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RE-PRESENTING PASTS: SIKH DIASPORIC AND DIGITAL MEMORIES OF 1984

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation is a study of digitally mediated, diasporic and intergenerational collective memories of the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. The violence unfolded in two separate but related events in June and November of that year. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with Sikhs in North America, and content analysis of websites about 1984, I show that even though community members in India suffered the losses of 1984, the Sikh diaspora is finding ways to represent these previously marginalized experiences. Public discourse on 1984 is caught between dichotomous narratives. The first consists of dominant state and mass media representations, which justified the violence, dismissed it as spontaneous “riots,” and blamed and shamed the Sikh community for its own victimhood. The state and mass media told a distorted story of Sikhs as “outsiders” in a “Hindu nation state.” The second set of voices comes from the resistance struggle for Khalistan, which was a counternarrative to the state, a mostly territorial movement, advocating militancy and violence. I argue that Sikhs in the diaspora are disrupting polarized narratives of the state and counternarratives that emerged from within the community, re-presenting memories of 1984 in and through digital media to form “crevices” in dominant, static

and rigid “walls” of representations and popular counternarratives. Crevices are multi-layered experiential narratives that are a work-in-progress, an ongoing process of dissension defying the fixity and rigidity of dominant narratives. An intergenerational cohort of Sikhs in the diaspora are doing “memory work,” deliberate and conscious public practices of searching for fragments of painful pasts and piecing them together to give cultural meaning and shape to broken traumatic experiences. My study addresses gaps in literature in two main ways: first, I examine heterogeneous voices within the Sikh community, narrated through more personalized, intimate and interactive medium of communication, digital media; and second, my dissertation is one of few studies examining a non-Western group’s construction and representation of trauma. I extend frameworks of collective memory and trauma to include Sikh-specific cultural apparatus in giving meaning to experiences of loss and suffering.

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Chapter 1

Media, Memory Work and Trauma Narratives

In June 1984, the Indian army under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi invaded the holiest of Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple, in the Sikh-predominant north Indian state of Punjab, killing thousands of pilgrims. Following closely on the heels of this attack, Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. This precipitated the organized, state-backed mass massacre of Sikhs in India's capital city, New Delhi, and other parts of North India lasting from the evening of October 31 through November 4, when more than 3,000 Sikhs died. 1984 was the first state-sponsored sectarian massacre of a religious minority in India.¹ Sikhs keenly experienced the sacrilege and destruction these events brought in their wake but lacked a social space to express their feelings. More broadly, "1984" became shorthand, symbolizing the tensions between the Sikh community and the state as well as state-inflicted civilian atrocities and abuses in Punjab during that period. It became a taboo subject for the community members in India, overshadowed by state-created and mass media-circulated stories and Sikh militant voices.

But in the early 2000s, an intergenerational cohort of Sikhs in the diaspora began to talk back to dominant representations of 1984, creating counter-memories, or their own collective memories of the event, in and through digital media. My dissertation is a study of these digitally mediated collective memories, and how they challenge state and mass-mediated representations of 1984.

From Dichotomy to “Crevices”

Public discourse about 1984 is caught between dichotomous politicized narratives: the first, from the state,² that assumes “Hindu” identity, drawing a simplistic association between the majority Hindu community as the “rightful proprietors” of India³ (Hansen 1999, 4); the second comes from the resistance/religious nationalist struggle for Khalistan, which was a counternarrative to the state, a mostly territorial movement demanding a separate, sovereign state for Sikhs. The Khalistan movement employed “militant political modes of action” (Murphy 2000, 340), but it was not the only response to 1984. In state and media representations, however, 1984 was deliberately constructed as synonymous with a separatist, extremist movement, engendering fear of all Sikhs as “terrorists,” to undermine and create amnesia about state complicity. The discourse of Hindu nationalism, an underlying factor in attacking Sikhs, is “invisibilized” or hidden under the veneer of “secular” politics of the political party in power, the Congress (I).⁴ In fact the very foundation of the Indian state’s secular ideology is flawed and broken (see for e.g. Madan 1991). The violence of 1984 not only set a precedent for other anti-minority attacks in India, but was also the first instance of the Indian state appropriating a “Hindu” identity. Yet, public or even scholarly representations of 1984 rarely make this underlying discourse visible.

My dissertation interrogates state and media representations of Sikhs and analyzes digital narratives of 1984 as counter-memories. In keeping with the state and mass media narrative in popular but also academic accounts, the study of counternarratives to 1984 is confined to militancy and militant identity (see for e.g.

Juergensmeyer 1987, Kakar 1990, Das 1995⁵, Axel 2005). There is no comprehensive account addressing heterogeneous voices within the Sikh community. Nor is there a full-length study examining the role of mass media in creating and disseminating a biased, often vicious discourse against the Sikh community in and around 1984. One of the reasons for this is the widespread media blackout at the time and different forms of media in existence in 1980s India. Yet, media representations are particularly important given that diasporic Sikhs are responding to dominant accounts belatedly in and through digital media, bringing back 1984 into the public discourse.⁶

While state representations of 1984 circulating in traditional media, such as print, television and radio, obliterated Sikh voices, counternarratives contained in the separatist, territorial movement for Khalistan also failed to effectively convey (and perhaps even obscured) experiences of pain, suffering and loss felt by the community at large. Khalistani focus remained narrow and exclusionary, especially as it employed violent means to establish a territorial identity. Even though the question of a separate territory for Sikhs was, and continues to remain, a highly politically charged issue (see for e.g. Banga 1990, Oberoi 1987, Grewal 2007) there is more to the events of 1984 than the question of territoriality. For example, Sikh experiences of fear, of being marginalized and stigmatized, have been excluded from most framings of the event. By actively engaging with memories of 1984 in and through digital media, diasporic Sikhs are addressing this lacuna in public discourse.

Sikhs have a substantial diasporic presence, approximately one million, or about 5% of the total Sikh population of about 20 million live outside India and Punjab).⁷

Today, an intergenerational cohort of diasporic Sikhs is struggling to give meaning and coherence to a troubled and politicized past. They are doing “memory work,” piecing together recollections and re-creating, re-interpreting and re-presenting past experiences and events by weaving them into public narratives (see for e.g. Kuhn 1995, Abu-Lughod and Sa’adi 2007). I call these two cohorts of memory workers “first” and “second generation,” derived from literature in immigration studies (e.g. Portes and Zhou 1993, Levitt and Waters 2002, Kasinitz et al 2009) and intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory (e.g. Prager 2003, Hirsch 2007), specifically Holocaust memories (e.g. Stein 2009, 2014, Jacobs 2011). First generation memory workers are part of the larger South Asian wave to North America that arrived in the period of post-immigration reforms to the United States in 1965 and Canada in the 1950s. These were mostly professional, educated Sikhs unlike Sikh migrants who started arriving to North America at the turn of the 20th century.

Their children comprise second generation immigrants, born in diasporic contexts or those who arrived between the ages of five and twelve, or what is known as 1.5 generation. Scholars in trauma and memory studies define first generation as the age cohort with a direct relationship with a traumatic event or a “wound that never heals” (Prager 2003, 176). The second generation are children of survivors who grow up with memories of trauma. These memories deeply impinge on their psychological and social development such that past experiences persistently bleed into and define the present, and the “next generation is deprived of its sense of social location and its capacity to creatively define itself autonomously from the former” (Prager 2003, 176).

Here, I use the term first generation to refer mainly to two main sets of diasporic Sikhs: first, the women and men who directly confronted the violence of 1984 in India and migrated to North America because of these experiences of persecution either as voluntary migrants or refugees, and second, the individuals who were part of the diaspora prior to 1984 and for whom the year marked a deep and durable transformation in community identity and relationship with India and Punjab.

The term second generation refers to children of direct survivors of 1984 as well as descendants of pre-1984 Sikh immigrants. The “wounds without memory” (Laub 1998) often left an intense impact on the second generational cohort because of their parents’ direct experiences. In instances when parents had not been directly affected, 1984 became a pathway for younger Sikhs to develop a deep affective commitment to the faith and the diasporic community. In opposition to scholarly findings about the diluted importance of religiosity, especially among South Asians (e.g. Maira 2002), and in keeping with ethnographic research about continued religiosity among second generation South Asians (see for e.g. Puryakastha 2005, Kurien 2005, Joshi 2006) I argue that memories of 1984 are a way for the second generation to find meaning in the Sikh faith in the diaspora.

Diasporic Sikhs, both first generation and second generation, are doing the work of emotion (Hochschild 1979), articulating experiences of grief, fear, anger, shame and loss in and through digital media. Second generation Sikhs are particularly active in creating digital memory projects on 1984. The second generation learned of 1984 through various sources within their family and community. Their “postmemories,”

(Hirsch 2007) or indirect, vicariously experienced recollections of 1984 are the starting point for renarrating 1984. Digital representations of 1984 are more complex and nuanced than either state or militant narratives allow. Diasporic memory work in and through the digital cultural moment aims to construct a more differentiated, nuanced and diffuse set of memories of 1984 than post-1984 framings tend to afford.

Sikhs are re-presenting 1984 in and through fragments or fissures, or what I call “crevices”⁸ in dominant, static and rigid “walls” of representations as well as in popular militant counternarratives. Crevices resemble counternarratives. But unlike the immediate and unambiguously passionate violence of Khalistani narratives, crevices are time-delayed, retrospective, slowly evolving, complex and even contradictory re-presentations that derive from a wide section of the community. Crevices mark a subtle and fluid shift in re-presenting 1984, disrupting the polarized narratives of the state and extending dominant counternarratives that emerged from within the community.

The genesis of present-day crevices can be traced back to developments within and outside India in the immediate aftermath of the June and October-November events, when some civic organizations in India began creating and voicing counternarratives. Crevices also build upon a more nuanced and moderate diasporic mobilization in the immediate post-1984 period (see for e.g. LaBrack 1999, Tatla 1999). Diasporic memory work contains many stories rather than the single story of militant resistance. A straightforwardly militant portrayal continues to be advantageous to the federal state in India, justifying its own agenda of repression and silencing, but diasporic

and digital memory work on 1984 shows that the community responds in heterogeneous ways to past and present repression.

The main argument I make here is that despite the mayhem, destruction and losses of 1984 which excluded and stigmatized Sikhs in India, the Sikh diaspora is finding ways to represent such marginalized experiences. An intergenerational cohort of memory workers in the Sikh diaspora, with their spatial and temporal distance from the events of 1984; the availability of changing technologies, horizontally organized digital media, interactive, bridging private and public domains; and cross-cultural influences (such as the Jewish Holocaust) are challenging dominant walls of representation. These mediated re-presentations of 1984 are crevices, multi-layered experiential narratives which have the potential to disrupt well-entrenched memory edifices.

“The Personal is Political”

Several years ago, I began to reflect consciously about the Indian subcontinent’s 1947 Partition memories, and study memories of the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. I am a third generation descendant of 1947 Partition survivors. My grandparents and their siblings moved to present-day India at the time of the Partition. I am a Hindu Punjabi (Punjab was directly affected by the Partition along with the east Indian state of West Bengal), born and raised in New Delhi (the capital city of India, also in north India, with a substantial Punjabi population)⁹ and had a vague consciousness of my Hindu and Punjabi identity while growing up. I identify as a Punjabi mostly because of my intimate relationship with the language. Despite my lack of formal training in Punjabi and limited

spoken fluency, the language lives in me because it was and continues to be the medium of everyday conversation in my immediate family, among my paternal grandparents, now deceased, and my parents, as well as members of my extended family and friends. My affinity with Punjabi language and cultural familiarity more broadly made me interested in studying the Sikh community.

Following a well-worn path of family migration paved by immigrant groups (see for e.g. Foner 2002) I came to the United States, to be with my sister and niece and to attend graduate school. My distance from “home”¹⁰ created a yearning for the familiar. Studying traumatic memory and identity awakened a consciousness of my family history of Partition. I wrote a term paper on the subject and soon after started working on another project with Sikhs in New Jersey and New York. I began conducting interviews with Sikhs to understand the idea of “wearing religion,” or maintaining external attributes of Sikh identity in the diaspora. As I attended *gurdwara* or the Sikh place of worship periodically and started speaking with people I serendipitously discovered that 1984 was a critical temporal event that had deep meaning and significance for diasporic Sikh identity, including the adoption and maintenance of external insignia of the faith. While none of my preliminary interviews were with direct survivors of 1984, I became aware that many diasporic Sikhs were “haunted,” or living with ever-present traces of these events (Gordon 1997). It is these “hauntings” that are addressed through memory work, as I show.

My dissertation is an account of Sikh diasporic memory work on 1984, focusing on Sikhs in Canada and the United States: What are the dominant memories of this

period? What were some early counternarratives which challenged such understandings? What are some components of Sikh memory work today? Given the proliferation of voices on the Internet,¹¹ what role does digital media play in doing memory work? Who are Sikh “memory workers” and what are their motivations? More generally, what is the relationship between traumatic memories from national contexts and diasporic identity?

In the rest of this chapter I situate 1984, imagined and represented as a traumatic memory and constructed through digitally mediated memory work, which creates and reinforces “diasporic public spheres” (Appadurai 1996, 4).

1984 as Cultural Memory and Trauma

1984 is in the past but it continues to resonate as a “critical event” (Das 1995, Tatla 1999) for Sikhs in the present. Is 1984 a memory, is it history, or both? This issue is part of a broader question of framing the past as history or memory. Major scholarly writings (see for e.g. Halbwachs 1980 [1950], 1992, Nora 1996 [1992], Connerton 1989) draw a strict distinction between “memory and history.” Memory is breathing, malleable, evolving and performative or nimble and active, while history is inert, static and fixed in the past. The exception is oral history and its study of everyday memory as a challenge to dominant narratives (see for e.g. Perks and Thomson 2006 [1998], Portelli 1991, 2006 [1998]).

In opposition to the rigid binary between memory and history, I focus on the overlap between the two. Even though I use the frame of “memory” rather than

“history,” I situate my study in the fluidity rather than solid boundaries between memory and history (see for e.g. Olick and Robbins 1998, Jelin 2003, Sturken 1997, Murphy 2012). I emphasize the similarity between history and memory and see them both as narratives and representations of the past that help make sense of the present. History is not ‘T’ruth and memory is not fiction (for e.g. Kuhn 2000, Radstone 2000, 10-13).¹² Even though the events of 1984 are predominantly situated within official representations, this is not the only history that matters. For the Sikh community both their own interpretive recollections of 1984 as well as official narratives, constitute different forms of “memory.” While their memory of 1984 includes “the experiences, the perceptions, the feelings” (Butalia 1998, 98), the state memory of 1984 forcibly excludes and leaves out these subjectivities to create a façade of coherence and rationality vis-à-vis 1984.

Cultural or collective memory scholarship defines it as reconstruction of the past by a social group based on the present (see for e.g. Halbwachs 1992, Connerton 1989, Bal et al 1999, Hirsch and Smith 2002, Hodgkin and Radstone 2012 [2005]). Cultural or collective memory is “constructed” (Halbwachs 1992) or “selected” (Schwartz 1982) by the larger social group or community, and is not merely the sum total of individual memories. There are several possible interpretations of events and collective memory “frame” or narrow “interpretive practices as patterned by the ways we define the situation at hand,” rather than establishing one “‘reading’ as the correct one” (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 4-5). Memory is culturally mediated, a representation, not an “essential”

fact, but the “schemata, and stories...that comprise our memories, and the way we think about them” (Antze and Lambek 1996, xv).

When memories are defined by trauma, it adds another layer of complexity. Individuals and groups do not fully experience traumatic occurrences. Instead they can only be experienced after the event, shaping the durability, repetition and spillover of trauma (Caruth 1996, also see Prager 2003). The after-life of trauma is combined with the stigma associated with traumatic experiences, such as sexual abuse and recollections of war and violence. Through social struggle over a period of time (Leydesdorff et al 2004, Stein 2014), and a “trauma process” (Alexander 2004, Eyerman 2004), groups recognize and remember trauma and give it a cultural face. To study traumatic memory sociologically, is to study the toil and labor, the memory struggles of individuals and groups against many kinds of social barriers to establish trauma as such.

Sociological studies of collective or cultural memory and trauma frameworks are helping situate Holocaust experiences (e.g. Stein 2014, Gerson and Wolf 2007) and sexual abuse (for e.g. Rose 2004). Yet with some exceptions (see for e.g. Cho 2008, Roy 2012), the social processes that mediate cultural trauma for non-Western groups remains a neglected area in sociology. My study fills this gap by extending frameworks of collective memory and trauma to a non-Western group and understanding specific cultural apparatus they evoke in giving meaning to “extreme” loss, suffering and despair (Miller and Tougaw 2002).

Studies of the social construction of trauma, which Eyerman (2004) defines as the “dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in social fabric, affecting a group of

people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” or cultural trauma (Eyerman 2004, 61) tend to undertheorize the centrality of emotions and experiences underlying loss (for e.g. Prager 2003, Stein 2009, 2014). Here I show how unarticulated feelings about 1984 that were silenced by dominant narratives of the state, mass media and even Sikh counternarratives are finding a social language in the diaspora and in digital cultural spaces. I situate present-day memory work on 1984 within this shift in the study of cultural memory and trauma where remembering and trauma is not simple recollection or complete cultural mediation. Instead, remembering, especially traumatic memory is also always informed by feelings of loss and dispossession (Stein 2009).

While 1984 is a contentious issue, its traumatic nature adds to its emotional density. I define traumatic memory as a form of cultural memory—or shared, public retrospective narratives—that are affectively constructed representations and meanings ascribed to incoherent pasts informed by present-day social conditions. All forms of memory, but especially traumatic memory, involve a regular back-and-forth movement between the past, present and anticipated future (see for e.g. Misztal 2003, 83). Memories of 1984 are “neither pure experience, nor pure event,” (Kuhn 2000, 189) but comprised of culturally-informed representations connecting many temporalities.

Memory Work to Narrate 1984

“Memory work” on 1984 entails the deliberate and conscious collective public practices of searching for fragments of painful pasts and piecing them together to give cultural meaning and shape to broken and tenuous traumatic experiences (Kuhn 2000,

Haug 2000, Sa'adi and Abu Lughod 2007). Memory work is often, though not always, organized around torn and disintegrated pasts. Sikhs do memory work for personal and political reasons, and to thaw events and experiences which had been “frozen” in time (Rose 2004, 160) due to their extreme devastating impact. Memory workers, individually and in groups, are taking the lead in creating and selecting cultural frameworks to represent difficult experiences of 1984, participating in processes of active remembering.

In addition to giving meaning to broken experiences, traumatic narratives of 1984 embody a struggle and contestation with externally imposed, dominant narratives. While the state as a perpetrator¹³ of trauma adopts silence and elision as a mechanism, survivors and witnesses of 1984 and their descendants wage a battle to overcome these silences and include their experiences in public discourses. Their voices challenge official silences and elisions. Therefore, traumatic narratives of 1984 are shaped by questions of power or hegemony: Who has represented 1984 thus far? How are these representations constructed? Whose views are excluded? (see for e.g. Gramsci 1971; Foucault 1972, 1980; Hall 1997; Gitlin 2003).

In the Indian national context, representations of 1984 have become static and fixed. Sikhs continue to experience feelings of fear, stigma and shame, internalizing the dominant narrative of “you brought this upon yourselves.” They are caught in an unending cycle of representations where the state and state-sponsored media blamed the community for its own victimization, portraying them as “terrorist,” “secessionist,”

and “seditious,” dismissing the carnage in November as “riots.” The power of representations holds everyone captive, Sikhs and non-Sikhs. As Hall writes,

The circularity of power is especially important in the context of representation. The argument is that everyone- the powerful and the powerless- is caught up, *though not on equal terms*, in power’s circulation. No one- neither its apparent victims, nor its agents- can stand wholly outside its field of operation” (1997, 261).

Events and experiences are represented in certain ways rather than others. What memories get formed and shared, what events and experiences are excluded, are shaped by power. Remembering and forgetting, or the acts of “performing,” an active process of practicing memory and “not performing,” a willful forgetting are products of cultural prescriptions and proscriptions, defined by families, communities or nations (Bal et al 1999, Raj 2000). Cultural contexts and actors often determine when stories are told, how they are told or who can participate in their interpretation, what emotions can be conveyed and which feelings must lie hidden and dormant. Experiences that lack social acknowledgement tend to lack a narrative structure, and cannot therefore contest hegemonic representations.

Narratives possess a temporal plot or a structure and logic: a beginning, middle and an end. They give social meaning and make sense of otherwise chaotic and disconnected events (see for e.g. White 1980, Plummer 1995, Stein 1997, Ewick and Silbey 2003, Polletta 2006, Maynes et al 2008). By constructing stories about 1984, diasporic communities exercise agency, owning and acknowledging their wounds. Narratives of 1984 draw cognitive connections among events but also imbue them with affect and emotion, both in their telling and their reception.

Narratives about 1984 in India are constrained not just by state-imposed, majoritarian community's "feeling rules" or appropriate and legitimate ways of expressing feelings (Hochschild 1979, 1983), but what I call "feeling walls." I use this term to describe strategies of emotion management within political systems of extreme oppression, when the work of emotions transcends everyday management, to hiding and masking feelings as a survival strategy.

There has been a lack of public space for Sikhs to mobilize and express their feelings about the invasion of the Golden Temple and the ensuing carnage in the Indian national context. "Public sphere" or the "quality of discourse and quantity of participation," around 1984 is mostly exclusionary, impoverished and thin (Calhoun 1992, 2). In India socially engendered fear and socially produced shame were effective and invisible mechanisms to gag the community and preclude the Sikh story of 1984 from becoming public. In seeking a "fit" between their memories and what was "publicly acceptable," Sikhs "inevitably relie(d) on practices of repression and exclusion (Roy 2012, 9; see also Edkins 2003). In contrast, in the diaspora, feeling rules and feeling walls did not find much influence, making it possible for Sikhs to express their dissent and deep resentment of state actions even in the immediate aftermath of violence.

