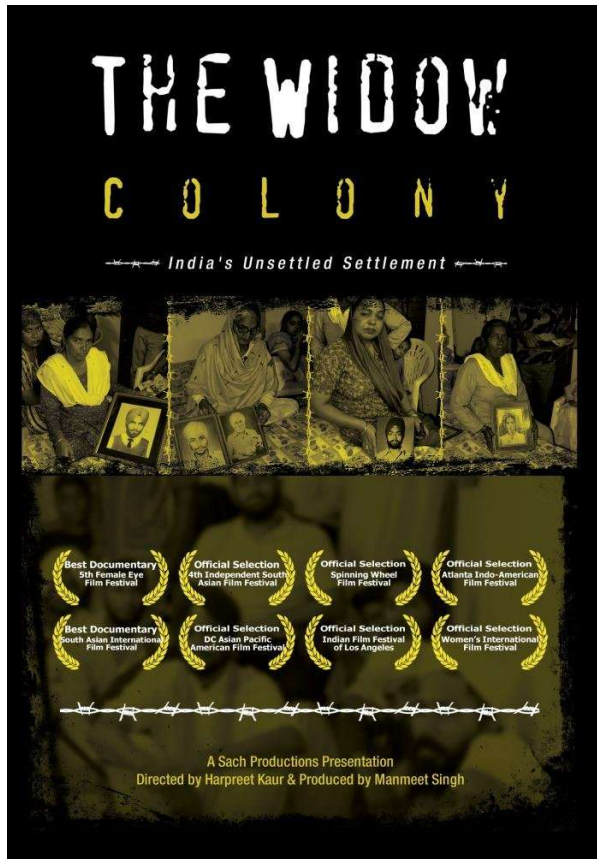
### ***Amu***

Written, produced and directed by Shonali Bose

Released: 2005

Genre: Feature film

Description: *Amu* is a 102-minute-long feature film directed by Shonali Bose about the 1984 anti-Sikh violence. It is based on Bose's own novel by the same name. It stars Konkona Sen Sharma, Brinda Karat and Ankur Khanna. It premiered at Berlin Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival in 2005. The film is the journey of a 21-year-old Indian American woman who has lived in the US since the age of three. After graduating from UCLA, she goes to India to visit her relatives. There she meets a college student from an upper-class family who is disdainful of her wide-eyed wonder at discovering the 'real India'. Undeterred, she visits the slums, crowded markets and cafes in Delhi. In one slum, she is struck by an odd feeling of déjà vu. Soon after that, she starts to have nightmares. She also learns that she had been adopted as an orphan. It turns out that her birth parents belonged to the same slum and had been put to a brutal end there. The film had received critical acclaim as well as the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in English.



***The Widow Colony – India’s Unsettled Settlement***

Directed by Harpreet Kaur

Released: 2005

Genre: Documentary

Description: ‘The Widow Colony – India’s Unsettled Settlement’ borrows its name from the settlement in Tilak Vihar in west Delhi, which is locally called the Widow Colony or *Vidhva Colony*. The documentary film takes the viewer to the streets of Trilokpuri, Kalyanpuri, Himatpuri, Sultanpuri and Mangolpuri, the localities which suffered the major brunt of the Sikh killings in November 1984. Director Harpreet Kaur uses the testimonies of the widows and subject experts, along with images of the killings and destruction that followed the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi, to convey the trauma of the widows, their battle for justice and their struggle for survival in India.



### ***Graham***

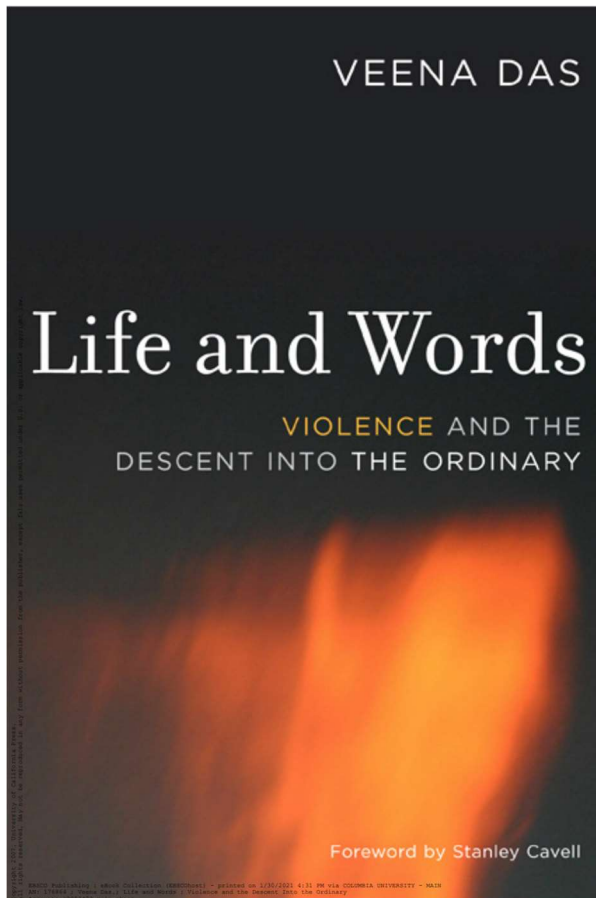
Created by Shailendra Kumar Jha

Released: 2021

Genre: Crime/drama

Description: *Graham* is an acclaimed eight-episode web series on Hotstar. It is based on a Hindi language book, *Chaurasi*, by Satya Vyas. The series stars Pawan Malhotra, Zoya Hussain, Anshumaan Pushkar and Wamiqa Gabbi in lead roles. The story revolves around Amrita Singh, a young IPS officer, who resigns because of political interference in her work and opts to get married to her longstanding beau in Canada. That's when she comes to know that her father Gursevak Singh, a Sikh himself, is a prime accused in the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Bokaro, Jharkhand. Amrita decides to stay on in the police to unravel the truth. Through Amrita's investigation emerges a tender love story of trust, betrayal and supreme sacrifice, where the viewers see an old world romance of Rishi and Manu, a Hindu boy and a Sikh girl, in 1984. As the story unfolds, secrets from the past about identities and relationships tumble out one after the other, while at the socio-political level, the situations in 1984 and 2016 present some chilling and uncanny similarities.





***Life and Words: Violence and the Descent Into the Ordinary***

By Veena Das

University of California Press

First published: 2007

Genre: Social Science/ Anthropology

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WkWokq24bH6JKKQh-IEq62OW-SMUOcNE/view?usp=sharing>

Description: In this powerful and compassionate work, one of anthropology's most distinguished ethnographers weaves together rich fieldwork with a compelling critical analysis about violence and how it affects everyday life. Dr Veena Das examines case studies including the massacre of the Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi. In a major departure from much anthropological inquiry, Das asks how this violence has entered 'the recesses of the ordinary' instead of viewing it as an interruption of life to which we simply bear witness. She engages with anthropological work on collective violence, rumor, sectarian conflict, new kinship, and state and bureaucracy as she embarks on a wide-ranging exploration of the relations among violence, gender, and subjectivity. In doing so, she weaves anthropological and philosophical reflections on the ordinary into her analysis and points towards a new way of interpreting violence in societies and cultures around the globe. Besides the opening chapter titled, 'The Event

and the Everyday' (pp 1-17), chapters directly relevant to the Sikh Genocide are: 'In the Region of Rumor' (pp 108-134), 'The Force of the Local' (pp 135-161), 'The Signature of the State' (pp 162-183), 'Three Portraits of Grief and Mourning' (pp 184-204) and 'Revisiting Trauma, Testimony, and Political Community' (pp 205-222).

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