My work is in keeping with scholarship that critically engages with "countermemories" of the marginalized and powerless, for instance in oral history (Passerini 1987, Portelli 1991) and in subaltern studies (Guha 1997). Diasporic Sikh survivors and witnesses of 1984 and their descendants are creating stories of their marginalized experiences and events, in the form of "little narratives or history from

below,” (see for e.g. Ewick and Silbey 1995, Davis 2002, Polletta 2006) or what Foucault called “subjugated knowledges.” These are stories “that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition and scientificity” (Sturken 1997, 6). A number of social factors are influencing this shift in storytelling, including the passage of time, diasporic consciousness combining spatial distance and imagined nearness with national contexts, proximity to narratives of the Holocaust, and presence of and access to digital media.

Digital media is especially important. The state exercised uninhibited censorship and mass media blackout as events of 1984 unfolded; its representations continue to shape popular memories of 1984 today. Sikhs memory workers are breaking free of the restrictions on speech, finding their voice, sharing their feelings and communicating in and through new media cultures that are offering more possibilities than constraints for the community to resist hegemony.

Media Informs Memories of 1984

As Erll writes, “cultural memory is unthinkable without media” (2011, 113). The forms of media that shape memories about critical events such as 1984 have a direct bearing on the content of memories that are produced (McLuhan 1994 [1964]). Indian mass media have constructed a story of 1984 that is in keeping with the state’s “ideological” apparatus (see for e.g. Gitlin 2003), which seeks to uphold its image as secular, orderly and non-violent (see for e.g. Amin 1995, Basu and Roy 2008) and

dismiss violence against religious minorities, including Sikhs, as an anomaly or necessary evil. The state employs mass media to transmit and perpetuate the belief that it is a just and impartial entity. Mass media frames, or organizes reality, selecting from a vast array of events (Goffman 1986 [1974], Tuchman 1980, Gitlin 2003, Schudson 2011 [2003]). Dominant memories of 1984 were framed by the mass media as “riots,” and Sikhs were labeled “anti-Indian.”

Yet, there is an implicit social faith in the veracity and objectivity of news reports. Memories of 1984 and images of Sikhs continue to be defined by state-sanctioned “media frames,” these accounts have “journalistic authority” (Zelizer 1992). Media is far from stagnant, however, and each media form extends, exaggerates and hones the effects of a previous medium (McLuhan 1994 [1964]). For example, the Internet not only combines the visual, speech and aural dimensions of print, telephone, radio and television technologies, but also coalesces these different effects into a new hybrid composite and in turn produces computer or digitally mediated communication.

There is a growing body of literature on the relationship between mediated pasts, or the intimate relationship between media and memory (for e.g. Schudson 1993, Zelizer 1992, Kitch 2005, Neiger et al 2011). Of particular significance is the digital dimension of memory or how new media shapes the past in the present (see for e.g. van Djick 2007, Garde-Hansen et al 2009, Garde-Hansen 2011). Sikhs are using digital media, the Internet in particular, to look back and also find a public space to legitimize their marginalized stories (see for e.g. Plummer 1995, Passerini 1987, Guha 1997). Memories of 1984 are changing and evolving because of shifts in media that are underway. Digital

media is developing and extending the potential of mass media, by changing ways in which the “written about” become “authors” or individuals and groups themselves engage with media, interpret and construct events.

Traditional media, particularly print media, television and radio, owned or influenced by the state became vehicles of the official narrative of June 1984. They framed state action as an “intervention” rather than “invasion” by the Indian Army to “flush out terrorists,” and dismissed the November violence as spontaneous and accidental “riots,” instead of highlighting the orchestrated carnage of a religious minority.

Digital media as a counternarrative tool, specifically in non-Western contexts, has been studied in contexts ranging from the “Arab Spring” or a series of political changes in the Middle East and North African region (see for e.g. Tufekci and Wilson 2012, Khondker 2011, Howard and Hussain 2011) and the Zapatistan guerilla movement against the Mexican government (Froehling 1997). In the South Asian diasporic context some instances include Mitra’s work on the Internet as a “safe place” in the face of diasporic displacement, a space to construct cultural and religious practices, to adapt to new immigrant contexts (2006), for the marginal to speak (2001); and Gajjala’s study of South Asian woman as the “Other” of the Western woman which speaks online. She explores the tension between the privilege of speech available to “Third World Subjects,” who speak in cyberspace, but also their silences, combined with the silences of “subaltern” women far removed geographically, materially and culturally from privileged “postcolonial virtual spaces” (Gajjala 2004, 5-7). Puryakastha focuses on

online communities to reaffirm and strengthen common identities and values (2005). Digital technology is also employed by organized Hindu groups in the diaspora to construct and promote Hindu nationalism or “cyber-diasporic Hindu militancy” (Lal 1999, 152). Hindu organizations in North America particularly the US are using digital technology to develop a narrow, “ossified conception of their faith,” “Hindutva, a Hinduism stripped to its imagined essences” (Lal 1999, 147-8).

Of direct relevance to my work are studies of the Sikh diasporic virtual or Internet cultures engaging with and constructing the trauma of 1984 (Gunawardena 2000, Axel 2005, Barrier 2006, Shani 2010). However, most of these studies focus on the Internet as a repository and conduit for separatist voices in response to state oppression, and fail to account for the experience of loss; separatism, or the Khalistan movement, was neither the only nor the most popular response. My study of digital memory work on 1984 helps further an understanding of diverse and nuanced mobilization or counternarratives.

Barring a handful of sociological studies (for e.g. Stein 2009, Ostertag and Ortiz 2013), there is a glaring gap in the study of digitally mediated communication to construct narratives of traumatic and contentious events. My project is situated within these studies of digitally mediated counternarratives and cultural meanings of traumatic memory while focusing on a non-Western case.

The democratic potential of digital media, permitting marginalized groups to create stories, rather than simply consume them, is changing the hierarchical dynamic inherent in mass media representations. While in the past, the community had to live

with top-imposed, other-defined mediation, digital technology facilitates an elimination of such intermediaries. The state and mass media are no longer the only agents telling Sikhs who they are, how they must act and react to 1984. Instead diasporic memory workers are publicly re-presenting the past and its meaning. Digital media is giving Sikhs control over information-making and dissemination, constructing a public narrative of 1984 by weaving together private and idiosyncratic experiences. Sikhs are sharing their stories of 1984 online using mixed media- converging forms and content of communication: visual/ oral, verbal /nonverbal to sift through the events and experiences of 1984. In the process, Sikh memory workers are reinstating symmetry in communication and representation.

Digital media, part of larger “global cultural flows,” specifically “mediascapes,” (Appadurai 1996, 33-36) constructs an “imagined community” in the diaspora (Anderson 2006 [1983]). In the case of Sikhs this imagined community coheres around collective belonging and memories of the faith, hauntings of 1984 and the ghosts of racial and religious marginalization in the North American context.

Data and Methods

My data comes from a combination of sources: regular attendance at *gurdwaras* in New Jersey and New York between 2009-2011 and preliminary interviews with 20 Sikh women and men there; a content analysis of eight websites on 1984; 27 semi-structured interviews with Sikh survivors, witnesses and their descendants in Canada and the United States and two focus group discussions with 18 Sikh women and men in

the United States. My preliminary interviews acted as an introduction to online *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory (Nora 1989).

I did a search on “Google” in its various national versions (American, British, Canadian and Indian) to come up with a pool of websites devoted to the events of 1984. The sample of websites I chose from this pool is purposive. I had two main criteria in mind in choosing websites for my study: (1) inclusivity: the website included a wide range of views on 1984 rather than a single-minded Khalistani political affiliation. This was expressed through various forms of communication: written text, graphics and other audio-visual texts, (2) depth of content: that is websites that comprised more than 5 pages (Gunawardena 2000, 275). I used various combinations of key words, “Sikhs, 1984,” “Sikhs, 1984, commemoration,” “1984, Sikh story,” etc. to narrow down websites on 1984. I analyzed the following websites for my study: 1984livinghistory.org, sikhchic.com, sikhgenocide.org, sikhtoons.com, sikhmuseum.com, nov1984.org, carnage84.com and ensaaf.org.

I examined oral, written and visual texts using thematic or content-specific and visual analysis to arrive at a broader digital narrative analysis of websites (see Reismann 2008). I analyzed texts in three steps: (1) studying individual stories of 1984 on each of the websites by “preserving and analyzing them as units,” (Reismann 2008, 12); (2) combining stories found on a single website to delineate similarities and differences and; (3) merging websites to arrive at an overall mosaic of narratives to delineate patterns and themes.

To supplement my narrative analysis of websites I did interviews with 27 Sikhs in Canada and the US. My interview sample consisted of 11 first generation Sikhs, aged 35-80, including four women and seven men. The other 16 respondents in my sample are second generation Sikhs either born in North America or who migrated from India between infancy and the age of five. They ranged in age from 25 to 40 years. This sample of respondents consisted of eight men and eight women. I studied details of producers of and contributors to websites to arrive at an initial sample of respondents. I also posted an advertisement on sikhchic.com to recruit respondents for my study. I first contacted potential respondents via email and set up either face-to-face or Skype interviews. I used the latter exclusively to conduct interviews with Sikhs in Canada. My respondents were well-educated professionals including lawyers, physicians, Ph.D. holders or near-Ph.Ds, journalists, writers, artists and filmmakers. The composition of my interviewees points to the relatively elite nature of memory workers. They have access to various kinds of “capital” (Bourdieu 1984): economic or material, social or networks, and cultural or “resources such as verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, scientific knowledge, and educational credentials” (Swartz 1997, 43) to contest official memories of 1984.

While the small size of my sample makes it difficult to claim representativeness, digital narrative analysis helped me discern broad patterns and themes of memory work. The continued social stigmatization surrounding public talk of 1984, among Sikhs and non-Sikhs meant that I encountered reluctance, anger and inhibition of Sikhs’,

including memory workers in some instances, to share their stories, especially perhaps with a non-Sikh researcher.

Using an interview schedule and open-ended questions, my interviews lasted from one to three hours. I began with general questions about migration to North America, family composition and family presence and ties, slowly moving on to recollections of 1984, their feelings about the events as they remembered them, how they felt about these memories today and their reasons for doing memory work.

I also tried to develop a comprehensive understanding of digitally constructed memory work. Who are the individuals doing memory work? What were their individual journeys into the work of memory and how are these converging to create a larger culture of memory work? I collected “self stories,” or “a story of and about the self in relation to an experience...that positions the self of the teller centrally in the narrative that is given” (Stein 1997, 7).

In doing narrative analysis of digital texts as well as studying self stories of 1984 I was attentive to general concerns of narrative analysis,

how and *why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. For whom was this story constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured in this way? What cultural resources does the story draw on, or take for granted? What storehouse of plots does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative or counter-narratives? (Reismann 2008, 11).

To understand the reception of digital memory projects and the extent of synchronization between memory workers’ aims and objectives, and everyday Sikhs, I conducted focus group discussions following a focus group guide with open-ended questions with 18 urban, educated, middle class first and generation Sikhs in the United

States, ranging in age from 18-60 years old, eight women and ten men. I recruited respondents by making visits to the local *gurdwaras* and through snowball sampling. I facilitated discussion with two separate groups of nine individuals each. We went through written, but mostly oral and visual materials from various websites. I paused to ask for reactions and also observed their reactions, facial gestures and body language throughout the sessions.

Together, these different methods of data collection and resulting narratives helped me piece together the digital story of 1984 as it is slowly emerging as crevices in dominant accounts.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter two situates memory work within cultural traditions, the Sikh diaspora and transnational flows, including some historical instances illustrating continuity in transnational engagement. It gives a detailed account of events preceding 1984, particularly the Indian subcontinent's Partition of 1947 and its immediate context and discusses how 1984 constructed Sikhs as the "other," in a "Hindu nation."

In chapter three I examine what I call "memory walls," or state and mass media representations of 1984, drawing on official documents, primary sources and secondary analysis of media reports. I discuss the various ways these representations rationalize the violence of 1984, portraying it as "riots," while vilifying and shaming the Sikhs, holding them responsible for their own victimhood. I describe early counternarratives or what I call "crevices," in the Indian national context, such as reports by civil rights

organizations; survivor, witness and journalistic and engaged citizens' testimonies, as substantial evidence for the active role or complicity of state functionaries. These remained thin fragments or "emergent," rather than becoming institutionalized. On the other hand, a second set of counternarratives, voices from the Sikh militant and secessionist struggle gained ground, supported by the Sikh diaspora in North America, though not representative of the heterogeneity of the community.

Chapter four is based on a content analysis of eight websites, two focus group discussions with 18 Sikhs, and interview data with 27 Sikhs to understand the story of 1984 as it unfolds digitally—what I call "digital crevices." These are nuanced, dissenting and multi-layered experiential narratives written by Sikhs which build on "early crevices." Digital technology, with its intensified interactivity and mixed modality facilitates an intimate re-narration of hauntings or present pasts. These digital crevices are challenging feeling rules and breaking down feeling walls, complicating state portrayals of Sikhs as "terrorists," contesting the language of riots and making connections with other traumatic memories. The chapter discusses splits along gender and class in doing the work of memory and responses from the community.

Based on my interviews, I draw an intergenerational portrait of eight memory workers in chapter five, comprised of first and second generation Sikhs. I explain that the first generation started sharing their experiences over a period of time for many reasons: they are seeking the meaning of the faith; grappling with feelings of shame and stigmatization imposed by the Indian state and media (exaggerated by Punjabi cultural notions of *sharam* or loss of face and upholding *izzat* or honor); they experience a

growing stability and security in their new immigrant contexts; the growing temporal gap between 1984 and present makes it possible to revisit past pain and grief; and the desire among some to transmit their stories to future generations. Second generation experiences of 1984 follow from socialization within the family or in community spaces such as periodically organized Sikh camps; serendipitous discoveries and in some instances they were witnesses to the events via mass media reports in 1984. Unlike first generation memory workers from the Indian national context, second generation Sikhs, growing up in different contexts and with different interpretations of 1984, did not internalize feelings of shame and fear engendered by the Indian state and media. First and second generation memory work is converging today and creating an intergenerational archive as both generations talk together and talk back to dominant representations.

Chapter six examines the current socio-cultural context within which memory work is situated. This includes diasporic consciousness, or dialectical experiences of exclusion and being the “other,” in multiple spaces which is shaping memories of 1984 in ways that are not possible in India; the digital cultural moment that is creating a horizontal and intimate rather than vertical and impersonal engagement with media; the temporal lag between 1984 and the present is facilitating broken and interrupted voices to emerge; and finally Holocaust consciousness in the diaspora which has had a profound influence on Sikh memory work in implicit and explicit ways.

I conclude by reflecting on diasporic anxieties and hauntings, experiences of marginalization and discrimination that go into constructing a narrative of 1984 which

contests affective erasures of dominant state and media representations. This memory work is limited by the absence of explicit connections with anti-minority violence in India, lack of bridges with the South Asian collective, and inequalities pertaining to the digital divide. While being partial, emergent and incomplete, digital crevices are nonetheless creating new and innovative ways to grapple with complex and unfinished experiences and resist dominant representations.

¹ There have been many other instances of state sanctioned and legitimized violence against religious minorities in India since 1984, of which the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat stands out. Violence motivated by religion is known as communal violence in South Asia.

² According to Yuval-Davis and Anthias, “The state is neither unitary in its practices, its intentions nor its effects...The term refers to a particular ‘machinery’ for the exercise of ‘government’ over a given population, usually territorially and nationally defined, although the definitions of what constitutes these boundaries etc. will shift and change depending on what it is government or power over and what is being managed or negotiated. Hence we can specify the state in terms of a body on institutions which are centrally organized around the intentionality of control with a given apparatus of enforcement at its command and basis. Coercion and repression are then seen both as forms of control and as a back-up...Using this formulation, the state can harness a number of different processes, including ideological ones, through juridical and repressive mechanisms at its command. Education and the media are the prime institutional forms for ideological production in the modern liberal-democratic state but they are not part of the state as such” (1989, 5).

³ The state taking on a Hindu identity in 1984 has parallels but also differences from the ideology of Hindu nationalism that has taken center stage in India today (Hansen 1999; see also for e.g. van der Veer 1994, Ghassem-Fachandi 2012).

⁴ This is often contrasted to the “communal” politics of the Hindu nationalist political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and their alliance with the Hindu nationalist organizations, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Kaur writes, “While communal parties, based on religious nationalism, are acknowledged to be capable of endorsing or organizing inter-ethnic violence, the secular parties are expected to be more objective, non-partisan in matters of religion and in their condemnation of religion-based violence. However, this neat division begins blurring when we juxtapose the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi with the 2002 anti-Muslim

Gujarat riots. The former was led by the local leadership of the 'secular' Congress party, the latter was actively encouraged by the 'communal' BJP government in Gujarat led by Narendra Modi, a former preacher from the extreme right wing Hindu organization, the RSS. However, a reading of the two riots, based on citizens reports and eyewitness accounts, show that the pattern and description of violence in both instances is more or less the same" (2005, 33).

⁵ Veena Das has an important body of work on 1984, especially the November violence which I will draw on in later parts of my dissertation.

⁶ There are other forms of diasporic initiated, Sikh and non-Sikh produced public representations of 1984. These include the book and film *Amu* (see P. Singh 2006, Mehta 2010) and the first theatrical representation of 1984, *Kultar's Mime* (see Devgan 2014).

⁷ See Singh and Tatla (2006, 33).

⁸ I develop the idea of "crevices," first published in 2013.

⁹ The total population of Delhi swelled from 917,939 to 1,744,072 in 1951. Punjabi refugees from the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 constituted a substantial proportion of this influx (Kaur 2007, 32).

¹⁰ In keeping with Ahmed et al (2003) I recognize that "home" is not simply about "roots," while migration translates into "displacement." Yet, my own initial experience of being in the diaspora reaffirmed this commonsensical and conventional dichotomy, where I felt unmoored and in search of familiarity in an unfamiliar social and cultural landscape.

¹¹ See DiMaggio et al (2001) for a review of social implications of Internet, affirming Internet's role in reinforcing existing media and their consequences rather than upending them. Also, following Di Maggio et al I define "Internet" as "the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval" (307).

¹² See also Hodgkin and Radstone (2012 [2005]) for a critique of privileging memory over history, pp. 7-9.

¹³ On perpetrators, see for e.g. Cohen (2001).

Chapter 2

Sikhs, their Diaspora and 1984

Sikh diasporic memory work is situated within intersecting cultural processes and developments that I identify in this chapter. First, I introduce cultural traditions and practices or Sikh specific cultural apparatus, an underlying basis of memory work. Second, I trace the role of the diaspora and transnational flows in the development of Sikh identity. Memory work is informed by these transnational flows and also contributes to creating an imagined community despite dispersal in space and time. Finally, I give a detailed account of events preceding 1984 in the Indian national context, discussing how 1984 constructed Sikhs as the “other” in a “Hindu nation,” and the enduring relevance of these histories in shaping memory work.

Memory work is situated in the heterogeneous cultural traditions of Sikhism. In doing the work of memory, Sikhs invoke more than one cultural script; their counternarratives are not confined to the monolithic “militant discourse” (see Das 1995). As I explain in this chapter, nonduality, or simultaneous presence of militant resistance and pacifism is inherent in Sikhism (Bhogal 2007, 2011). Sikh memory workers go beyond militant resistance, borrowing from many practices within this nondualistic cultural repertoire, including *seva* or service; and, primacy of the past, including memories of past genocides as well as glorious celebration (articulated, for example, in the *ardas* or prayer, *shahidi* or martyrdom and centrality of *Panth* or community). Sikhs in the diaspora share an active engagement with these cultural

traditions, as well as remembrance of 1984. The Sikh diaspora itself has a long history of migration and settlement in North America, underlined by experiences of racialized marginalization and exclusion that acted as an impetus to maintain transnational connections with India. “1984” transformed Sikhs’ place in the Indian national context and changed the diaspora’s relationship with India. Diasporic Sikhs experienced an emotional break with the Indian nation-state, expressing this affective rupture through the work of memory.

The estrangement that Sikhs experienced vis-à-vis the state at the time of the Indian subcontinent’s Partition in the 1940s culminated in 1984. Sikh religion and culture and economic conditions in Punjab became politicized in 1978, culminating in the June 1984 invasion of the Golden Temple and the November massacre of Sikhs in India’s capital city, New Delhi and other parts of North India. The community suffered direct violence and indirect assaults, stigmatizing and targeting them as the “enemy” of the state.

In what follows I give a broad overview of Sikh cultural institutions and practices followed by an account of Sikhs’ early migration and experiences in North America, the United States and Canada. I also trace developments leading up to 1984 and events that transpired in June and October-November 1984.

Situating Memory Work

The Sikh *Panth*¹ or community traces its genealogy to the Gurus, or teachers, extending from Guru Nanak (1469-1539) to the tenth and last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh

(1675-1708) in the north Indian state of Punjab or the land of five rivers. Guru Nanak founded a faith to resist the ritualism and obscurantism of Hinduism, a tradition free from idol worship and founded on the premise of equality against the authority of the priestly caste, the Brahmins. The Sikhs are *shishyas*, or disciples, of the ten Gurus and the term 'Sikh' itself comes from the Punjabi verb *sikhna* (to learn). Guru Nanak was followed by Guru Angad (1539-1552) who developed the Gurmukhi script, and the faith continued to be developed by eight other Gurus and their distinctive contributions to Sikhism, some of which are discussed below.²

Some distinctive cultural practices and values of the Sikh *Panth* are centered around the institution of the *gurdwara* or Sikh place of worship, of which the foremost is the Golden Temple or Darbar Sahib.³ The *gurdwara* (literally doorway to the Guru) is the building or room that ritually houses the Sikh scripture the Granth Sahib or Guru Granth Sahib. The *gurdwara* is an important space for doing *seva* or altruistic service by taking up activities like cleaning worshippers' shoes, sweeping the sacred precincts and helping in the *langar* or community kitchen without caste distinctions. *Seva* is an important part of Sikh practice and theology and also an underlying motivation for memory work around 1984. The culture of *seva* or service to the community defines Sikhs' actions and belief system, including the work of memory, rallying support for suffering members of the community and commemorating losses of those killed in the massacres. Within the *gurdwara*, during Sikh ceremonies and rituals, the *ardas* or Sikh prayer is recited. The *ardas* is an important religio-cultural practice to understand Sikh engagement and continuity with the past (see for e.g. Jeffrey 1987). Memory workers

attempt to ascribe meaning to the incoherence of 1984 by situating it in the recollections and remembrances of other sacred losses contained in the *ardas*. The *ardas* became standardized in the 18th century but has expanded to include recent events. The complete prayer consists of three distinct sections: invocation, recollection and petition and only the first lines and concluding couplets are unalterable (McLeod 1989a, 105). For memory workers on 1984 the *ardas* is constant reminder of the community's larger difficult and turbulent past, its survival against odds and an affirmation of its history and ethics.

The Golden Temple has deep reverential meaning for the community. The complex consists of the Harimandir Sahib, also known as the Darbar Sahib in the inner sanctum sanctorum, built by the fourth Guru, Guru Ramdas (1574-1581) and symbolizes the spiritual center for the community. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev (1581-1606) compiled the writings of Guru Nanak and other Gurus as well as Hindu and Muslim saints into the Adi Granth or Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book, and formally installed it in the newly constructed Harimandir. The sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind Singh, constructed the Akal Takht or throne of the Akal Purakh or Timeless God facing the Harimandir Sahib. This was representative of temporal authority assumed by the Guru. Guru Hargobind Singh assumed temporal authority in response to the social and cultural circumstances of the time. His father, the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (1581-1606) had been tortured and put to death by the existing rulers and his death is perceived as the "first martyrdom." 1984 memory workers evoke the importance of a trajectory of *shahid* or martyrs or witness who resists and defies oppression and tyranny (Fenech 2000, 6) in

gradually weaving their dissensual narrative against the state and state-controlled media. As a response to his father's *shahidi* or martyrdom, Guru Hargobind (1595-1644) institutionalized militancy while retaining the importance of non-violence. He donned two swords. One sword symbolized *piri* or spiritual power and the other represented *miri* or temporal authority, in continuation with his predecessors. This nonduality also comes across in various institutions of the community. The Harimandir Sahib represents the spiritual message of the Gurus while the Akal Takht stands for temporal power. The Harimandir Sahib and the Akal Takht along with other buildings form the sacred temple complex, the Golden Temple.

To analyze memory work around 1984, one must understand the absence of duality between violence and non-violence, rather than an unequivocal association between Sikhism and violence.⁴ According to Bhogal, Sikhism is best understood as “continuity-in-difference” (2007, 109). There is no clear break from “pacifism” of the early Gurus to “militancy” of later ones. Sikhism exemplifies the coexistence of violence and peace, religion and politics rather than an either/or association (Bhogal 2007, 2011). Sikhism is not situated in the neat boundaries between “tradition and modernity, religion and science, emotion and reason, violence and peace” (Bhogal 2011) but affect situated in political action. Sikh tradition combines:

nondual pairings of saint/soldier (*sant-sipahi*), spiritual/temporal (*miri-piri*), and charity or dispensation of justice/defense or eradication of injustice (*deg-tegh*). For the Sikhs, a love without universal and political dimensions is an exercise in narcissism, in that private passions are indulged, above and beyond the needs of others; similarly, a politics without love reduces ethics to utilitarian stratagems, serving power rather than the powerless (Bhogal 2011, 60).

Nonduality, the essence of Sikhism, confounds secular modernity and was used as an effective ploy by the state in 1984 to elevate its “rationality” and “reasoning,” while demeaning Sikh counternarratives and consequently the community as “religious, fanatical, irrational, violent, uncompromising and callous to the extreme” (Bhogal 2011, 71). Sikh memory work, a more complex representation of 1984, combines “passion,” with “politics,” to do the work of emotion in resisting state imposed feeling rules.

The Sikh collective body embodies the Gurus’ nondual teachings in various ways, including in the community of saint-soldiers or *sant-sipahi*, combining spirituality with temporality that evolved as part of the Khalsa tradition (from Khalis meaning pure). Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa in 1699 at Anandpur in Punjab. The immediate impetus for instituting the Khalsa tradition was Guru Gobind Singh’s father, Guru Tegh Bahadur’s martyrdom. The purpose of the Khalsa was to develop a coherent body of Sikhs, visibly identifiable to fight Mughal rule or the reigning Muslim dynasty. Of the injunctions part of the Khalsa identity are the *panj kakke* or Five Ks⁵, each beginning with the letter ‘k’: *kes* or long hair, *kangha* or comb, *kirpan* or sword/dagger, *kara* or steel bangle and *kacch* or a pair of breeches which must not reach below the knees.⁶ The initiate drinks *amrit* or sweetened holy water stirred by the *khanda* or two-edged sword in the presence of the *panj piare*, five Sikhs or “Cherished Five” who symbolize the original five members or nucleus of the Khalsa.

Along with laying the foundation of the Khalsa tradition, Guru Gobind Singh initiated the Guru *Panth* or the community as the Guru. Before his death Guru Gobind Singh established this belief that meant that the Guru was present wherever the Sikh

congregation or *sangat* gathered. In other words, the Guru was present in the “corporate body of the community” (Oberoi 1987, 34). A related principle was that the Guru was present in the sacred scripture, the Guru Granth. As Oberoi notes,

These two principles- the Guru Panth, or corporate Guru, and Guru Granth, or scriptural Guru- bound the community together and helped to distinguish its constituent members from others in the local society who shared no such doctrines or institutions (1987, 34).

In addition, Sikh males were given the suffix “Singh,” or lion, and women were given the name “Kaur,” or princess (see for e.g. P. Singh 2004, Jakobsh 2004). The Golden Temple also became prominent as the foremost center of Sikh pilgrimage, overshadowing other sacred shrines at this time (see for e.g. Oberoi 1987, 34).

The establishment of the Khalsa identity created a series of conspicuous categorizations.⁷ *Amritdhari* Sikhs take *amrit* or holy water in the initiation ceremony, abide by all the 5Ks and observe the *rahit* or Khalsa code of conduct. Another category of Khalsa Sikhs are the *kesdharis*, who keep long hair and typically observe the 5Ks but have not taken the *amrit* or been baptized. Finally, there are *sahajdhari* Sikhs who cut their hair, do not observe the *rahit* or Khalsa code of conduct and are considered to be “slow adopters” (McLeod 1989a, 85). Despite the significant presence of non-*amritdhari* identity, certain developments within the Sikh faith and post-1984 consciousness put the focus on *kesdhari* identity. Axel’s categorization needs to be substituted with *kesdhari* (Barrier 2002) but his observation remains true, “the *amritdhari* body has attained a hegemonic quality so extensive that all other ways of being a Sikh are constituted in relation to it” (2001, 36).

The Sikh diaspora is an essential rather than coincidental part of the development of the Sikh community and its identity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the transnational and intergenerational digital engagement with events of 1984 that unfolded in India, which are publicly narrativized and represented in the diaspora. The Sikh diaspora has a well-established history of migration outside Punjab and India. Even though Sikhs constitute a numerical minority in India (less than 2%) they comprise one of the largest sections of Indians overseas.

“Diaspora,” a term originally associated with the Jewish experience of scattering and displacement (Safran 1991, Cohen 1997) has come to characterize many experiences of migration and “routes” and “roots” (Clifford 1994). Diasporas transform the relationship with origins and make them processual and dynamic rather than preexisting and fixed. As Hirsch and Spitzer note,

In the language of diaspora, originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply interconnected with other places, they are further transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, constructed in the process of search (2011, 3).

Axel notes that the diaspora creates the homeland rather than the homeland producing the diaspora. The homeland is “an affective and temporal process rather than a place” (Axel 2002, 426). The Sikh diaspora’s relationship to “home” and nostalgia for a past left behind is ongoing and continuous. Following from this, representations of 1984 are defined by “sensation, vibrations, echoes, speed, feedback loops, recursive folds and feelings” (Puar 2007, 171). An essential part of the Sikh diaspora’s journey and early experiences in North America relate to memory work.

Sikh Diaspora in North America: A Historical Overview

British colonization provided the major fillip to overseas migration by integrating Punjabis into the capitalist world economy as laborers and workers and giving Sikhs in the military preferential recruitment (see for e.g. Fox 1985). Most early Sikh migrants were young and able male adults of the Jat or agriculturalist, landowning caste.⁸ Exclusionary immigration policies before World War II led to the disproportionate presence of Asian Indian, primarily Sikh men in North America and precluded the migration of women (see for e.g. Jensen 1988, Bacon 1996). Immigration policies were designed to exploit immigrants as labor rather than foster family and community development. Even though Sikhs held *garibi*, or poverty, to be the main motivating factor behind migration, the most poor did not have the resources to migrate. Rather, Sikh migrants were mostly aspiring small landowners who needed to raise finances to fulfill this ambition (McLeod 1989b, 36). The desire for landownership was not individualistic but informed by Punjabi cultural factors.

The family unit is most important in Punjab, especially rural Punjab, and values that are most relevant to the family include *izzat* (with various interrelated translations including honor, pride, reputation, respect and prestige) and *sharam* (shame and very often sexual propriety or modesty) (Pettigrew 1975, 58; Dusenbery 1990, 242; Mooney 2011, 58). *Izzat* is associated with the family rather than being an attribute of the individual. *Izzat* was traditionally associated with landholdings, military service and overseas migration (that was also a route to attaining *izzat* and a concomitant

consequence of military service). Cultural aspirations for land and economic betterment are nested and deeply situated within the pursuit of status or honor.

The Sikh diaspora also developed because of Punjab's strategic importance within networks of migration and the establishment of well-worn routes of migration over a period of time. As Ballantyne notes,

While many of the migrants' descendants suggest that their ancestors migrated because they were *garib* (poor), it seems that colonialism generated this increased mobility not simply through the imposition of economic constraints, but rather through Punjab's importance for the coercive instruments (army and police) of the broader imperial system; the region's growing connection to international labor markets and migration routes; and eventually, the emergence of elongated family and community networks that stretched from Punjab to Southeast Asia, Australasia, North America and East Africa" (2006, 82-3).

Changes underway in Punjab in the 19th century were not isolated from the increasing mobility ushered in by the British empire. Instead there was an intricate interpenetration between forces of colonialism and developments in Punjab, or what Ballantyne calls, "webs of empire" (2006). These "webs" make it impossible to understand Sikh history and identity without understanding the movement of Sikhs beyond Punjab. As I show in this project, memory work related to 1984 is a significant part of this "web," and a continuation of transnational engagement characteristic of the Sikh diaspora since the 19th century.

Initial opportunities for Sikh migrants were in Asia and later Australia, but as "exclusionary regimes" were established, Punjabis, mostly Sikhs, began looking for opportunities in the United States, or "Mitkan," and Canada or "Kaneida," in the early 19th century. Sikh migration to Britain began with the First World War but mass

migration did not come into full effect until after the end of British colonial in India, in the 1950s and early 1960s. Sikhs formed a majority of all Indians who migrated to North America in the early years. Between 1904 and 1907 roughly 5,000 mostly Sikh migrants arrived in the West Coast of Canada, and about same number arrived in the West Coast of the United States between 1902 and 1910 as unskilled labor working in the lumber industry, in saw mills, laying railroads, and on farms (Dusenbery 1989, 6). Despite the predominance of Sikhs, it is more accurate to characterize early migrants as “Punjabi” rather than “Sikh diaspora” because of their emphasis on Punjabi identity—culture, place of origin and language (Dusenbery 1995, Leonard 1989, McLeod 1989b). Yet, even in the early years Sikhs had started forming a community centered around *gurdwaras* in Vancouver, British Columbia and California.

The early phases of Sikh migration were also a time when intensely racialized and exclusionary legal and administrative measures emerged. For instance, Sikhs in North America were denigrated as “tide of turbans” and labeled “Hindus” or “Hindoos” (see for e.g. Takaki 1989). The case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that denied American citizenship to Asians in 1923⁹, the Alien Land Laws of 1913 barring them from owning land, and the Asiatic Exclusion Act of 1924 that applied to Chinese, Japanese and South Asians¹⁰ were among the discriminatory measures that contributed to distinct feelings of marginalization.

In Canada, discrimination was exemplified by the *Komagata Maru* episode. The *Komagata Maru* was a Japanese ship chartered by Gurdit Singh Sarhali, a wealthy Sikh contractor. It sailed to Canada in April 1914 with 376 passengers from non-Indian

shores. This was in violation of Canadian executive orders. On arrival to Canadian shores, the passengers fought a legal battle for two months, at the end of which only 24 passengers, previously residents of Canada, were given permission to stay in the country. On 23 July the *Komagata Maru* was forced to leave and return to Hong Kong (see Johnston 2014 [1989]). This episode fuelled anti-British sentiments among Sikh immigrants and led them to join the protests of the nationalist Ghadar (mutiny or rebellion) movement in North America organized to bring about a violent, revolutionary overthrow of colonial government. I will return to the Ghadar movement in a later chapter; it is important because it illustrates the historical change in Sikh diasporic consciousness, from a strong transnational mobilization supporting India, to estrangement from the Indian state post-1984.

In contrast to the deep affinity and solidarity with India in the early migratory phase, 1984 led to a break in emotional connection with the Indian nation-state. For instance, at the seventy-fifth public commemoration of the *Komagata Maru* episode in Canada a debate raged over whether to remember the episode as Sikh or Indian. Even though some Sikh activists were in favor of remembering the episode as discrimination against all Indians, rather than only Sikhs, dissenting voices urged them to sever Sikh from Indian identity. A separate consciousness of being the “outsider”—in both India and the diaspora led Sikhs to construct an identity politics that was weak and unremarkable—before the events of 1984 (Srikanth 2002).

Post World War II saw a shift in immigration policies, with Canada favoring highly skilled immigrants—women and men—beginning in the 1960s and also in the United

States post 1965.¹¹ Punjabi men were able to sponsor family members and be joined by their wives. This change in family formation also contributed to the dissolution of a specifically diasporic, cross-cultural family form, bi-ethnic Punjabi-Mexican families, that had been developing in California in the early 20th century due to US laws that prohibited family migration (Leonard 1992).

The events of 1984 saw a final wave of Sikh migration to North America (O'Connell 2000, Mann 2000). Because of political persecution, low-income refugees and educated professionals, made a conscious decision to leave India in the face of the community's precarious position post-1984. (Most first-generation memory workers I spoke with belong to two different groups: one cohort were comprised of those who migrated post-1965; the other were educated, professional, upper-middle class Sikhs who arrived in North America in or close to 1984). 2011 Census figures suggest that there were 455,000 Sikhs in Canada.¹² The United States Census does not include a separate question on religious affiliation, but it is estimated that in 2012 there were 250,000 Sikhs in the United States.¹³ The number of voluntary Sikh migrants post-1984 are hard to find, but Sikh refugees are estimated to be 4,500-7,500 in Canada, primarily British Columbia and Ontario, and between 7,500-9,000 in the United States, concentrated in California and New York (Tatla 1999, 59). Sikhs in the United States come from various classes and occupations, including non-skilled labor such as factory workers, cab drivers and convenience store operators, to highly trained professionals, including entrepreneurs and academics (see for e.g. Mann 2000, Mitra 2012). In Canada, they are a mix of white-collar professionals and blue collar workers, with a majority in

processing, machinery, construction and transportation occupations, especially after changes in immigration policies led to the admission of semiskilled labor in the 1970s (see for e.g. O'Connell 2000, Basran and Bolaria 2003, Nayar 2004).

Diasporic Sikhs are transnational citizens or citizens who are located within complex networks of belonging and displacement, and within fluid “transnational migrant circuits” (Rouse 1991; see also Basch et al 1994, Ahmed et al 2003). There is a growing body of literature on the transnational linkages between home and host countries, particularly in relation to ethno-religious networks (see for e.g. Yang and Ebaugh 2001, Levitt 2007). The Sikh diaspora is situated within these diasporic, transnational flows; they are “flexible citizens,” who are rooted in several national contexts at once (Ong 1999).

Diasporas often mobilize around traumatic pasts, experienced generationally (e.g. Cho 2008). First generation Sikhs are waging a struggle for social acknowledgement of the losses and wounds of 1984. They are combining their many spatial and temporal experiences of exclusion and marginalization to speak out against state oppression in national contexts. Second generation Sikh descendants with their hybrid Sikh and North American consciousness and “insider-outsider” position are also creating new diasporic subjectivities. Diasporic subjectivities embody critical trans-spatial and trans-temporal bridges in dealing with “difficult pasts,” or those that are ridden by trauma or contestations (Vinitzky-Serrousi 2002, 31) in the originary “home.”

In focusing on digital memory work, I extend recent research focusing on underlying commonalities rather than differences in divergent diasporic contexts.

Despite many similarities between Canada and the US, there are differences which are centered around the policy of multiculturalism in the former, versus the “melting pot” of the latter. Although there is a shift from melting pot to multiculturalism or the politics of identity in the US (Taylor 1994), such distinctions remain an important part of South Asian perception of the United States. Another difference between the US and Canada is that Sikhs/South Asians are one of many diverse immigrant groups in the former, while Canada has a less diverse immigrant mosaic (Hinnells 2000, 8-9). My project affirms the importance of studying “host-host” networks rather than the traditional focus on “host-home” relationships. A “transnational congruence of identities” is based on racial, religious and ethnic marginalization of diasporas in Canada and the United States (Narayan et al. 2011, 519). Memory work around 1984 is constructing an imagined community of Sikhs traversing boundaries of space and time.

Situating 1984

In June 1984, the Indian Army entered the Golden Temple complex with tanks and blasted the Akal Takht and heavily damaged the sacred structure. As opposed to the state’s claim that the Golden Temple was unaffected, eyewitnesses have reported that the Harimandir Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum, was pockmarked with bullet holes (see for e.g. K. Singh 1992). The Golden Temple complex also includes the library with its collection of manuscripts, including copies of the Guru Granth Sahib handwritten by some of the Gurus. The library was burned down and sacred documents were wantonly destroyed. 1984 marked a decisive shift in Sikh-state relations and today’s memory work

is a critical response to state actions and attitudes towards the community. Yet, hostile relations between Sikhs and the Indian state, crystallized in 1984 are of recent origin.

The estrangement between Sikhs and the state that led up to events of 1984 started evolving only in the 1940s, with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent when Punjab in the north and West Bengal in the east were divided into Hindu dominant and Muslim majority India and Pakistan in 1947. The creation of two Punjabs—one in Pakistan, the other in India—was accompanied by death, destruction, sexual violence and homelessness, and left a lasting legacy of loss, confusion and chaos. The Partition led to one of the largest migrations in world history with an estimated 12.5 million people being displaced or uprooted. Close to a million people were murdered or died from malnutrition and disease. Estimates of people killed in Punjab during this time range from 200,000 to 500,000. Again, exact numbers are impossible, but it is estimated that roughly 15,000 to 35,000 Sikh and Hindu women and 29,000 to 50,000 Muslim women were abducted, raped, forced to convert and marry men of religions other than their own (Butalia 2000, 183). The experiences, uncertainties and anxieties that the Partition created are left out of the Indian nation's grand narrative (Hasan 2000, Pandey 2001). Collective memory that draws on individual stories of the Partition is of recent origin, manifested mainly in scholarly accounts, and popular works in literature and film (see for e.g. Kaur 2007, Pandey 2001, Butalia 1998, Menon and Bhasin 1998, Das 1995, Bhalla 1994, Sahni 2001, Manto 2002).

Post-Partition Sikh anxieties and fears about their identity remained and

territorial demands that started in the 1940s found expression in the call for a Punjabi Suba or a Punjabi-speaking state within the Indian republic. Even though the Akali Dal (Eternal Army), the major Sikh regional political party presented its demand for the creation of a Sikh majority state on linguistic basis, that is, an emphasis on Punjabi, this demand was turned down by the States Reorganization Commission on the ground that Punjabi was not sufficiently distinct from Hindi and that the movement lacked “the general support of the people inhabiting the area” (Brass 1974, 320). The lack of “general support” referred to Hindus who declared Hindi to be their mother tongue to census commissioners for fear of a Sikh majority state. This intensified the rift between Punjabi Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus that the Partition had already set in motion. Despite this resistance, the Punjabi Suba or a Punjabi-speaking Sikh majority state came into being in 1966. After the redrawing of state boundaries, Sikhs constituted 54 per cent and Hindus 44 per cent, making Sikhs a majority by a hair’s breadth in Punjab.¹⁴

The enduring loss of the Partition informed both Sikh and Hindu interpretations of 1984, and events preceding and following that year. Diasporic memory work on 1984 carries sediments of several crucial developments from Sikh past, but perhaps 1947 is the most significant of all. Yet, an unambiguous Sikh identity vis-à-vis the Indian state did not materialize until 1984. As Tatla observes about the Sikh diaspora in particular, “Being a Sikh, a Punjabi and an Indian posed no contradiction nor were there any events which might have forced them to differentiate between the various aspects of such an ambiguous multi identification” (2012, 67).

Memory workers on 1984, especially first generation Sikh survivors and witnesses, evoke the memories of the 1947 in framing the events of 1984. 1984 was an echo, a resonance of the mayhem, destruction and brutal losses of the 1947 Partition. Still, Sikhs draw a distinction between the cataclysms. The state that was perceived to be an impartial, rational, coherent and repository of authority and justice (Hansen 2001) was complicit in the 1984 massacres. Sikhs continue to experience the vacuum created by 1984—unlike 1947, which was a blow to all Punjabis (Sikh, Muslim and Hindu). 1984 constructed Sikhs as a separate, distinct and excluded community.¹⁵ As Sikh memory workers explain in their interviews and in digital narratives, they felt alienated and distant from a state that took on the identity of the “Hindu ‘other’” (Gupta 1996, 2007).

Immediate Context of 1984

The anxieties and insecurities that began haunting the Sikh community in the 1940s kept intensifying culminating in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1960s, Punjab was riding an economic success wave of the “green revolution,” or widespread reforms in agriculture. Agricultural prosperity relied on high-yielding varieties of seeds and a host of other equipment such as fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation implements. These innovations in agriculture brought considerable wealth to the state but also widespread government activity to facilitate the continued success of the agrarian revolution. Also, the green revolution decreased cultivators’ autonomy and made them dependent on conditions over which they had no control- e.g. increasing prices for fertilizers or availability of credit (Jeffrey 1986, 78-9). Education and wealth grew in the state but as

the green revolution reached a plateau and industries did not develop in the state, employment opportunities kept shrinking. This created discontentment among Sikh youth (K. Singh 1984). Social changes ushered in by increased commodification also led to socio-cultural crisis (Singh and Purewal 2013, 134).

It was against this backdrop that political factors took precedence in creating a new minority consciousness among Sikhs in the 1980s. As Joyce Pettigrew suggests, “it was during the 1970s that the bonds of the Sikhs with the state began to loosen” (1995, 7). Economic factors alone do not account for the crisis of 1984 because it was not until the period between 1978-1980s that militancy gained ground and a small group of Sikhs put forth secessionist demands. Neither can the events be understood in purely cultural terms. As I explained before, Sikhism is characterized by an absence of duality, and yet the militant/martyrdom side within this continuous tradition assumed (and was also deliberately made) visible in interactions with other communities and the state only after 1980 (Gupta 1996, 70-71).

Politicization of issues played a major part in producing and fomenting the crisis in Punjab. Political dynamics in Punjab were centered around three key protagonists: the nationalist party Congress (I), the Akali Dal, and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947-84) and his followers. Bhindranwale was the head of a seminary called the Damdami Taksal (taksal literally meaning mint). Jarnail Singh attended this taksal or seminary in the village of Bhindran and hence came to be known as Bhindranwale. The taksal was made sacred by its association with the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Bhindranwale became the head of the Damdami Taksal after his

predecessor passed away in a car accident in 1977 and after his ascendance to leadership was given the prefix Sant (Saint).

The Akali Dal sought to maintain its influence in Punjab in the 1970s while the Congress (I) that held power at the federal level under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, was also vying to create a stronghold in the state. Even though Akali Dal was a major regional and religious party, it did not enjoy undivided Sikh support (Tully and Jacobs 1985, J. Grewal 2007). The Congress (I) had enjoyed success in the state before the events of 1984. Even after 1984 Sikhs continued to draw a distinction between the ideology of Hindu nationalism and the Congress(I). They felt estranged from what came to be seen as the “Hindu *sarkar*” (government) rather than the Congress (I) (Gupta 1996, 77). This struggle for power led the Akali Dal to make demands for increased state autonomy for the first time in 1973 in a document that came to be known as the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. The Resolution was formally adopted in 1978. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution included three main demands: first, Chandigarh be the capital of Punjab alone, rather than the shared capital of both Punjab and Haryana; second, that territorial disputes between Punjab and its adjoining province of Haryana be adjudicated by an independent tribunal; and finally, that the distribution of river water between Punjab and its neighbors be settled by the Supreme Court (Gupta 1985, Tully and Jacob 1985). The document did not draw much attention in 1978 when it was formally adopted but assumed importance only around 1980 (Gupta 1996, 74). It became a central plank on which dissension between the Akali Dal and the Congress (I) and later Bhindranwale, played out.

The demands by the Akalis formally endorsed in 1978 must be understood in relation to other developments that were unfolding in India. From 1975-77, Indira Gandhi imposed a State of Emergency in India as a measure to protect her political position. The national Emergency was declared on the pretext that the security of India was at peril because of internal disturbances. This was to keep her own government in power after the Prime Minister had been found guilty of corrupt electoral practices. Democracy was suspended and dictatorial measures were imposed including press censorship, arbitrary arrests, torture, demolition of slums and forced sterilization.¹⁶ The Akali Dal put up a strong resistance movement against this dictatorial regime. When the Emergency was lifted, the Akalis formed a coalition government in Punjab. However, to restore power back to the Congress (I), a host of leaders resorted to various tactics (see for e.g. Nayar and Singh 1985, Tully and Jacob 1985) including to use the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as a tool to create fear of secessionism and another imminent Partition among Indians at large. The motives behind the resolution as observed by independent observers was autonomy rather than secessionism (see for e.g. Tully and Jacob 1985, 50).

The Anandpur Sahib Resolution also included a set of religious demands including granting the status of holy city to Amritsar, to broadcast recitation of the holy scriptures in the Golden Temple and the demand that Sikhs be allowed to carry the kirpan or ceremonial dagger aboard civilian aircraft on domestic and international flights (Tully and Jacob 1985, 75-6; K. Singh 1984, 9; see also *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation* 1984; 61-5). The Akalis' agitational techniques culminated in declaring a

dharma yudh (righteous war) and thousands of volunteers were sent from Amritsar to protest against the government and court arrest.

At the same time as the Akalis carried their politics of non violent resistance, a parallel Sikh “fundamentalist” (e.g. K. Singh 1984) or “revivalist” (e.g. Singh and Purewal 2013) movement led by Bhindranwale was underway. The choice of terms to characterize Bhindranwale’s movement is indicative of heterogeneous perceptions about Bhindranwale within the community as well as in scholarly accounts. A major episode that constituted the immediate precursor to the events of 1984 was the confrontation between the Sant Nirankari sect of Sikhs (with a different set of beliefs from orthodox Sikhs that I will outline below) and orthodox Sikhs in April 1978. The latter were followers of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who first rose into prominence with this episode.

Bhindranwale led a small but influential movement touring villages advising Sikh youth to return to the Khalsa traditions of Guru Gobind Singh: not clip their beards, abstain from smoking and drinking, and uphold the Khalsa code of conduct. His rhetoric against the perceived assault on Sikh values from the Hindu community found rapid acceptance and the frequency of initiations into the Khalsa increased manifold (Nayar and Singh 1985). There is a great deal of ambiguity about Bhindranwale being used as a pawn by the federal government to curb the influence of the Akali Dal, or the Akali Dal’s role in starting these rumors to control his rising popularity (Mahmood 1996, 80). Nevertheless, there is consensus that Bhindranwale’s militant movement advocating violence (Gupta 1985, Mahmood 1996) was markedly different from the non-violent

politics of the Akali Dal (though there were splits within the Akalis: see Major 1987). The Akali Dal and Bhindranwale were themselves seen in a political embrace at times but that was also symptomatic of the prevailing politicization of issues. There were many fractures even within the Sikh political leadership.

The 1978 clash between the followers of Bhindranwale and the Sant Nirankari sect was the beginning of a period of militancy in Punjab. The rise of Sikh religious nationalism and its complete mishandling by the federal state created the immediate conditions for the events of 1984 and entangled Punjab in an unprecedented political crisis (Jodhka 2000). Damdami Taksal activists were involved in militant activities to preserve the orthodox Sikh tradition (see for e.g. Nayar and Singh 1985, Tully and Jacob 1985). The Sant Nirankaris were strongly opposed by Bhindranwale and his followers. The Sant Nirankaris believed in a living Guru and added their own scriptures to the Guru Granth Sahib. On April 13 1978, the Sant Nirankaris were to hold a convention in Amritsar. A two hundred-member strong procession came together to resist the Nirankaris. There was a violent clash between the Nirankaris and Bhindranwale's group killing twelve orthodox Sikhs and three Nirankaris.¹⁷ A case was registered against Nirankaris by the Akali-led government but they were acquitted. Lala Jagat Narain was the chief editor and owner of the Hind Samachar group of newspapers and published bitter editorials against Bhindranwale.¹⁸ He testified in favor of Nirankaris. The Nirankaris also received support in the media. Orthodox Sikhs considered this favorable treatment indicative of an anti-Sikh sentiment.

After this episode, the situation in Punjab deteriorated massively. There were

several murders and killings in which Bhindranwale is likely to have played a part (Mahmood 1996). Baba Gurbachan Singh, the Nirankari Guru was killed in 1980 and Lala Jagat Narain was killed in 1981. Bhindranwale exhorted all Sikhs to take up arms and become *shastradharis* (weapon-wielders). There is some ambivalence about Bhindranwale's demand for a separate state of Khalistan and it is generally agreed that he did not use the word "Khalistan" (e.g. Juergensmeyer 1987, Mahmood 1996) but talked for greater autonomy for Punjab and used the term *qaum* (nation) to refer to the Sikh people (see also Tully and Jacob 1984).

Though a majority of Sikhs opposed the violence of Khalistani nationalists these sentiments were not captured and broadcast by the media. There was also a great deal of state and media emphasis on the demand for Khalistan in the diaspora. In 1971, a former minister in the Akali Dal government, Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan raised a cry for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan. Contrary to popular perception, support for Khalistan in the diaspora was limited and split (see for e.g. Nayar and Singh 1985, 50). Chauhan was boycotted by "all mainstream overseas Sikh communities till 1984 when the tragedy not only rehabilitated him but proved, in the minds of many angry Sikhs, that he had always been right!" (Tatla 2006, 68). At the same time, Bhindranwale gathered support from various high-ranking police and military personnel leading Mahmood to remark:

Already, then, there is something puzzling about the "extremism" and "terrorism" of the Bhindranwale group, which, it is true, were vociferously condemned by more moderate Sikhs all over India, but which attracted support from various quarters not obviously allied to the quest for religious orthodoxy characteristic of Bhindranwale's own rhetoric (1996, 81-2).

The various political machinations and maneuverings at this time and a

simultaneous escalation of violence created an atmosphere of distrust and animosity against the community at large. All Sikhs began to be viewed as a “threatening and disruptive” minority. This was proved in 1982 when the regional sports alliance, the Asian Games, were to be held in New Delhi. The Akali Dal had stated that they would demonstrate at the Games to make their demands of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution heard. This was considered unpalatable to Indira Gandhi’s federal government.

Consequently, Sikhs were treated as security threats and prohibited entry into the capital city. The Sikh community was confounded and bewildered by this treatment.

Jyoti Grewal (2007) writes of the atmosphere of the time and the predicament confronting common Sikhs:

Stories of Sikhs being pulled out of vehicles and searched, of tossed turbans, of women being frisked by male constabulary, of being asked impossible questions like “Do you have proof that you are not a terrorist?” or “Can you prove you will not be demonstrating at the Asian Games?” abound...Even more importantly, the humiliation and mortification of Sikhs was immeasurable...Consider the reality of Sikh women and men during these strange times: within Punjab, they lived with the fear of the militants- terrorists- fundamentalists who had made life miserable for the general populace...Outside of Punjab, Sikhs were either derided for being Sikhs or were officially treated as suspects, and lived in fear of further unwelcome treatment” (Grewal 2007, 63).¹⁹

Political dynamics in the preceding years centering around the Akali Dal, the Congress (I) and Bhindranwale “placed everyday Sikhs at the center stage of selective discriminatory humiliation” (Grewal 2007, 62). Various incidents of escalating violence unfolded at this time including the murder of the Deputy Inspector-General of Punjab, A.S. Atwal, police opening fire on Sikh demonstrators, a bus stopped by Sikh militants and Hindu passengers executed and bank robberies.²⁰ Sikhs suffered equally in violent attacks along with Hindus but this was neglected in official accounts of the time.

In October 1983, Punjab was declared a “disturbed area” and President’s Rule was imposed. Bhindranwale and his followers took refuge in the Golden Temple the same year. At the time that Bhindranwale set up his headquarters in the complex, the Akali Dal President Longowal had been living there. He also called in a private army to defend himself from Bhindranwale, and men from an organization called the Babbar Khalsa moved in, one of the many splinter groups formed against the Nirankari or reform movement that had clashed with Bhindranwale’s followers in 1978. They took their name from the Babbar Akalis or the group within the Akali Dal who opposed non-violence in the 1920s, also symptomatic of the coexistence of many strains, violent and non-violent within Sikhism. Bhindranwale occupied and fortified portions of the Akal Takht in the Golden Temple complex and brought in arms to the shrine.

Mahmood evokes the repercussions of these political confrontations in Punjab on the larger community. She recalls the sinister atmosphere by recording her own recollections of the time:

I happened to be in Delhi in the fall of 1983 and saw personally what was happening to totally uninvolved and apolitical Sikhs I knew. They were stopped and searched before going into movie theaters for fear they might be carrying bombs...Although my Sikh friends held no brief for Bhindranwale or his methods, they felt insulted and hurt by the presumed association between their turbans and the increasing violence in Punjab...As one Hindu woman told me at the time, “It used to be that if we were riding on a train and saw a Sikh in our carriage, we would feel protected. Now if we see one, we feel scared.” When I told this to a Sikh friend, he was quite upset... (1996, 83).

The above discussion shows that the dominant counternarrative of Sikh militancy itself needs to be contextualized within the prevailing structural conditions when the Indian state assumed a “Hindu” identity. When scholars such as

Juergensmeyer (1987) and Kapur (1986) focus on militancy as an “essential” quality of Sikh religion and culture without juxtaposing this with other attributes and by neglecting the 1978-1984 state manufactured equation “Indian=Hindu identity,” this boosts the Indian state’s narrative, vilifying the community-at-large, constructing them as “terrorists,” and “militant separatists.” The Sikh community at large found itself in a difficult double bind in the 1980s while the state justified its use of violence to curb a “difficult minority.” Sikhs were identified as “the ‘enemy,’” and while Hindus dissociated themselves from the “enemy,” Sikhs were given impossible choices to,

(e)ither...reject this ‘enemy’ thereby (i) affirming that militancy is a deviation from ‘true’ Sikhism and (ii) renouncing the right to resist the state (a principle historically and theologically inscribed in Sikh tradition). Or, to identify with the ‘enemy’ thereby (i) affirming that Sikhism itself is not a true religion and by nature incompatible with democracy and (ii) affirming that Sikhs and Sikhism can never rightfully belong within the ambit of the Indian nation, hence justifying separatism which inevitably invites state violence (Mandair 2007, 220).

The developments leading up to 1984 ostracized everyday Sikhs in a Hindu state. While Sikh political leaders were part of the tussle between the federal state and Punjab, the community on the whole faced the brunt of suffering. The events of 1984 crystallized the “othering” of Sikhs by inflicting direct violence on the community.

1984: June and October-November

On June 1, a brutal military assault on the Golden Temple was launched, under the codename Operation Blue Star to “flush out the extremists,” Bhindranwale and his followers (see Tully and Jacob 1985, 155-191). The Indian Army took control of the state,

imposing a curfew in the city of Amritsar and cutting off all communication. There were thousands of pilgrims in the Golden Temple who had gathered to celebrate the anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev on June 3.

There was some exchange of fire from June 1 and June 3 between Bhindranwale's group and the Indian Army. On the evening of June 5, the Army entered the Temple complex with tanks and blasted the Akal Takht, representing the temporal center of the Sikhs. The Akal Takht and Harimandir Sahib suffered heavy damage. Bhindranwale and his followers were not the only ones killed. According to initial rough estimates there were close to 1,000 civilian women, children and men in the Golden Temple at the time, around 100 priests and temple attendants in addition to Akali Dal supporters and other armed groups supporting the Akali Dal leader, Longowal, bringing the number to more than 3,000 (Tully and Jacob 1985, 185). Later civil liberties organizations like the Movement Against State Repression stated the total number of killed exceeded 10,000 (Pettigrew 1995, 24). It is fairly certain that the loss of life and damage to the Golden Temple complex was far greater than that reported by the state and the media. As a prominent Sikh Army officer, Lt. Gen. Aurora notes in an essay:

I went to Amritsar on 6 July, visited the Golden Temple and talked to the Army authorities and others who were there during the Army operation. The damage to the entire complex was much beyond what was reported in the media news or the press. It was difficult not to feel hurt and control one's anguish. It is not easy to rationalize when your deepest sentiments are injured (1984, 93).

In addition to the loss of lives and irreparable damage to the complex and Sikh collective body, there have been accounts of the callous mishandling of civilians at the hands of the army. There is visual evidence of Sikhs with their hands

behind their backs. Some of these people were shot dead (Tully and Jacob 1985, 190). A journalist reported his eyewitness account of what he witnessed on June 6:

On the way back to the hotel, I witness a scene at the Kotwali (police station) which is blood curdling. This is where some jawans (soldiers) were kicking some of the 11 suspected terrorists as they knelt on their bare knees and crawled on the hot road surface. Among the officers directing this operation was a Sikh. His face contorted in anger when he lashed out at his fellowmen who he thought were traitors. But the hundreds of spectators who saw this incident felt anguished. The sight put them off (Kirpekar 1984, 82).

After Operation Blue Star an unprecedented number of Sikh soldiers mutinied. Even as far as repairs of the damage of the Golden Temple was concerned, *kar seva* (service related to religious sites) was entrusted to a controversial leader of a Sikh sect, Santa Singh. There was little attempt to redress the desecralization of the sacred Golden Temple and the humiliation of a people (see Tully and Jacob 1985, 213-215, Nayar and Singh 1985, 122).

Sikhs were unanimous in condemning the brutality and “deliberate desecration” (Das, 2007, 109) of the forced entry of the army in the *gurdwara*. They came together as a community to challenge the necessity of the operation as well as its timing. Operation Blue Star evoked memories of other anti-Sikh massacres from Sikh past and was labeled “the third Ghallughara,” roughly translated into “holocaust,” at the hands of invading armies. In 1746 Sikhs suffered a massacre killing more than 10,000, known as the *Chhota Ghallughara* or lesser Holocaust and in 1762, an estimated 25,000-30,000 Sikhs lost their lives in what is known as the *Vadda Ghallughara* or greater Holocaust. The term “Ghallughara,” suggests the magnitude of damage, challenges the state’s justification of the assault and serves as a testament to Sikh resilience. Yet there are

limits to the comparison because it “obscures the more complicated and tragic consequences of the third Ghallughara, as both the Sikhs and the Indian state have evolved into far more complex structures since the eighteenth century” (Tatla 2006, 61).

The secessionist movement for Khalistan received a massive boost after Operation Blue Star. While before Operation Blue Star, Sikhs had either been indifferent or estranged from political events as they were unfolding, the discrimination levied on the community in years preceding it and Operation Blue Star drove a deep wedge between Sikhs, the “Hindu *sarkar*” (state) (Gupta 1996, 77) and mainstream Hindus at large. In its continuing pursuit for power the federal state created the spectral threat of another Partition for Hindus. To capture Sikh sentiment after Operation Bluestar, the famous Sikh novelist and columnist Khushwant Singh wrote:

Things have never been the same again. Sikhs who had nothing to do with Bhindranwale or politics felt deeply humiliated. Bhindranwale was killed which gave him a halo of martyrdom he did not deserve. It gave a fillip to the terrorist groups...(1992, 71).²¹

The end of Operation Blue Star was also the beginning of another spate of state-initiated atrocities against Sikhs. In one state action called Operation Woodrose, young Sikh men were attacked and went missing. In the name of pursuing Bhindranwale’s followers, the army initiated an indiscriminating assault on Sikh youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. They were kept in army custody for significant lengths of time and subjected to torture (Pettigrew 1995, 2006). *Amritdhari* or baptized and *kesdhari* Sikhs were specifically targeted. The Army’s targeting of *amritdharis* became evident through the Army Gazette which said:

Any knowledge of the Amritdharis who are dangerous people and pledged to commit murders, arson and act [sic] of terrorism should immediately be brought to the notice of the authorities. These people might appear harmless from outside but they are basically committed to terrorism. In the interest of all of us their identity and whereabouts must always be disclosed (cit. in *Oppression in Punjab* 1985, 28-9).

On October 31 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. All Sikhs did not condone Indira Gandhi's assassination itself, but there had been a premonitory understanding among both Sikhs and non-Sikhs that Operation Bluestar was "bound to have a sequel in the form of a calamitous national event" (Das 2007, 110). The assassination precipitated orchestrated, state-backed massacre of Sikhs in India's capital city Delhi and other parts of north India from the evening of October 31, 1984 lasting through November 4, 1984. More than 3,000 Sikhs died in this violence aided and abetted by prominent leaders of Congress Party to which the assassinated Prime Minister belonged. *Amritdhari/ kesdhari* or visibly identifiable Sikhs were especially targeted and their homes and businesses were attacked. The extent and impact of the horror was not officially acknowledged till much later. Even so, the Indian state dismissed the violence as "riots," or a spontaneous outbreak of violence. The community's relatively comfortable relationship with the state and majority Hindu community was transformed with a gruesome suddenness. To quote from Chakravarti and Haksar at length:

What the Sikhs found unbearable was that it was not on the streets that they had been attacked but right inside their homes. The unexpectedness of the action of the mobs striking right inside the homes of the Sikhs meant that they had been virtually trapped before they were assaulted and killed. Even those who got away with relatively little damage shared with others the feeling of being hunted, of being holed up inside their homes, and of having to seek refuge in the homes of neighbors.²² The sense of insecurity has been the greatest to the

sense of self esteem of the Sikhs. While earlier they perceived themselves as walking erect and proudly now they feel crushed...

The collapse of the administration which many of our interviewees talk about is considered by most Sikhs to have been a “contrived collapse” and the state has then, through the media, tried to make the riots look as if they were “natural and inevitable,” describing it as an expression of the spontaneous anger of the people (1987, 24).

The writer Khushwant Singh writes of how Sikh houses and shops were marked for destruction like “those of Jews in Tsarist Russia or Nazi Germany”(1992, 93) and the police and administration either facilitated the violence or were indifferent. Singh took refuge in a Swedish embassy, an option not available to the majority of the afflicted. All Sikhs were affected by the carnage, but the economically dispossessed and marginalized faced the brunt of the attacks. Estimates of homeless people are as high as 50,000 and the government’s offer of compensation was insufficient and hard to procure.

The events of 1984 created a gaping hole in community identity. Sikhs’ self-perception as a minority was fleeting or fairly insignificant even after the Partition of 1947. Yet, state action as well as the apathy and inaction of non-Sikhs during the anti-Sikh carnage ensured a crystallization of minority identity. While the state and the dominant community disowned the Sikhs, the community as a whole felt stigmatized and humiliated. As the community started representing and making sense of their painful experiences, they also started developing a pronounced minority consciousness.

The repression and humiliation the community experienced in 1984 led many young Sikhs to participate in the fight against state terror. The demand for a territorial identity that had found expression in the 1940s acquired a new and distinctive face with the Declaration of Khalistan or an independent state of Sikhs in April 1986. Operation

Woodrose that continued in the 1980s led young Sikhs to move closer to the militant, resistance movement against the state and demand a clear-cut territorial identity. This contributed to creating further conditions of *zulm* (oppression) including:

A whole range of behavior inflicted on the innocent, such as the disappearance and torture of sons, death in false encounter, illegal detention in false cases, harassment of witnesses and of the relatives of the militants both near and far and the creation of an atmosphere of terror so that people are driven out of their homes and villages (Pettigrew 1995, 10).

The events of 1984 initiated at least a decade of extrajudicial killings, atrocities, torture and human rights abuses in Punjab sanctioned by the state (Human Rights Watch 1994). From 1987 onwards the federal government initiated unprecedented terror on people in Punjab. After another attack on the Golden Temple in 1988, Punjab was handed over to the security forces with extrajudicial powers, resulting in anonymous and arbitrary arrests, secret detentions, disappearances, killings and systematic torture (see for e.g. Pettigrew 1995, Kumar et al 2003, P. Singh 2010). Civilians, Sikhs and Hindus alike, found themselves caught between the war between security forces and militants. Estimates of those killed vary from 21,000 to 100,000 (Tatla 1999, 231). “The federal government abandoned Punjab to its security forces, making little effort to address the underlying cause of the Sikh rebellion- namely, the humiliation felt by a people” (Tatla 2006, 70).²³

After the 1984 carnage in Delhi and other parts of north India, some 26,000 Sikh refugee families, arrived in Punjab from other parts of India and 1,000 Hindu families moved out of Punjab between 1983-86 (Tatla 1999, 33). After 1984 Sikh families also tried to escape abroad. There was an increase in asylum seekers and refugees in North

America though few were granted asylum (Tatla 1999, 58-60). The rise and growth of the Khalistan movement or secessionism in the 1980s until the mid-1990s can be understood against the developments of the late 1970s and 1980s (see for e.g. Kapur 1986, Jodkha 2001). I will briefly examine diasporic mobilization around Khalistan in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Sikh cultural practices, along with the diaspora's simultaneous physical distance and emotional proximity with the community in India, shape and define memory work. The Sikh community is sacred and coheres around collective memories, glorious and grim. Memories of 1984 are embedded in this larger narrative. Sikhism is not an either/or tradition, and counternarratives to the state combine passion with politics—they are neither simply pacifist nor purely militant. For the Sikh diaspora, memories of 1984 are a means of transnational engagement, which differs substantially from pan-Indian mobilization of the pre-1984 period, most notably the Ghadar movement. In the contemporary period, Sikh estrangement with the Indian state began with the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. But whereas the violence accompanying the latter affected all groups (Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims), 1984 targeted the Sikh community alone. 1984 constructed and represented Sikhs as a “threatening and menacing” minority, distinct and separate from the “Hindu” nation-state. The political turmoil in Punjab, combined with economic anxieties, created conditions for certain cultural values, namely militancy and martyrdom, to find support over others. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution was used

as a strategic tactic in a political power play. The many political struggles between Sikh leadership and the Indian federal state created conditions for a backlash against the community at large. In June 1984 the Golden Temple, a sacred embodiment of the Sikh collective body was invaded by the Indian army, killing thousands of pilgrims, followed by the systematic carnage against Sikhs in November. Memories of these events were not allowed to break through the thick “walls” of representation created by the state and its mass media, especially in the Indian context. Counternarratives from the militant movement, supported by the diaspora, received attention, but early “crevices,” from Indian civic rights organizations and engaged citizens were lost. The following chapter will examine these official representations of Sikhs, as well as early counternarratives.

¹ *Panth* means path or way and means community.

² See for e.g. K. Singh (1966), McLeod (1976, 1989), Oberoi (1994) for various views on the development of Sikhism and Sikh identity.

³ Sikhism has several other sacred sites, see for e.g. Murphy (2012, 31-40). While acknowledging the significance of the Golden Temple, S. Singh (2014) contests its designation as “Sikhism’s holiest site”:
<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2014/11/18/10-things-i-wish-everyone-knew-about-sikhism/35075>

⁴ See also Pritam Singh (2007) for a discussion of “cycles” of violence and non-violence in Sikh history.

⁵ As noted by Murphy (2012) the 5 Ks did not emerge as a set until the 19th century.

⁶ Sociologist J.P.S. Oberoi (2000) offers a “pacifist” interpretation of initiation into the 5 Ks. Unlike the custom of total depilation followed by medieval mendicants, “the Sikh initiation rite is to be understood as a specific inversion in symbolic terms of the custom of total depilation...The meaning of being unshorn, in particular, is thus constituted by the ‘negation of the negation.’ It signifies the permanent renunciation of renunciation” (69-70).

⁷ See Jakobsh (2010) for visible identity for women.

⁸ Jats hold numerical dominance within the larger Sikh community (McLeod 1989). Sikhs of other castes also migrated (see for e.g. Verma, 2002).

⁹ Thind had received his citizenship papers in 1920 but his involvement in the independence movement against British colonial rule in India gave the Bureau of Immigration a pretext to deport him. Thind was acknowledged as Caucasian but his citizenship was revoked because he did not fit the “popular meaning” of “white.”

¹⁰ This act barred the entry of all “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” virtually ending all Asian immigration.

¹¹ Sikhs in the US also include Americans of European descent who converted to Sikhism in the 1970s under the leadership of Harbhajan Singh Yogi (Dusenberry 1990, Mann 2000).

¹² <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm#a6>

¹³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/2012/08/06/ask-the-expert-how-many-us-sikhs/>

¹⁴ In the 1941 census Hindus and Sikhs were 26 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. In 1951, after the Partition, Hindus were 61 per cent, Sikhs 35 per cent, and Muslims just one per cent (Tatla 1999, 229).

¹⁵ As Nandy (1995) notes, “[B]y conventional criteria, the Sikhs were not a minority nor did they see themselves as such. It took a long period of political skull-duggery and the experience of the 1984 riots to turn them into a distinct minority” (59-60).

¹⁶ See Tarlo (2003) for a comprehensive account.

¹⁷ I take these numbers from Tully and Jacob (1985, 59) but Mahmood (2006, 59) and K. Singh (1984, 9) report different figures.

¹⁸ Tully and Jacob (1984) write, “There is no doubt that Lala Jagat Narain’s papers played a role in fanning the flames of communal hatred between Hindus and Sikhs. In his editorials his theme was often the support for Khalistan among Sikhs in the Punjab. He gave the impression that this support was more widespread than it actually was, heightening Hindu suspicions of the Sikh community” (66).

¹⁹ See also Nayar and Singh (1984, 66).

²⁰ See for e.g. Nayar and Singh (1984), Tully and Jacob (1985) and Grewal (2007) for details of events as they unfolded in this period.

²¹ The latter sentiment about Bhindranwale is not representative of the entire community. There are many different perceptions, some of which came forth in my interviews.

²² The fear that Sikhs experienced in Delhi must be juxtaposed with community members' reactions in Punjab. In Sikh predominant Punjab, especially in the countryside, there were in fact celebrations following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. According to some eyewitness accounts, Sikh farmers celebrated the news of Gandhi's assassination, jumping with joy and throwing their turbans in the air, shouting *oye marti, marti* (we have killed Indira Gandhi, we have killed her!). This celebratory atmosphere, while being inappropriate and distasteful, shows the extent of discontentment and frustration experienced by members of the community. As Pritam Singh explains this "'celebration' must be seen in the larger context of Sikh collective memory that anyone who attacks the Golden Temple gets punished." In contrast to celebrations among Sikhs in Punjab, Hindus in Punjab experienced fear upon finding out the news of Gandhi's assassination. There was fear that there might be retaliatory Sikh mob violence against Hindus. However, this violence was deflected for many reasons, including the state's active role in preventing any such incidents against the majority Hindu community in Punjab. This was in keeping with its majoritarian policies and politics.

I am grateful to Pritam Singh for alerting me to these finer distinctions between and within communities.

²³ The aftermath of this period of disappearances and deaths lies outside the purview of my project. There is literature available in Punjabi language documenting this period and containing voices of Sikhs from rural Punjab. I confine myself to memories of June and October-November 1984 as a starting point in making silenced voices heard.

Chapter 3

Memory Walls and “Crevices”: Representing 1984

Broadly speaking, representations of 1984 should be situated in relation to the frameworks of dominant versus counterhegemonic knowledge. Dominant narratives abound with elisions and omissions which uphold the state’s legitimacy, and create social rules for expressing emotions that exclude Sikh experiences (Hochschild 1979). Counternarratives to this official discourse emerged from civil rights bodies and engaged and committed collectives, as well as from the Sikh militant resistance. Present day memory work builds on these counternarratives but it is also different from these accounts. The militant resistance movement sought to challenge the state’s subjugation of a community and to retrieve the lost *izzat* (honor) of the community.

Present-day memory workers borrow from these counternarratives. On the whole, they are sympathetic to the militant counternarrative. Their narratives are imbued with feelings of *izzat* and *sharam* (shame) as well as emotions of sadness, nostalgia, anger and fear. Yet their mode of dissent and affect is different from those of the past due to multiple social factors, including a shift in generational consciousness, the rise of digital media, diasporic experiences, and the time elapsed since the event occurred.

I examine present day memory work as counternarratives more closely in the following chapters. But first, it is important to address the following two questions: what were the dominant narratives about the Sikh community created by the state and mass media? What were some early counternarratives?

The state and the mass media built a tight, coherent, wall-like narrative around 1984, keeping out alternative interpretations and experiences. These dominant representations were static and unchanging. The state and media depicted the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as a separatist document, despite scholars and activists' claims to the contrary, and represented the attack on the Golden Temple as a much-needed act to control not simply a handful of Sikh militants but to curb a "disruptive community." It dismissed the planned massacre of Sikhs as spontaneous sectarian "riots." Official narratives focus on Sikh militant identity in the 1980s and 1990s without attention to variations within the community and continue to uphold this narrative today. All Sikhs, regardless of political affiliation or opinions, were labeled "fundamentalist" and anti-national.

Two main sets of counternarratives challenged these official accounts. One was created by Indian civil rights organizations, journalists, academics and engaged citizens, especially the reports by Citizens for Democracy (CFD) and the People's Union for Democratic Rights and People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUDR-PUCL). I call this set of counternarratives "crevices" or ruptures because they were "emergent," slowly simmering, opposing the dominant narrative (Williams 1977, 123). While these reports contained eyewitness, activist, journalistic and even survivor evidence about the state's complicity in the events of 1984, they did not find their way into the popular press or consequently, into popular memory. For instance, the CFD report was banned in India; the CFD and PUDR-PUCL accounts were drowned out by the second cluster of counternarratives that gained center stage, which encompassed voices from the Sikh

militant and secessionist movement of Khalistan. Militant calls for an independent state of Khalistan enjoyed support from some members of the community, especially segments of diasporic Sikhs, but degenerated over time, becoming instrumentalist and divisive. Militant counternarratives failed to include more heterogeneous responses to 1984 from within the community.

Dominant Narrative: The State's Story

The Indian state's account of 1984 is based on denial and distortion. The state maintains silence about the extent and magnitude of damage against the community at large, while blaming the Sikh leadership and Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and rationalizing and underplaying its own involvement and complicity in violence. At the time the state was led by the Congress (I) under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The Congress (I) had gained credibility and respect among Indians at large because of their role in leading the nationalist struggle for independence against British colonial rule. The party had come to represent secular politics. However as I explained earlier, the intricate political manipulations of the years preceding 1984 meant the Congress (I) led government had much to gain by labeling and targeting the Sikh community as the "outsider" in a predominantly "Hindu nation-state." The genesis of the present Hindutva movement or Hinduness, "a majoritarian call for Hindutva combin(ing) well-established paternalist and xenophobic discourses with democratic and universalist discourses on rights and entitlement" (Hansen 1999, 4) can be traced back to the state identifying itself as "Hindu," starting in 1984. While today the politics and ideology of the right-wing

political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its militant outfit Rashtra Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) are mostly responsible for the construction of India as a Hindu “*rashtra*” (nation) to the exclusion of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, the state abused power and took on a militant Hindu identity on many occasions starting with 1984. In situating the anti-Muslim pogrom of Gujarat in 2002 involving mass killings of Muslims, destruction of Muslim homes and religious and commercial property (see Ghassem-Fachandi 2012). Varadarajan writes,

the ease with which it (RSS) has been able to use the State machinery to sanction, legitimize and orchestrate violence against a section of citizens – something the country first saw in such a raw, naked manner during the Congress sanctioned massacre of Sikhs in November 1984 – points to a more pervasive problem with the nature and structure of the Indian polity and State. As in Delhi in 1984 or Bombay in 1993 (when Muslims were attacked in the wake of the Babri Masjid’s demolition) or indeed the violence in Hyderabad in 1990 (when nearly 200 Muslims and Hindus died), the State in Gujarat turned against a section of its citizens and refused to accept responsibility for providing even the most basic physical protection to them (2002, 10).

Even before the events of June and October-November 1984, the federal government had started creating an antagonistic climate for Sikhs by using several tactics. These strategies intensified in the period between 1980-1984 and included: (a) denying the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal’s demand for greater regional autonomy contained in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution; (b) portraying the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as a secessionist document; (c) using the state-controlled mass media as a mouthpiece to circulate their one-sided representations stressing that the onus of 1984 lay with Sikhs.

The Akali Dal and its negotiations with the central government were continually cast in a negative and disruptive light by the state and media. The Indian state used the

document put forward by the Akali leadership, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, as a tool to further their political ambitions. The three main demands contained in the document (the demand for Chandigarh; river water distribution and river water rights; and deciding territorial disputes by an independent tribunal) were “straightforward regional and secular issues.” The very transparency of Akali Dal’s demands and the religious composition of the Akali regional party gave the Congress (I) a reason to “communalize” the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. The document was interpreted as secessionist to create fears of another Partition (Gupta 1985, 218-9). The “non-reading of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution” (Gupta 1985, 221) was deliberate and willfully manipulated for electoral gains. Underlying these immediate electoral gains were deeper issues of the Indian state’s weak secular ideology, dismissive of minority religious rights and seeking to appropriate a “Hindu” identity.

The state represented the June 1984 attacks in a similar lop-sided manner. Instead of accounting for the complexity of the context for the attack on the Golden Temple, the state wove a limited and simplistic narrative. In popular representations, created and circulated by the state and state-backed agencies, the state created dichotomous and hierarchical categories. The state took on the role of a benevolent, wise, calm, paternal and collected entity while ascribing qualities of unruliness, insolence, aggression and wayward immaturity to the Sikh community at large.

The primary source of the state account of June 1984 is the *White Paper* issued by the Government of India along with the statements and opinions expressed by political representatives of the time. According to the *White Paper* there were a set of

factors that produced a “complex web of violence and terror” (1984, 1) to weaken Punjab’s fabric along with the rest of India. These factors included what is termed a “communal and extremist movement” that supported “heinous crimes against innocent and helpless citizens and against the State,” as well as a demand for secessionism. The *White Paper* uses the labels “criminals, smugglers, other anti-social elements and Naxalites” (1984, 1) and “terrorists” (1984, 2).

In outlining the problems preceding 1984, the government considers the Akali Dal’s demands as unreasonable. The debate between the state and the Akali Dal centered mainly on the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. In response to these issues, the government document explains the overtures made by the Prime Minister that were repeatedly spurned by the Akali Dal because of the latter’s obdurate and “rigid position” (*White Paper*, 14). According to the government, the stalemate was the Akali Dal’s responsibility while the administration made every effort to “be helpful, without being unfair” (*White Paper* 1984, 15).

Another significant set of representations comes from the portrayal of the diasporic community. The state holds diasporic Sikhs responsible for starting and fueling the ideology of separatism. “The essence of the problem in Punjab was not the demands put forward by the Akali Dal in 1981 but the maturing of a secessionist and anti-national movement, with the active support of a small number of groups operating from abroad” (*White Paper* 1984, 3). The *White Paper* lists several individuals and organizations supporting Khalistan (1984, 35-42). It writes of the Sikh diaspora as opportunistic and

disconnected from problems in Punjab but thinly veils their contemptuous and condescending portrayal of an entire community:

The ideological underpinning for the demand for a separate Sikh state was provided by certain members of the Sikh community in foreign countries (*White Paper*, 1).

Sikhs are among the large number of Indians settled or working abroad whose love for India is not in doubt. However, some are misinformed or misled by interested parties, some others may be vulnerable to pressures in those countries. It is not always easy for the affluent settled abroad to identify with the basic socioeconomic interests of the working Sikh masses in India. For some of them the troubles in Punjab were a good opportunity to project themselves as leaders of the Sikh community (*White Paper*, 35).

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale finds space in the state issued document in stark black and white terms. According to state accounts, Bhindranwale's extremist measures should have been held in check by the Akali Dal. The state comes across as a helpless spectator to the politics of Sikh leadership:

Secessionist activities in India were fuelled by the inflammatory utterances of... Shri¹ Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and a few others...Their (Akali Dal) ambivalence and, on occasion, their use of the concept and phraseology of the separatist movement contributed to the political confusion of the State (*White Paper*, 1-2).

The state justified Operation Blue Star by stressing its reluctance and inhibition in sending army troops inside the Golden Temple. The *White Paper* states that Sikh "secessionist and terrorist groups" took advantage of the "government's reluctance to send police forces into gurdwaras out of deference to the religious sentiments of the Sikh community..." (*White Paper*, 2). The Prime Minister's address included in the official document reasserts the role of "terrorists and anti-national elements" that have created

an environment of animosity between Sikhs and Hindus and challenged the “unity and integrity our motherland...by a few who find refuge in holy shrines” (*White Paper*, 107).

The *White Paper* lays out in detail the arrangements made by “terrorists” to convert the Golden Temple complex into a “veritable fortress.” There is repeated mention of highly sophisticated weapons and foreign support for terrorists. The government is also clear in pointing out that of the 70 people killed in the attack on the Golden Temple, including 30 women and five children, the army troops were uninvolved. Rather these civilian deaths were a consequence of “terrorist” fire. The Prime Minister’s address, also nationally broadcast on the state-owned television channel *Doordarshan* called for a “healing of wounds” and an appeal to “all sections of Punjabis- don’t shed blood, shed hatred” (*White Paper*, 109).

Unlike the June invasion, state accounts of the November 1984 massacres do not find systematic explanation in any official document. The government did not issue an official account of the massacres. A handful of state officials issued statements, supported and circulated by the media. These statements include explaining violence because of “absence of orders, inadequacy of manpower and a general paralysis of the system following the sudden death of Indira Gandhi” (Bedi 1985. 61). While the carnage against Sikhs was underway, the state portrayed the situation as restrained, under control and a mere result of displaced anger.

The state dismissed the violence that broke out in Delhi and other parts of North India in November 1984 as spontaneous “riots.” This framework of suddenness and accidental emotional outbursts of Hindus against Sikhs was used to attribute sanity to

the massacres and mayhem. Rioters' agency was understood in terms of "madness" (Das 2007, 141).

When the violence broke out against Sikhs on the evening of October 31, the police took on the role of indifferent bystanders. Journalist Rahul Kuldip Bedi was an eyewitness reporter during the massacres as they were unfolding. He writes, "For Delhi, according to its rulers, is 'calm' and relatively incident free on November 2. Things, the then Lt.-Governor...says in an elaborate press note, are 'under control.' And they want no evidence, which might disprove their claims, to be seen by their new Prime Minister" (1985, 53). A senior police official continued to assert that there is some "*garhbarh*" (confusion) and he has performed his duty by informing the police control room (Bedi 1985, 54-55).

As Bedi reports a senior police official looked on passively while a group of youth started pulling Sikhs out of buses and mercilessly beating them up. He is reported to have said, "There is nothing I can do. I have to take her (Indira Gandhi's) body home." (1985, 63). As mobs led by the Congress (I), went out on a rampage systematically, the police either took on the role of passive spectators or deliberately assisted in the carnage, killing, attacking and violating Sikhs. "The local police collaborated with the rioters, as numerous evacuees in camps swore afterwards in affidavits...In the early hours of the following morning, the police disarmed and arrested the handful of Sikhs who tried to defend themselves with traditional weapons" (Bedi 1985, 58). In several other north Indian states, the same pattern of active police involvement through their willing absence or collusion was reported.

After around a fortnight of the Delhi massacres, the incoming Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi issued a statement on November 19 in which he considered the mass massacre of Sikhs an emotional reaction or a manifestation of people's *krodh* or anger and said, "*jab bada péd girta hai, to dharti hilti hai*" (When a big tree falls, the earth is bound to shake) (Mitta and Phoolka 2007, 3).

Officially issued statements were immune to scrutiny because they were associated with "sublime" (Hansen 2001, 35) power and even an implicit assumption about neutral, unbiased justice, rationality and reporting. These accounts acquired a rigid inflexibility and alternative perspectives, namely Sikhs' point of view and accompanying emotions were not allowed to escape this closed narrative structure. As a result official narratives assumed the shape of solid, impermeable walls. From the Sikh perspective, the official state narrative revealed the "myth of the state," (Hansen 2001, 32) belying its manifest and intended role as an impartial, rational and coherent body maintaining social order and justice. Sikhs-at-large felt disenchanted by the state but their feelings remained confined to private or community spaces. Indian mass media aided and abetted the state's wall-like narratives. Instead of acting as a system of checks and balances for state and state-created accounts, a vast majority of print and audio-visual Indian media accepted the state's account and contributed to creating an anti-Sikh social environment by reporting selectively and with prejudice directed toward the Sikh community.

Dominant Narrative: The Mass Mediated story

The Indian mass media reporting on 1984 comprised of mostly newspaper dailies, state owned television *Doordarshan* and radio service, *All India Radio*. Even though newspapers include regional language publications, I will include only some excerpts from English language dailies here.

In the period preceding the events of 1984, the mass media provided emphatic endorsement and became a carrier for a systematic, sustained and vociferous campaign of “government misinformation and disinformation on Punjab” (Gupta 1985, 221). For example, in an article appearing in *The Indian Express* before the events of 1984, Arun Shourie, (who later wrote in support of the Sikh view of the November massacre) targeted and portrayed the entire Sikh community as greedy, manipulative, anti-national and secessionist. Instead of contextualizing the specific issues plaguing the community in the immediate period preceding 1984, Shourie reduced and simplified the issue to a cultural core of separatism characterizing the community:²

A demand born out of whipped-up phobias as the *panth*-in-danger, is inherently insatiable. The moment you satisfy a part of the demand, or even all of it, a new and more extreme one is put forth...Do not lull yourself in the belief that Khalistan is just the brainwave of a Jagjit Singh Chauhan. It has an ancestry, and in the eyes of many a respectable one (“The Politics of Pandering,” May 12, 1982).

Neither did the media report on Sikh killings in Punjab during the turbulent years of 1981-84. The focus was on Hindu lives lost when more Sikhs than Hindus were killed during these years. In building their case against Sikhs the media also chose to ignore stories of Hindu-Sikh co-operation before the events of 1984 (P. Singh 1985a, 178-9).

The crisis of 1984 was the first instance of the state assuming a Hindu identity while “othering” Sikhs. Instead of contextualizing and understanding the demands of a handful of Sikh separatists, the entire Sikh community became a target of state manufactured animosity. The media wholeheartedly supported the state agenda of chastising and reigning in a “mutinous community.” “The reportage on those events pivoted around the vivid prototype of the Sikh provocateur” (Gupta 1985, 211). Sikhs are depicted as a homogenous set of subversive citizens making unreasonable and juvenile demands.

The pattern of partial or non-communication of events continued during Operation Blue Star. There was a media blackout during the operation and two weeks after the army invasion of the Golden Temple, newspapers were not published or were unavailable (P. Singh 1984, 1569; see also P. Singh 1985b). News broadcasts appealed to “Hindu communal sentiments,” with a surfeit of news about raids in *gurdwaras* to recover firearms and other weapons, focusing on Sikh militancy. Yet there was little or no coverage of similar army action against militant Hindu organizations like the Shiv Sena that had also been collecting weapons (P. Singh 1985a, 159). The state controlled television channel, *Doordarshan*, used language such as “fortifications” inside the Golden Temple and “caches of arms” seized by the army.

Sikhs were deeply hurt by these images while Hindus, as a community that was unaffected by the crisis at large, absorbed them more or less passively and unconditionally. Sikhs were successfully labeled destructive “terrorists” while the Indian state and army were applauded for “saving” the country (Malik 1985, 44). These

representations sharpened rifts that had been growing between Sikhs and Hindus in the years preceding 1984. As Pritam Singh writing on the media coverage of Operation Blue Star and what followed notes:

It was obvious that such news manipulation was bound to hurt Sikh sentiments. But consistent with the objectives of the media programs, what mattered was not the Sikhs susceptibilities but the acceptance of such propaganda material by the wider Hindu population. As a consequence, Hindu-Sikh relations were further embittered and communal polarization was sharpened (1984, 1571).

Far from playing an objective role in its coverage of the army invasion, media representations of the events as they unfolded were either absent or lop-sided. The media created a climate to fuel feelings of hostility and communalism. The Sikh perspective was left out of mass media reporting systematically and deliberately. After the invasion of the Golden Temple, *All India Radio* and *Doordarshan* were assertive in their reporting that “no damage has been done to *Harmandir Sahib* during the army action” (P. Singh 1984, 1571). Sikhs who visited the complex after the army action and saw the damage first hand, write of the *Harmandir Sahib* pockmarked and damaged by bullet marks (Nayar and Singh 1984).

Media representations presented military action in the Golden Temple as inevitable and necessary. A journalist writing in *Mainstream* magazine legitimized and approved of state actions with complete disregard to the effects of this discourse on the Sikh community. The state’s politicization of the issue was neglected and instead a narrative was woven around the fear of a “Hindu backlash”:

Could the military action in the Golden Temple have been avoided? If what was happening before the military action had continued for another two or three months, there would have been a massive Hindu backlash. There would have been massacre of Sikhs outside Punjab. The possibility of some sort of coup and

the army marching into the Golden Temple...could also not have been ruled out (Kewal Varma, "Genesis of Sikh Alienation," September 1, 1984).

Instead of extending compassion and solidarity to the community, the media challenged and offended Sikhs' already outraged sentiments. The Golden Temple evokes deep reverence and devotion for the community but media reports were insensitive and callous to these feelings. Journalistic accounts aggravated emotions that were already running high. The crisis and confusion in Punjab was reduced to "drama," and Sikhs were blamed for not speaking up before the attack on the Golden Temple. The army action was represented as a battle of "our soldiers" (Hindu Indian) versus "your extremists" (Sikh community). Not only was the Sikh community expected to remain silent and not protest the desacralization of this collectively cherished shrine but actively blamed for challenging the army's assault. As a reporter writing in *The Times of India* and explaining state action wrote:

...this grave situation called for necessary action which caused some unavoidable damage to the building. When this happened the same people who looked on the previous drama either helplessly or with an indulgent eye, felt outraged...The extremists who died became martyrs; the jawans (soldiers) who gave up their lives in performing a patriotic duty were forgotten... (Ram Swarup, "The Hindu-Sikh Cleavage," December 20, 1984).

Expressing his anger, Patwant Singh, a prominent Sikh writer noted, "What to others is just a building is to the Sikhs the supreme symbol of their honor and inspiration" (1985, 21). He also notes that while the media held Bhindranwale accountable for creating a crisis situation in Punjab, there was little or no evaluation of the state's role in "fanning communal fires" (1985, 17). Most Sikhs did not support "Bhindranwale's cult of violence" before 1984 (Malik 1985, 41) but these opinions were

never reflected in state and media reports that had far more to gain by portraying Sikhs as a homogeneous, anti-national mass rather than a differentiated group that were as much a part of the Indian fabric as any other group. In an evaluation of media reporting during 1984 and the prolonged period of crisis in which Sikhs were embroiled, independent observers and scholars have noted that leading English national dailies like *The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times*, far from diffusing tensions, caused damage and destruction by inciting sectarian hatred (A. Das 2009).

The same pattern of selective reporting and/or non-reporting continued in October-November when her Sikh bodyguards assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The entire Sikh community was targeted and stigmatized, and mass media became the main instrument for forming and communicating these images. The mass media neglected and made invisible the organized massacre of Sikhs and instead fixed attention on the death and funeral of Indira Gandhi (Mitta and Phoolka 2007). As Aseem Shrivastava, a writer observing events of the time writes:

Such seemed to have been the depth of state endorsement of the violence. Not one image of the looting and arsoning, let alone of the killing, was ever shown on TV. It would have appeared that the city of 9 or 10 million people was in solemn sorrow and mourning at the death of the great departed leader" ("The Winter in Delhi, 1984," December 10, 2005).

In an editorial printed in *The Times of India* the Sikh community found itself assaulted by the media in addition to the punishment that the community was being subjected to on the streets of New Delhi and other cities across north India. The editorial pronounces the "truth," as self-evident and claims that the anger against the community is widespread and justified.

India is ablaze with hate and anger...It would be dishonest to say that the hatred is directed only or even mainly against the Akalis, the secessionists and the extremists...enraged mobs have gone and are going about systematically burning and looting Sikh properties and assaulting Sikhs without discrimination. The people know the truth... The anger against the Sikh community is sweeping large sections of the Indian society (November 2, 1984, quoted in P. Singh 1985a, 181).

The editorial continues to chastise, label and harshly admonish Sikhs, putting the onus of the violence on the community, calling them to prove their patriotism to the Indian nation-state, sentiments that continue to inform community members' alienation and mistrust of India creating an invariable association between the India and Hindu. While the editorial holds Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi accountable for denouncing and stopping the violence it takes an unforgiving stand against Sikhs. Sikhs were punished in direct violence and through scathing editorials such as the following, demonizing and blaming the victims, and pitting them as outsiders and implicitly "essentializing" India as Hindu.

Sikh 'leaders' stood by as silent spectators as Bhindranwale's band of assassins murdered more than 500 persons and converted the Golden Temple into an arsenal and a sanctuary for criminals...Thus if a breach has opened between the Sikhs and the rest of India, the Sikh 'leaders' and their intelligentsia are largely to blame...the authorities must use the entire machinery of the state to restore law and order...This is a test for Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister which he must not fail...For the first time Sikhs outside Punjab are realizing how vulnerable they are. Those in Punjab should not only not add to their woes but try and lighten them by proving that they have abandoned the politics of confrontation and secession. This may appear unduly harsh in the present context. But a soft-headed approach is not going to convince those who need to be convinced that the Sikhs are willing to live as peaceful and law-abiding citizens of the country (November 2, 1984, quoted in P. Singh 1985a, 181-2).

The anti-Sikh sentiment kept gaining strength as the media, in keeping with the state story, designed a narrative of communal "rioting," resulting from Hindus' inflamed

sensibilities. State-controlled radio and television depicted the violence as spontaneous “madness” carried out in “grief and anger” (*Who are the Guilty?* 2003 [1984]).

Organized massacre of Sikhs was underplayed as “riots” by the media and this language continues to be used to frame the violence today.³ The term “riots” gives an innocuous, accidental face to violence that transforms the deliberateness of violence into something more uncontrollable, difficult to prevent and imparts a sense of helplessness and temporary inefficacy of state machinery. Das writing of newspaper accounts of the Delhi carnage (2007, 136-141) notes:

The initial understanding of the situation in media reports attributed the violence entirely to unruly crowds and depicted them as irate, mad, bloodthirsty, and composed primarily of antisocial elements...Initially it was assumed that, crazed by grief, people had lost control, but this description was soon replaced by the notion that it was street urchins, thugs, and antisocial elements who had taken advantage of the temporary collapse of state order and gone about looting property and killing people. Newspaper reports assumed that the police force was outnumbered, thus explaining their inability to restore order” (141).

Doordarshan broadcast images of crowds shouting “*khoon ka badla khoon say*” (blood for blood). The only mention of the brutal mayhem that was unfolding on the streets of Delhi and other parts of North India was depicted in an inadequate and impoverished media summary: “There have been some disturbances.” The state-controlled *All India Radio* announced that leaving aside a few episodes “the situation was under control.” While international media⁴ and therefore diaspora Sikhs were watching qualitatively different images of what was unfolding on the streets of Delhi, Indian viewers saw only Mrs. Gandhi’s body lying in state (Malik 1985, 50). As a

diasporic Sikh writer notes, his source of information about 1984 were “smuggled” images of the violence rather than Indian media accounts:

The most powerful images of 1984 in the nascent days of the communications revolution were those smuggled by Sikhs, and not those released by the propaganda machine of the state-controlled media. My own recollection is that of watching a several hours-long smuggled video of the carnage that was unleashed in Delhi, filmed secretly by some very brave Sikh women. The indignation, sense of violence, and hopelessness that I encountered watching this video, in the luxury of my private living room, certainly forced a rupturing of the frame of war that had been constructed within official discourse (Ahluwalia 2010, 107-8).

The anti-Sikh propaganda was acerbic and labeled an entire community secessionist. After the November violence, as the country was going into polls, life-size posters of Indira Gandhi’s death were circulated by the mass media. Some of the electoral messages included phrases such as: “Will the country’s border finally be moved your doorstep?” Painful memories of the Partition were exploited to stigmatize an already vulnerable community. Given the relatively large number of Sikh cab drivers in the country, election messages read: “Why should you feel uncomfortable riding in a taxi driven by a driver who belongs to another state?” (Malik 1985, 56). Malik, a Sikh columnist, also points out that the overwhelming importance to the separate Sikh state of Khalistan was an invention of the media rather than being representative of majority Sikh sentiment (Malik 1985, 39). The anti-Sikh rhetoric contained the message that “Sikhs had to be taught a lesson. That ‘they’ had it coming!” (Malik 1985, 50).

The insularity and partiality of state representations was actively bolstered by the mass media. The walls of narratives and representations within which Sikh experiences were confined kept getting higher and stronger. State and mass media

accounts emerged as the definitive source of the “Punjab crisis” and the Sikh community in the 1980s. Yet there were some counternarratives to these dominant accounts that emerged in the Indian context. Some of these constitute what I call early “crevices” or fractures in dominant walls of representations. Crevices are important visible and vocal dissension in representation and constitute re-presentations of 1984. At the same time, they did not become institutionalized, did not gain as much strength as both official narratives and separatist counternarratives that developed in the aftermath of 1984. I will elaborate on the idea of diasporic memory work as crevices in the following chapter. I begin with an examination of a set of counternarratives as “early crevices” and move on to a discussion of dominant counternarratives to the state- militant and separatist voices-particularly in the diaspora.

Early Crevices as Counternarratives

While the state’s unquestioned authority and commonplace perceptions of a value-neutral mass media translated into rigid walls of representations about the Sikh community, there were some voices of dissent. A handful of journalists and civil rights organizations comprising of scholars, commentators and activists made early efforts to dismantle these quickly forming impermeable structures of representation.

One of the first and few Indian-initiated counternarratives to the state came from reports of independent civil and human rights organizations, including Citizens for Democracy (CFD) and People’s Union for Democratic Rights and People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUDR-PUCL). In addition, there were some compilations of counternarratives

including accounts of the Delhi violence in the feminist journal *Manushi* (1984), some early reports in the magazine *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (1985), and some other journalistic writings. Together, these accounts constitute crevices, or slight ruptures, in officially constructed walls.

These crevices constitute an “emergent culture,” representing voices of resistance and opposition to the dominant discourse. They constitute “a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named” (Williams 1977, 126). Crevices as counternarratives to the state are malleable narratives, stories that are a work-in-progress, an ongoing process of dissension that are fermenting and seething, open to heterogeneous, complex and often contradictory representations, defying the fixity and rigidity of dominant narratives.

Early crevices in state narrative form a direct challenge to official representations and the underlying discourse of power. They are composed of both Sikh and non-Sikh voices: survivors, engaged citizens, journalists, lawyers and academics, who registered dissent against the state. As crevices developed over a period of time, they came to include complex and contradictory registration of discontentment and dissatisfaction with hegemonic representations. For example, as I will examine in the following chapter, crevices created in and through digital media, while shifting the narrative of 1984 away from the militant resistance, continue to contextualize it, sometimes identify with it, challenging the state’s vilification of militancy and the state-defined belief that dissent about 1984 is synonymous with “terrorism.”

Early counternarratives emerged as immediate responses to state accounts contained in the government-issued *White Paper* and circulated through mass media and popular journalistic stories. These crevices held the potential to fracture the hegemony and self-proclaimed veracity of official accounts. Yet, the overwhelming power of the state and mass media curtailed their efficacy and reach. For instance, the CFD's report "*Oppression in Punjab*" was banned by the Indian government. Journalist Brahma Chellaney's eye-witness account of the goings-on inside the Golden Temple⁵ became a basis for his harassment and charging him with sedition (Ghazali 1985). These early crevices are being revived by diasporic Sikhs as indispensable and significant evidence to remember, recreate and re-present 1984.⁶

A Citizens for Democracy (CFD) report entitled, "*Report to the Nation: Oppression in Punjab*" includes a description of conditions in Punjab before and after Operation Blue Star, including a critical evaluation of the actual army assault. It also provides an overview of laws giving unprecedented and free reign to the police and the army after Operation Blue Star or what it calls "the black laws- charters of slavery" (1985, 85).

CFD writes of the media blackout and complete censorship after Operation Blue Star. All journalists, with the exception of *Doordarshan* and *All India Radio*, were expelled from Punjab. Punjab remained cut off from the country and the rest of the world until July 1985, as the report points out and then remarks: "Obviously the Government of India has a lot to hide still" (1985, 6). The report is critical of national dailies' unethical reporting of happenings within the Golden Temple despite having no

access to the precincts. Print media reports fortified and supported the propaganda created by the state by writing of “the very magnitude and caliber of the weapons found in the Temple complex, some of foreign origin...” (CFD 1985, 8). The report explains the “baselessness” of state accounts of the army’s action. It contains grim and horrifying accounts of people killed in cold blood, their hands tied behind their backs, humiliated and stripped of their identity:

...the story about the so called ‘highly sophisticated arms’ which were used to fight back the Army is totally baseless. A number of responsible men and women who were inside the Golden Temple throughout the Army action, described to us how innocent people were slaughtered like rats- first letting them enter the Complex and then declaring the curfew which prevented them from going out- thousands were thus caught unawares; finally when the survivors were asked to surrender they were shot in cold blood; our photographs would show how the hands of men were tied at their back with their own turbans, some of whom were shot (CFD 1985, 10).

CFD’s account is categorical in calling state actions “state terrorism.” It writes of the treatment meted out to Sikhs under the garb of controlling “terrorism”:

The Report has gathered that in the name of curbing terrorism unabashed state terrorism has been unleashed on the Sikhs branding them as criminals, arbitrary arrests and McCarthy style witch-hunt, sadistic torture of Amritdhari Sikhs and cold-blooded shooting down of young men in false encounters...even village women are not spared, they are being harassed, beaten up, dishonored and taken away to Police Stations or to unknown destinations and kept there... (1985, 9).

The report includes narratives from eyewitnesses of the army action in the Golden Temple. Such narratives are cited as counterevidence to the state and mass media narratives that “non-militant” Sikhs inside the Golden Temple had been treated with “dignity and consideration” and that “no women and children were killed in the action by the troops” (CFD 1985, 68). These eyewitness accounts bring out the severe

brutality of army assaults that the state and mass media denied and continue to disown at present. Bhan Singh, the secretary of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee or SGPC, (the chief controller of all Sikh *gurdwaras*) was one such eyewitness during Operation Blue Star. His testimonial is part of the CFD report and is cited widely on several digital spaces to commemorate 1984 today (see chapter 4):

On the 6th morning when hundreds of people were killed or wounded, everywhere there were cries of those people who were wounded and injured...Many young people aged between 18 and 22 years were killed and so were some ladies. A lady carrying a child of only a few months saw her husband lying before her. The child was also killed on account of the firing. It was a very touching scene when she placed the dead body of the child alongside her husband's body. Many people were crying for drinking water but they were not provided any. Some had to take water out of the drains where dead bodies were lying and the water was red with blood. The way the injured were quenching their thirst was an awful sight which could not be tolerated...Such a brute treatment was given to them, as if they were aliens and not the citizens of the country to which the forces belonged (1985, 68-9).

CFD also came out with a report entitled "*Report to the Nation: Truth About Delhi Violence*" (1985) where they categorically stated the detailed organization behind the Delhi violence:

We have shown in this report that several meetings were held all over Delhi...in the late hours of 31st October to give final touches, as it were, to the plan already prepared with meticulous care, with an eye to every minute detail that nothing was left out to successfully exterminate the Sikhs (x).

According to the report the attacks proceeded in four stages: *gurdwaras* were attacked, Sikh houses were looted and set on fire, men were humiliated (their hair shorn and beards cut and then killed), and women were molested, raped and killed. The purpose of the carnage, according to this report, was to garner Hindu votes. As Amiya Rao, the author of the CFD report writes in another article, the massacres were planned

much before the assassination of the prime minister. Hindus were being called upon “to wake up, to arise and destroy” (*utho, jago, maro*) weeks before October 31, only for the Congress (I) to win electoral gains. Rao also writes of the impact of this manufactured sectarian distrust. The success of the state and mass media representations on people at large came across in their inaction in preventing mobs from attacking Sikhs.

Moreover, in some instances when Sikhs retaliated against the mobs with the help of traditional weapons, this was interpreted as a sign of inherent militancy within the community because of the power of dominant imagery. Even though there were instances of Hindus saving their Sikh neighbors, overall, there was an atmosphere of apathy and distrust:

There was comment on the collapse of state administrative machinery but one saw very little of collective and vigorous action to confront the mobs. In certain localities residents did band themselves together and kept watch at night both against anti-socials and as some told me, also against “militant Sikhs”...The seed of communalism could be seen in people’s unwillingness and also incapacity to understand that firing in self-defence does not prove either extremism or militancy. So Delhi burnt for three long agonizing days (Rao 1984, 2066).

Another important crevice (as counternarrative) to the official account comes from the civil organization, the People’s Union for Democratic Rights and People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUDR-PUCL). Their report entitled ‘*Who are the Guilty? Report of a joint inquiry into the causes and impact of riots in Delhi from 31 October to 10 November*’ also records the state and its agencies’ complicity in initiating and fuelling systematic massacre against Sikhs. It includes case studies of neighborhoods affected, a chronology of events, eyewitness accounts and names of Congress (I) members of parliament, members of the local Municipal bodies, leaders of the youth Congress (I)

party, police and others involved in the violence. This report along with CFD documents was a direct challenge to the assertive and taken-for-granted narrative of “riots” created by the state and effectively communicated by the media. Instead the report provided evidence for the organized and deliberate nature of violence. Shifting the vocabulary to represent violence is an important part of present-day memory work. While “riots” may represent unintentionality and uncontrollable emotions or reactions (Jasper 1998), terms such as “genocide,” “massacre” and “holocaust” evoke the calculated and rational agenda behind violence. The PUDR-PUCL report states:

The attacks on members of the Sikh community... far from being a spontaneous expression of “madness” and of popular “grief and anger” at Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination as made out to be by the authorities, were the outcome of a well-organized plan marked by acts of deliberate commissions and omissions by important politicians of the Congress (I) at the top and by authorities in the administration” (*Who are the Guilty?* 2003 [1984]).

While “riots” provoke two or more parties in a mutual confrontation or a “whipping up of passion...that is never one-sided” (Rao 1984, 2068), the November massacres betrayed this pattern. Even in instances where Sikhs tried to retaliate and fire in self-defense, they were immediately arrested and the attack remained one-sided.

Like the CFD document, the PUDR-PUCL report outlines a “definite pattern” in the killings. It confirms that in many localities, Sikh homes and shops had been marked out in advance. Sikh vehicles had been identified and the looters and murderers had clear directions guided by lists of voters and food ration cardholders. Weapons and inflammatory materials had been stored beforehand and public transport, trains and buses, were used to create a mobile mob. The report contains accounts of “ritualistic killings” (Fera 1984, 16) young Sikh men “dragged out, beaten up and burnt alive.”

Women were gang raped in the capital city after men and infant boys were killed. These cases went unreported because the women “wanted their shame to remain buried with the cinders of their homes” (*Who are the Guilty?* 2003 [1984]). A few female voices are included in Madhu Kishwar’s *Manushi* report. Gurdip Kaur was raped and her sons were killed in front of her. She recounts that most women in her neighborhood encountered the same plight, including young 9-10 year old girls. Most women remain silent about these assaults: “The unmarried girls will have to stay unmarried all their lives if they admit that they have been dishonored. No one would marry such a girl” (1984, 14).

The PUDR-PUCL sums up police actions either through their absence, role as passive spectators, or even their “direct participation or abetment in the orgy of violence.” The state administration backed these actions by their “callousness and inefficiency” in extending help to potential victims and survivors of the violence. The report questions the role of the mass media in instigating the violence and creating a general atmosphere of communal hostility.⁷ The report concludes by reasserting the deliberate plan behind the violence and poses several questions for the administration and citizens to consider:

The riots were well organized and were of unprecedented brutality. Several very disturbing questions arise that must be answered...who was responsible for the planned and deliberate police inaction and often active role in inciting the murder and loot?...why were highly provocative slogans (khoon ka badla khoon-blood for blood) allowed to be broadcast by Doordarshan during the recording of the mourning crowd at Teen Murti (the residence of the slain Prime Minister)? (*Who are the Guilty?* 2003 [1984]).

Similarly, in *The Illustrated Weekly*, Romesh Thapar wrote, “While all energies are concentrated on establishing a conspiracy around the assassination of Indira Gandhi,

this ghastly holocaust is sought to be shelved as another 'communal riot' which it was not..." (1984, 12).

Other early crevices came from *Manushi's* report. It addresses many rumors⁸ that circulated and were fuelled by the mass media's propaganda. These include stories about Sikhs distributing sweets when they heard of Indira Gandhi's assassination; that they rejoiced at her death by doing the Punjabi folk dance, *bhangra*; and Sikhs' poisoning the water supply in Delhi. The report challenges the emptiness of these rumors and posits: "Thus these rumors have become not only a way of justifying the monstrous happenings which have no real justification, but also a weapon that is used with telling effect against the victims" (1984, 24). Further, the report challenges the role of the "safe nondoing" of the mass media. The report uses the example of the *All India Radio* to take media personnel to task:

They (*All India Radio*) were the last to announce her death, and kept playing their routine jazz and film music hours after BBC and several other foreign radio stations had announced the news and had started broadcasting condolence messages from different world leaders. It was a typical display of mindless servility and slavish self-censorship, characteristic of the government owned media in India (1984, 25).

The PUDR-PUCL and *Manushi* reports also discuss the reluctant and ill-equipped relief and rehabilitative work that the government took up in the aftermath of the violence. Relief work was short-lived and ineffective. Sikhs were made to feel grateful for the little monetary compensation that the government offered them. The cheap price put on Sikh lives was reflected not only in the paltry compensation offered to Sikhs but also in instances when "death had to be 'proved'" (Malik 1985, 53-4) and "'cinders' was not answer enough" (Bedi 1985, 61). Even while voluntary organizations like the

Nagrik Ekta Manch (United Citizens Forum) formed to assess the severity of the situation around November 6 the “government announced its plans to fold up the camps on the plea that the situation has returned to ‘normal.’ Government insisted that people return to their ‘homes’ so that the process of rehabilitation could be expedited” (*Manushi* 1984, 28). People were afraid to return to their neighborhoods where their immediate kith and kin had been brutally murdered: “the common feeling is ‘That place has become a cremation ground for us’” (*Manushi* 1984, 28). There were many reasons the government closed down relief efforts including downplaying the enormity of violence, circumventing efforts at survivors’ solidarity to acquire consciousness that would give them a stronger bargaining position, and as an intimidation tactic to silence the majority (*Manushi* 1984, 29).

These counternarratives have not given way to any major shift in discursive framing of the events, however, and in most public memories and writings, the violence of 1984 continues to be remembered as a sudden outbreak of communal “riots.” The November violence led Sikhs to face physical and existential displacement. “It also left a volatile and proud community humbled and beleaguered. ‘Where do we go from here?’ is the unanswered question in the eyes of every Sikh, refugee or otherwise” (Bedi 1985, 52). The state sacrificed countless members of the Sikh community, representative of “just another minority” to be dispensed with, to win favor of the dominant Hindu populace. As Bedi asks, “Was (police) action withheld so that the Hindu community, under “siege” by the Sikhs for the past three years, could break out and with state help,

assert itself? That, too, at a time when mass mobilization of Hindus was an election asset” (1985, 65).

Another source of counternarratives were nine government-appointed enquiry commissions, the latest including the Nanavati Commission to investigate the November massacre that came out with its findings as recently as 2005 (see Mitta and Phoolka 2005). However, these commissions did little to bring justice to the victims of the mass killings or conclusively disrupt the official discourse. In fact despite enough evidence to bring perpetrators to justice, these reports “contradicted the evidence” at hand (Bal 2014). For example the Nanavati Commission concludes by saying:

Some of the affidavits filed before the Commission generally state that the Congress Leaders/Workers were behind these riots. In Part-III of this report, the Commission has referred to some of the incidents wherein some named Congress(I) Leaders/Workers had taken part. No other person or organization apart from anti-social elements to some extent, is alleged to have taken part in those incidents. Smt. Indira Gandhi was a Congress (I) Leader. The slogans which were raised during the riots also indicate that some of the persons who constituted the mobs were Congress (I) workers or sympathizers (carnage84.com).

In evaluating enquiry commission reports, Bal writes,

Neither commission reconciled the contradictions in its account of the violence, and neither gave due consideration to evidence that went against its conclusions. Both bodies’ reports found that the carnage—organized through meetings that ensured police cooperation and a uniform method of murder across Delhi—was the result of uncoordinated acts by local Congress workers (2014).

Counternarratives embodied in the CFD and the PUDR-PUCL reports and journalistic, scholarly and activist work illustrate the first punctures to the sacrosanct and unquestioned authority of official narratives. Almost immediately, the more

vociferous, vocal counternarratives to the events of 1984 and its aftermath emerged from the militant and secessionist movement, drowning out the more inclusive, non-partisan narratives contained in the aforementioned civil group reports and media accounts. Sections of the Sikh diaspora in North America played a particularly important role in supporting and strengthening this movement.

Militant and Secessionist Counternarratives

Militant responses to the state and calls for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan emerged as the most vocal set of counternarratives. A Sikh resistance movement developed in the 1980s and 1990s to challenge state inflicted torture and humiliation on a community. The notion of damaged *izzat* (honor) lay at the core of the struggle. The movement lost momentum over a period of time as random violence, acts of terrorism⁹ and internecine rivalries developed. Militancy degenerated and lost mass support (see for e.g. Tatla 2006, 2012; Shani 2008). However, this also gave the state a justification to carry out its own violent repression under the garb of controlling militancy but that was nothing less than “state terrorism” (see for e.g. Pettigrew 1995, Mahmood 1996).

The militant resistance movement not only contested state attitudes and policies towards Sikhs but also put forward territorial demands for an independent state of Khalistan. As I outlined in the last chapter, voices for territorial autonomy were present even before 1984 but did not find much appeal in the community. The widespread support for the territorial movement from within the community was a direct result of the events of 1984. In the following, I focus on the North American Sikh diaspora’s role

in supporting militant separatism. I will contrast this diasporic mobilization with present-day crevices in the following chapter.

In the 1970s and early 1980s there were some isolated demands for a separate state of Khalistan in North America. In 1971, Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan, a former state finance minister residing in London, had raised slogans for a Sikh homeland. He also placed an advertisement in *The New York Times* calling for a separate state:

At the time of partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 it was agreed that the Sikhs shall have an area in which they will have complete freedom to shape their lives according to their beliefs. On the basis of the assurances received, the Sikhs agreed to throw their lot with India, hoping for the fulfillment of their dream of an independent, sovereign Sikh homeland, the Punjab (quoted in Jeffrey 1987, 59-60).

Dr. Chauhan had also unfurled a Khalistan flag in Birmingham, but at the time he did not find much support for his demands. Many Sikhs labeled his activities anti-Indian because they felt a deep affinity with India. The Khalsa Diwan Society of Vancouver and a *gurdwara* in the UK were the first to condemn Dr. Chauhan. Neither did his campaign resonate with the diasporic community at large (Tatla 1999, 104).

In 1982, in the United States, Ganga Singh Dhillon, organized a campaign emphasizing “Sikhs as a nation.” In the same year Surjan Singh led a similar campaign and set up a “Republic of Khalistan” office on 26 January 1982 with “Sikh Consul General” issuing “Khalistani passports” and “Khalsa currency notes” (Tatla 1999, 105).

The support for Khalistan started gaining ground only after the events of 1978 in Punjab when there was a clash between Bhindranwale’s followers and the Nirankari sect. These immediate events and 1984 itself “normalized” the question of a “Sikh homeland” (Tatla 1999, 105) especially in the diaspora. There were other factors in the

diaspora that contributed to the support to separatism including discontentment stemming from discriminatory policies and also a politics of identity that was gaining ground, especially because of Canada's official policy of multiculturalism (Dusenbery 1995, Tatla 2012).

In 1984, Sikhs in the diaspora were visibly moved to action- angry and crying openly in disbelief. Tejinder Singh Kahlon, president of the Sikh Cultural Society, New York, called the army attack "outrageous immoral" (sic) and said that by doing so, "Mrs. Gandhi was laying the foundation of a separate Sikh state" (*The New York Times* 7 June 1984, quoted in Tatla 1999, 248). *Gurdwaras* held services for the slain. Protestors turned out on the streets in several North American cities including Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Anti-India cries and "Khalistan zindabad" (long live Khalistan) slogans were shouted vociferously. In the media, Sikhs called for direct and concerted action for a Sikh homeland. New diasporic organizations emerged after 1984. In North America these included the World Sikh Organization, International Sikh Youth Federation, Babbar Khalsa and the Council of Khalistan. All these organizations supported the demand for an independent Sikh state though there were differences in the methods of mobilization (see Tatla 1999, 113-135). At the same time a few analyses take into account resistance for the Khalistan movement from within the diasporic Sikh community (Tatla 1999, 2006; see also Barrier 2002).

The Khalistani narrative has emerged as the predominant form of diasporic mobilization. La Brack, for example, writes of changes in diasporic engagement with

community values before and after 1984. While before 1984, mobilization revolved around issues of religious freedom such as the maintenance of 5Ks, discrimination and immigration and naturalization issues, the community's concerns changed after this critical event. Even though LaBrack acknowledges the difficulty of ascertaining the support extended by diasporic Sikhs for the concept of Khalistan and also writes of the marginalization of conservative and moderate voices within the community, he notes that the militant-separatist narrative was "certainly the most aggressively promoted position and visible symbol of Sikh discontent" (1999, 381).

The Internet was used as a particularly important site for forming separatist narratives. Axel posits that the diaspora formed itself in relationship with Khalistan images and representations. The militant, Khalistani discourse is important for Sikhs because it reminds Sikhs of the constant threat of violence that they confront. Axel goes as far as to say that Khalistan as a *qaum* (nation) already exists even without a territory, especially in the imagery of tortured Sikh Amritdhari or baptized bodies that are circulated over the Internet. "Khalistan, in this view, exists insofar as Sikhs are already constituted as a globally dispersed *qaum*. Khalistan is the "new global reality," and Khalistanis are named the cyber sangat ("community")" (2005, 135). Similarly, Sue Gunawardena analyzes digital spaces of diasporic organizations fighting for Khalistan (2000, 276-311). According to her, Khalistani narratives in the diaspora are critical to create "pan-Sikh solidarity and nostalgia for a geographically distant Punjab" (Gunawardena 2000, 274).

Militant resistance to the state was an important diasporic-supported counternarrative to treatment meted out to Sikhs in India. It is necessary to contextualize it in order to understand its strengths and limitations. Mahmood (1996) situates the Khalistan movement by including voices of Sikh militants in the diaspora. She explains contemporary militancy by placing it within the larger cultural framework of Sikh militant and martyr traditions. She writes of the importance of martyrdom and of bearing witness to atrocities for militants. Yet, she notes that militancy in the Sikh faith itself is not a reason for militant responses and support for these responses, but a framework for militants to situate their affective estrangement with the Indian state:

The celebration of religious orthodoxy is a symptom of discontent and a vehicle for military mobilization- but not a cause in itself, not for the great majority of people involved in fighting for separate statehood. Sikhs are fighting against the desecration of their holy sites and against the humiliation of their bodies (1996, 260).

Her sympathetic approach to understand militancy is important to problematize the movement rather than portraying it as completely illegitimate stand, as done by state and media texts. Mahmood acknowledges the “serious criminal activities,” of transnational Sikh militants (1996, 151). One of these Canada-based militant outfits, the Babbar Khalsa International, was implicated in the most well-known episode of resistant insurgency in the West, the Air India Boeing 747 crash off the coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985, killing 329 people. The flight was bound for London from Toronto and members of the Sikh Canadian community were immediately suspected, especially members of the Babbar Khalsa International. Lack of evidence and the latter’s claim to not being involved in the tragedy has kept the Canadian Babbars’ from being tried. “Two

journalists from the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail delved into the case more thoroughly and found that there were suspicious fragments of evidence pointing not to the Sikhs, but to the Indian government itself" (Mahmood 1996, 157). There have been other instances of Khalistani members' involvement in domestic episodes of violence in Canada, despite lack of connections (Mulgrew 1988).

Despite the importance of understanding militant voices, these counternarratives are not representative or inclusive of the entire Sikh community. These narratives surfaced as the most important voices of dissent, but remained partial and not representative of the entire community. In the following chapter, I will examine how current diasporic memory work is expanding militant narratives and shifting the focus from political demands of secessionism to more inclusive extra-territorial issues of reclaiming the very experiences and affects of 1984 denied by official accounts.

Conclusion

State and mass media representations are the main agents which are creating and perpetuating a dominant discourse on 1984. Sikh experiences do not find room within the confines of these wall-like memory structures. There were some early crevices in officially created hegemonic edifices including activist, journalist and engaged citizens' accounts. However, these crevices did not gain strength and instead militant and separatist voices assumed an overwhelming importance. Today's memory work seeks to revive early crevices while contextualizing militant affect and even recognizing its sanctity and necessity.

As seen in the above discussion, the language of the state issued *White Paper* and mass media accounts is a bland and simplistic exercise in finger-pointing and playing the “blame game.” The state and its functionaries took on a “Hindu” identity, unleashed xenophobic massacre against a minority community and used the mass media as a tool for creating an incendiary and accusatory discourse towards Sikhs. Hegemonic accounts also do not shy away from using labels that vilify and paint Sikhs as anti-Indian. Such texts are indifferent to the sentiments of the community while shunning responsibility for its own actions. Official accounts disregard the complex interplay of factors capturing the struggle between the state and the community-at-large. Political equations determined the state’s stand and media representations and subsequent narratives about the community. Even though Sikhs in Punjab continue to suffer in the aftermath of state atrocities and media narratives today, mainstream media has been only too eager to forget, trivialize and undermine these losses by integrating “former terrorists...within the national imagination as harmless, cheerful tricksters in a slew of Bollywood blockbusters...”(Kaur 2013).

Nuanced, dissenting voices from within the community never escaped the rigid and constrained walls of state and mass media backed memories until present-day memory work. Sikh diasporic memory work is in a dynamic relationship with the past. It interprets and contextualizes several aspects of Sikh identity, militant and pacifist, relevant to grappling with the tear in community identity in 1984. Memory workers are creating their own experiential narratives of events building on the long history of Sikhs instead of the myopic attention of hegemonic accounts. I will turn to an account of

these experiential narratives as crevices in dominant representations in the following chapter.

¹ A Hindi term for the prefix “Mister,” signifying respect.

² See Gupta (1996, 116-140) for an effective critique of this narrow discourse.

³ See for example: <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/1984-sikh-riots-families-recall-the-horrors-of-carnage/>
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/sit-likely-to-reinvestigate-1984-anti-sikh-riots-cases/36616.html>

Yet, public discourse in India is slowly shifting especially due to scholarly efforts such the following: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/1984-and-the-violence-of-memory/article2582952.ece>

⁴ See for e.g. <http://www.sikhmuseum.com/bluestar/newsreports/index.html>

⁵ See Nayar and Singh (1984, Annexure F).

⁶ See for e.g. Gunisha Kaur (2009).

⁷ Novelist Jaspreet Singh writes about the “soundtrack” accompanying television images of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi lying in state, “But the soundtrack was the soundtrack of the ‘mob’ created by the cabinet ministers and members of parliament, as we found out later. *Khoon ka Badla Khoon Say*, “blood for blood” (2012, 160).

⁸ See also Das (2007, 108-134) on the rumors and misrepresentations that gained ground during the carnage.

⁹ According to government figures there were 2,500 “suspected terrorists,” by the spring of 1984. In April organized groups of militants attacked 37 railway stations in Punjab (Mulgrew 1988, 74-5).

Chapter 4

Mapping the Digital Landscape of 1984

Sikhs in the diaspora are creating spaces on the Internet, articulating new interpretations of 1984 to form crevices, or fractures, in dominant accounts. The story of 1984 as it unfolds digitally is multi-layered, complex and critically informed, a response to simplistic, lop-sided hegemonic media representations.

In this chapter I analyze a sample of eight websites, to piece together the story of 1984 as it is emerging digitally. I use the term “digital crevices” to describe the seemingly subtle but significant way these websites challenge state-organized memories of 1984. Crevices, which are thin fractures rather than robust breaks in dominant accounts, deepen and reinforce the fissures that were first created by civic organizations and diasporic mobilizations immediately following the events of 1984, as I show.

In the immediate aftermath of 1984, while the Khalistan movement was not the only response, it gained the most attention. Beginning in the early 2000s, memory workers began creating websites to contest the dominant state narrative of 1984, as well as Khalistani representations of the event, by documenting and creating a tangible archive or repository expressing community members’ feelings of loss. Websites contain narratives and testimonies¹ informed by feelings of enduring and pervasive suffering to create an experiential archive of trauma — an “archive of feelings” about 1984 (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). In contrast to the master narrative of 1984 (a detached, impersonal imposition from above), diasporic Sikhs’ (especially the second generation’s)

close and easy engagement with the Internet, with its decentralized and consistent relationship with information, news and views or heightened interactivity, including ability to form viable social communities and relationships traversing geographic and temporal boundaries,² is facilitating an intimate re-narration of hauntings or present pasts.

This digital story of 1984 is expressed through hybrid forms of communication, visual/oral (writing and speech, images and sounds) and verbal/nonverbal (words and images/sounds) (see for e.g. Fornäs et al 2002). Sikhs are constructing a narrative of the events of 1984 while doing the work of emotion, communicating feelings of loss, sadness and shame. They call into question the official discourse of dismissing the community as “terrorists,” and reducing the orchestrated November massacre to “riots.” To do so, Sikhs invoke traumatic experiences of other religious minorities, particularly using language and imagery from the Jewish Holocaust, to translate their memories into a language that is widely understood. In challenging the state story of 1984, Sikhs are also challenging the “masculine” identity of the Indian state. Within the community, however, mostly men are doing the work of memory. Finally, memory workers are also sensitive to the class-specific nature of violence, and in reconstructing 1984 through digital memory projects, Sikh memory workers bring out the importance of class. Of course, class hierarchy is inbuilt in the access to or lack of access to digital technology, and there are splits within the community in the reception of texts.

In this chapter, I draw on findings from my focus group discussions and interviews to discuss these varied memory projects in which pre-1984 first generation

Sikhs and second generation Sikhs participate. By enabling Sikhs to construct their own narrative of 1984, I show how these digital crevices are challenging “feeling rules,” or breaking down “feeling walls,” acts of emotion management during periods of massive turmoil and oppression, such as the political oppression of 1984.

I start by situating websites on 1984 within a larger digital landscape. This is followed by my analysis of websites, discussing the digital story of 1984, connections with other traumatic memories, and underlying issues of gender and class. Finally, I examine the potential of digital crevices to challenge feeling rules and feeling walls.

Situating Websites

I studied a sample of eight websites from approximately 17,000 websites for “Sikhs, 1984” and “Khalistan,” on the search engine Google. The sample of websites I chose for my analysis is purposive, and are inclusive of various perspectives, opinions and feelings about 1984. There are several explicitly Khalistani or separatist websites that are not included in my analysis, in keeping with my objective to understand 1984 as a more inclusive and differentiated representation rather than extant scholarship’s exclusive focus on “cyber-archive of Khalistani struggles” (Axel 2005, 131; see also Shani 2010, Gunawardena 2000).

I focused on the following websites for my study: 1984livinghistory.org; sikhchic.com; sikhgenocide.org; sikhtoons.com; sikhmuseum.com; nov1984.org; carnage84.com and ensaaf.org.

All are easy to navigate and accessible to digital audiences. Their primary language is English; Punjabi language text has English subtitles or translations. All websites (with the exception of one) are produced by Sikhs in the diaspora, who are mainly activist-scholars or lawyers.³ They are primarily produced for the Sikh community, but also for larger South Asian and non-South Asian audiences.

Websites on 1984 string together individual Sikh voices to construct a larger digital narrative of 1984. They represent the direct and indirect experiences of community members, along with personal recollections and/or interpretations of 1984. Unlike a focus on sovereignty and images of tortured Sikh bodies on Khalistani websites, online spaces as digital crevices represent memories of 1984 as more complex and multi-layered; they are broader-based, diverse and sometimes include contradictory Sikh voices. Sikh narratives on these websites are counternarratives to the official discourse while also freeing 1984 from the confines of the separatist story. As one of my interviewees, Harjot, put it while indirectly referring to Khalistani websites: “Some websites I would never use, like some of the ones that are more focused on invoking emotion than they are about telling any sort of story.” In other words, while emotion work informs the work of memory, these websites situate memory work in relationship to the larger narrative of the Indian state, experiences of community members and oppression by the state, rather than in relation to an undifferentiated, unambiguous and violent narrative of separatism.

Some of the themes that websites share include: tracing the chronology of 1984; a detailed explanation of the June 1984 events and problematizing the labels

“terrorists,” and “militants;” a description of the November 1984 violence and challenging the language of “riots;” forming memories of 1984 through individual Sikhs’ “ideas, images, feelings,” (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 4) rather than top-imposed, impersonal imagery; extending the story of 1984 beyond the community and making comparisons with other traumatic memories, the Jewish Holocaust in particular, and challenging the Indian state patriarchal discourse.

While some websites (such as sikhchic.com and sikhmuseum.com) are broad in focus covering many Sikh-related issues, in which 1984 forms an important but not exclusive component, other websites are 1984-specific. Websites such as 1984livinghistory.org and sikhchic.com include mainly first person, direct and indirect accounts of 1984. All other websites comment on 1984 through the authorial voice of a single/or several producers. Two of the eight websites, carnage84.com and ensaaf.org are primarily action-oriented. They tell the story of 1984 to raise awareness, re-present the story of the community, and demand justice through the Indian judicial system. Sikhgenocide.org and Nov1984.org are mainly informational websites about 1984, tracing the trajectory of events. All websites combine mixed media to renarrate 1984, integrating graphic art, photographs, videos and written text.

In the following, I provide a summary of websites, which describes differences in form and content, as well as similarities, among them:

1984livinghistory.org contains recorded interviews with survivors, witnesses and descendants. It includes videos from Sikhs across the world, but mostly Punjab and North America. The website’s logo illustrates the website’s diasporic location and

mission: it is written in Gurmukhi (Punjabi script) followed by the name of the website in English. The home page is visually arresting, including brief moving text of featured stories accompanied by short descriptions. This website is participatory and “prosumptive,” (Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson, 2012) combining production and consumption. It includes instructions on how to make videos and upload them online. The website includes links to Human Rights Watch to situate 1984 within a larger discourse of human rights abuse and genocide. Interviews are subdivided into categories such as “alienation,” “childhood trauma,” “counter-memory,” “gendered violence,” and “role of media,” alluding to common themes of digital memory work. In contrast to other websites that include various forms of texts or mixed media to tell the story of 1984, *livinghistory.org* is an exclusive video project. It contains direct and indirect oral testimonies about the June invasion as well as the November carnage.

Sikhchic.com is a web journal addressing several issues relevant to the Sikh diaspora or, as the website’s byline says, “the art and culture of the diaspora.” The website has several pages, including “art,” “poetry,” “music,” “faith,” “history,” “cuisine,” “fashion,” and “sports.” 1984 is an important component of the website, with an exclusive column devoted to the issue. The home page is well designed, colorful and inviting, with featured stories as well as photographs, paintings and graphic art. The website’s logo is a circle with a turbaned Sikh face, to evoke the association between Sikhs and the male turban. Despite this implicit male bias, since the graphic does not include a beard, it can also be read as more ambiguous, inclusive and gender neutral.

1984 is represented on this website through personal narratives, short stories, poems, excerpts from books, reprints from newspaper and journal articles, as well as announcements about films, art or artistic expressions of 1984 organized in the diaspora. The distinguishing feature of *sikhchic.com* vis-à-vis other websites is that it considers memories of 1984 as one part of the larger diasporic story. It includes original written and visual text but also reproduces materials from Indian and non-Indian newspapers, journals and magazines to represent 1984 from a diasporic Sikh perspective.

Sikhgenocide.org tells the story of 1984 with the help of videos and academic papers and articles. The home page contains three videos documenting the trajectory of 1984: “Invasion: 1984,” “Pogroms: November 1984,” and “Genocide.” The home page also has a quotation from the writer Milan Kundera on memory:

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long that nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was...The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

There is a small, barely discernible picture of Punjab on the right side of the page. The site also contains links to human rights organizations including Amnesty International, and includes a bibliography of academic readings on 1984 showing its producers’ intellectually situated activism. This website stands out for its dominant authorial voice, and is not as multivocal as other websites that contain several first-person narratives and accounts.

Sikhtoons.com is a cartoon or graphic art website produced by an individual Sikh rather than a team of producers and contributors, as is the case with most other websites. The website has a minimalistic, clean look. It graphically depicts many different themes of relevance to the North American Sikh diaspora, particularly issues of race and discrimination under a tab labeled “turbanphobia.” The producer is a direct survivor of the 1984 November violence. He tells the larger community’s story, with the sting and satire of editorial cartooning. The website also includes visual depictions of current issues in Punjab and marginalization of religious minorities as part of Hindu cultural nationalism or “Hindutva.” *Sikhtoons.com* is different from other websites because it uses a unique form of storytelling: graphic art. Also, like *sikhgenocide.org* (but unlike other websites), a single author produces this website.

Sikhmuseum.com is an online “museum” that focuses on the June invasion, or Operation Blue Star. It includes a photographic archive and news reports from international media published from November 1983 to August 1984, along with a written chronology of the June invasion. The website has a larger focus, of “preserving Sikh heritage,” as the home page specifies. The home page includes well-designed interactive virtual tours highlighting various aspects of Sikh history and culture, including Sikh involvement in World War I and a virtual photographic tour of a Sikh wedding. Like *sikhchic.com*, the story of 1984 is one part of the larger diasporic experience. It is similar to *sikhgenocide.org* and *sikhtoons.com* because of its single authorial voice. But unlike

other websites, it focuses on piecing together the narrative of the June invasion of the Golden Temple.

Nov1984.org features current news and views related to 1984.

The banner of the website includes a phrase associated with the Jewish Holocaust, “lest we forget.” The home page also has running text of the names of Sikhs killed in the November massacre along with the place and/or neighborhood to which they belonged. The website includes a media library with videos on 1984, academic and news articles and perspectives about 1984 as well as PUDR-PUCL’S report, *Who are the Guilty*. In addition, the website has a column named “organize,” that contains templates to mobilize the community offline. Flyers on 1984, and a partial list of victims and testimonials, are some of the documents available to local organizations. This website reconstructs the story of 1984 by including documentation to support the Sikh case but is also heavily bent toward activism and ground-level mobilization.

Carnage84.com focuses on the November violence of 1984. The opening page starts with an ominous music score from a Hindi movie soundtrack. The homepage is stark, and not as aesthetically appealing as the other websites, with a byline that reads: “massacre of 4,000 Sikhs in Delhi.” The website includes legal testimonies from survivors and eyewitnesses of the massacre, along with excerpts from enquiry commissions and committees set up by the state. The website also has an image library and a map of Delhi to show what areas were most affected by the violence. The primary

objective of this website is to document the November carnage and includes testimonies or affidavits,”⁴ from survivors and witnesses.

Ensaaf.org, (“justice”), is a transnational non-profit organization working on state crimes in India with a focus on Punjab. As their website specifies, they seek to “end impunity, achieve justice.” The homepage includes pictures of older Sikh women and men holding photographs of sons, young Sikh men missing in state-sponsored disappearances. It also has links to films produced by the organization as well as an overview of the legal documentation and advocacy mission of the organization. The website includes reports, publications, written and oral testimonies. For instance, it houses documents such as “1984 Sikhs’ Kristallnacht,” “Twenty Years of Impunity,” and films produced by the organization like “The Last Killing,” an account of police atrocities in Punjab and the long struggle against it. Unlike other websites, it is also oriented to bridging the gap between online narrativization and offline action through organizing events such as marathons and calls for artwork to represent 1984. It includes reports and videos about present-day effects of 1984 in Punjab.

The Digital Story of 1984

Sikhs are constructing a digitally mediated story of 1984 by bringing together fragments of a broken past. The preceding websites converge and intersect to narrate common, underlying experiences of 1984.

They suggest that unlike the Indian state and media's representations, Sikhs do not remember 1984 as an isolated incident. Instead it is recollected as continuous and compared to other grim memories of Sikh past, especially the Partition of 1947.⁵ For instance, AAA,⁶ a Sikh male living in Punjab, in an oral testimony on 1984livinghistory.org explained that while 1984 reminded the community of the violent losses of 1947, it was also different because Sikhs were let down by their "their own people." Websites such as sikhgenocide.org contain papers outlining the history of what is termed India's "illiberalism," starting before 1947, culminating in 1984 and extending beyond 1984. Sikh remembrance of the events of June and November offer an experiential, affective chronicle to resist the cold rationalizations and erasures of official representations.

In the following examples, Sikhs remember and re-present the June invasion of the Golden Temple. In tracing the chronology, memory workers bring out the symbolic significance of the day of attack in June and the magnitude of damage wrought on the community. Instead of recollecting days and dates dispassionately the timeline constructs the attack as a sacrilege and gives a face to the army's actions by including eyewitness testimonies of those who suffered directly in the assault. As sikhmuseum.com lists:

Friday June 1st

Thousands of pilgrims start to gather at the Golden Temple complex to celebrate the martyrdom anniversary of Guru Arjan on June 3rd.

Sunday June 3rd

All communications including phone lines to and from Punjab are cut. Road blocks prevent anyone from entering or leaving Punjab and all journalists are expelled from Punjab. A total curfew is imposed and as many as 10,000 pilgrims are trapped inside the temple complex...

Wednesday June 6th

After midnight tanks are used to break down the steps leading to the parkarma (circumambulation)...The effect on the Akal Takht, the most sacred of the five Takhts (throne), is devastating...

Prithipal Singh (Sevadar, service personnel, Akal Rest House)

" At 2 a.m. on June 6 the Army people came to the Rest House. They tore off all my clothes, stripped me naked, my kirpan (ceremonial dagger) was snatched, my head gear (patta) was untied to tie up my hands behind my back. They caught me by my hair and took me along with five others - who were all pilgrims - to the ruins of the water tank, there we were told, "don't move or you'll be shot." They kept hitting us with the rifle butts...Six of us were in a line...when a...soldier started shooting from one end, killing four of us... As my turn was coming, suddenly a Sikh Officer turned up and ordered, "Stop Shooting". Thus I was saved" (sikhmuseum.com).

These digital narratives complicate the state's self-portrayal as a benevolent and calm patriarch curbing and controlling Sikh "terrorists." They show the state's role in attacking its citizenry inside a sacred and revered community symbol, symbolic of the Sikh collective body. Ensaaf.org resists state-imposed feeling rules by conveying feelings of rage and despair:

On June 4th 1984, India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, ordered the Indian Army to invade the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, the Sikhs' national institution. As it was the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Sikhs' 5th Guru (teacher) Arjun Dev, it was full of thousands of pilgrims... On the pretext of apprehending 'a handful of militants' lodged inside the Golden Temple, the Indian Army unleashed a terror unprecedented in post-independence India (PS, ensaaf.org).

Many Sikhs describe Operation Blue Star as one of the major "watershed(s)," (Zerubavel 2003) in Sikh collective memory. In an oral testimony, SS, a Sikh male from Punjab, writing on 1984livinghistory.com, recalls the unprecedented nature of attacks and of feeling isolated in postcolonial India. He brings out feelings of abandonment and desolation among Sikhs at the time, with no community of listeners to share their pain.

We hadn't even thought something like this could happen. Sikhs could never have thought that they would be attacked like this. *Koi hamdard vee naee sigga,*

sajje-khabbe, gawand jaye, gal kar sake- there were no sympathetic listeners to share our pain with, no one on any side, no neighbors who we could speak with. We saw such good days. We had to see these days too. *Bahut maada samaa sigga, bahut maada, bahut maada*- it was a very bad time, very bad, very bad (1984livinghistory.org).

Similar to discussions of the June violence, the digital narrative of the November violence includes Sikh views of the sinister atmosphere of the time, the complicity and active backing of government leaders along with inefficacy of the police, and the fear of attacks and vulnerability of the community.

RK is a woman from Delhi currently living in Canada and was an eyewitness to the carnage in Delhi. Her oral testimony is recorded in Punjabi on 1984livinghistory.org. RK expresses feelings of fear and shock that reverberated among Sikhs. She was relatively composed at first but started crying helplessly as she related an episode of Sikh men humiliated and burnt alive as kinswomen watched in horror. She ends the interview by asking: how can the community forget this violent, traumatic time? “It’s June again,” “It’s November again,” is a common refrain among memory workers. Traumatic experiences are not finite and finished, they are chronic and persistent and digital memory work is a way to translate and work through the impasse of traumatic temporality and traumatic affect.

In addition Sikh memory workers construct the narrative of November through legal testimonies or “affidavits,” of victims and eyewitnesses from enquiry commissions formed after 1984 (carnage84.com). Despite the inefficacy of these commissions (Mitta and Phoolka 2007; see also Bal 2014) and “wasteful degeneration,” of these testimonies in the pursuit of justice (Kaur, 2014), they are a way for the community, especially

diasporic Sikhs to imagine the suffering of community members removed in space and time. Carnage84.com also publishes overviews and excerpts from enquiry commissions and committees on 1984 as a means of making transparent the discrepancy between law in theory and in practice. As Simeon writes, 1984 is a “defining moment” in the Indian context because “the gap between official and political utterances and the evidence of our eyes and ears became an unbridgeable chasm (2014, 84).

Websites about 1984 are united in challenging the state and mass media’s language of rationalization and spontaneity in describing the violence. Both the June and November violence are recast as orchestrated cataclysms. In the following account, on sikhchic.com the writer questions the state’s labels of “terrorists,” and “militants,” as a sweeping label for the slain victims.

In June 1984, the Indian state orchestrated two cataclysmic blows on the Sikh population in India. With the purported goal to eradicate “terrorism,” the state army unleashed an unprecedented terror on the holiest of Sikh shrines...Dubbed *Operation Bluestar*, this carnage resulted in the deaths of at least two thousand devotees, two hundred of which were labeled “militants,” as well as the detainment of more than 1,500 civilians suspected of terrorism, twenty-two of which were children under the age of sixteen (HS, sikhchic.com).

Sikhs contest the discourse around the November “riots,” even more vociferously and emphatically than the June attacks. The following columnist writing on sikhchic.com nudges and interrupts the official vocabulary of spontaneous violence by setting out the complex nuances of violence and evoking statements from the propaganda machinery used to frame and justify the Holocaust. A shift in language is necessary to own the difficult memories of 1984 that continue to be shrouded in feelings of shame and the narrative of “blaming the victim,” within the Sikh community and outside. Sikhs are doing

the work of memory and re-presentation to bring out the gravity of the crime aided and abetted by the state and its functionaries, and renaming the violence, “carnage,” “genocide,” or “pogrom.”

po•grom – n. An organized, often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group

ri•ot – n. 1) A wild or turbulent disturbance created by a large number of people. 2) A violent disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled for a common purpose.

...In the words of Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda in the Nazi government, “It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and a psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. They are mere words, and words can be molded until they clothe ideas and disguise.” The frenzy of violence that was unleashed upon the Sikhs of Delhi, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in late October 1984 had ‘P-O-G-R-O-M’ written all over it (SS, sikhchic.com).

The combination of several forms of expression or mixed modality (see for e.g. Fornäs 2002, Baym 2010) is integral to the complex, emotive nature of the crevices created in and through digital media. Still and moving images accompany written and oral testimonies of the June invasion and November violence. Imagery, photographs and videos, provide visual, visceral testimony to represent the wounds and scars etched on the Sikh body. Forms of expression, including paintings and cartoons, challenge feeling rules underlying the dominant narrative, but refrain from replicating the inflammatory sentiments characteristic of militant counternarratives.

Sikhs’ pre-1984 consciousness suffered a severe blow following the state organized violence, resulting, in the loss of lives, and the desecration and desacralization of the Sikh collective body and its sacred material embodiment, the Golden Temple. While Sikhs in India continue to suffer physical, economic and social damage in the

aftermath of 1984, Sikhs in the diaspora are representing the magnitude, meaning and effects of these losses.

To depict the June invasion, there are several photographic images of the Golden Temple in flames (see figure 1). These photographs convey literal and figurative death. In using photographs, Sikh memory workers are employing a medium whose very essence is loss. As Roland Barthes (2010 [1980]) has written: “however ‘lifelike’ we strive to make it...Photography is a kind of primitive theater...a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). Visual evidence such as photographs of the Golden Temple under siege spur the imagination and rouse the community to feel a sense of trauma.



Figure 1: The Golden Temple in Flames (source: sikhmuseum.com)

The very story of how these images have come to be widely and publicly shared within the diaspora reveals how subversive it is to reconstruct the story of 1984. As sikhmuseum.com's producer writes, photographs had to be "smuggled out of India" in the face of media blackout.

One high ranking Indian Army officer made the fateful decision to get a roll of film with Blue Star photographs that he had taken developed by a local Amritsar camera shop. Realizing what they were looking at, the shop owners made a secret copy of those prints. Second and third generation copies of those copies were smuggled out of India in 1985 and form the only existing photographs of the military operation and conditions in the Darbar Sahib complex immediately after the initial combat phase of Operation Blue Star (SSB, sikhmuseum.com).

Another way to communicate the sacrilege and damage to the collective Sikh body is through images such as the painting on sikhchic.com (see figure 2), which evokes the bloodshed and ruination of the June attacks in a form that is more palatable and ambiguous than what Mahmood calls "massacre art." Massacre art includes pictures and paintings of "torn, broken, and seeping bodies...it is a kind of witness that will not allow one to rest" (1996, 189). As Mahmood explains, massacre art was displayed in Sikh homes in the immediate aftermath of 1984. There was an unambiguous quality to massacre art: its "potency derives only in part from their blood; it derives also from their unwillingness to be masked, covered, or distorted" (Mahmood 1996, 189). It saw militant martyrdom as a way to fight the state, and naked violence as a means to undo state oppression. In contrast, digital narratives, or crevices, are more reflective, contemplative, ambiguous and complex, translating suffering into a language that makes it possible to consume images more readily.

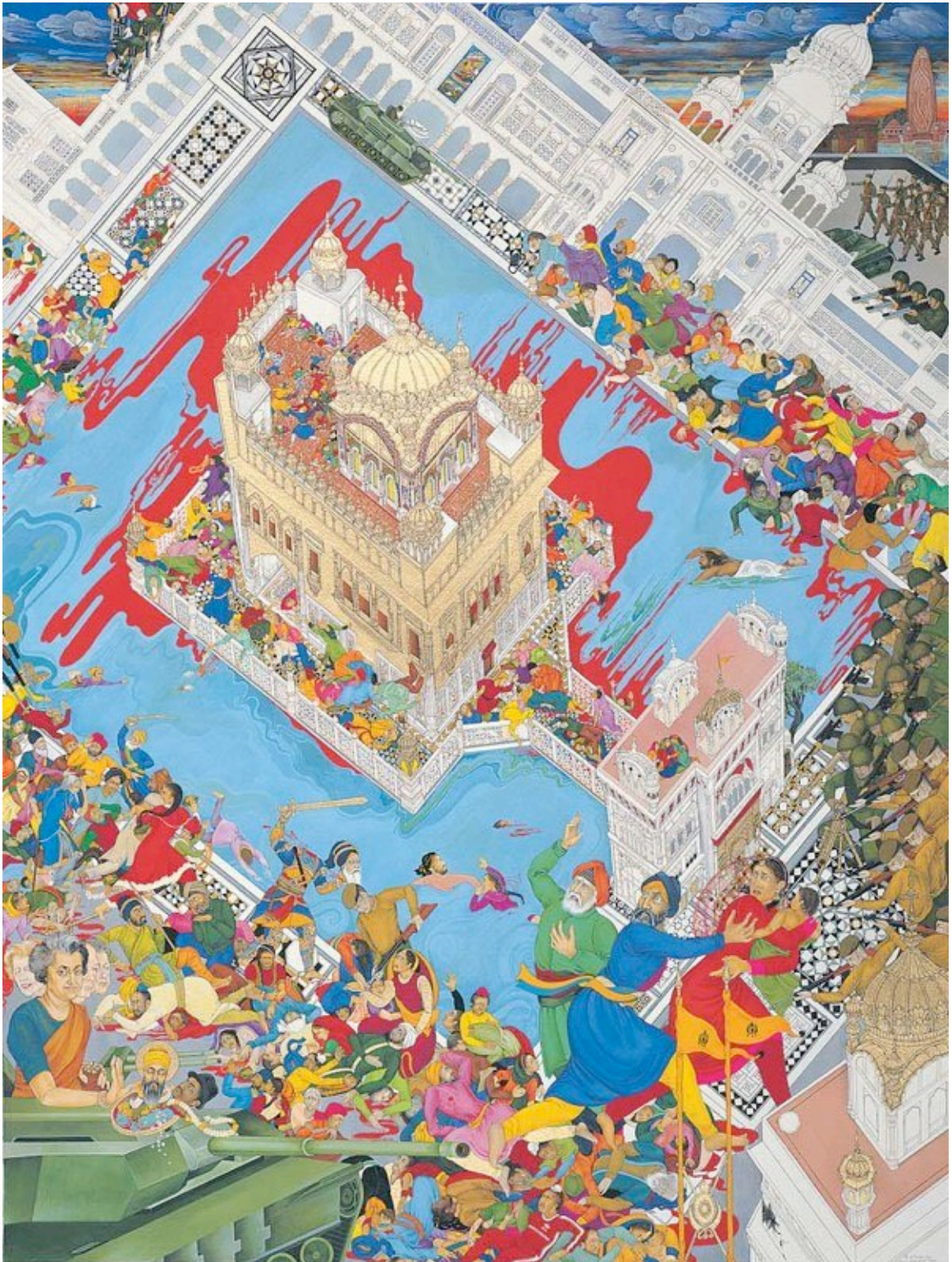


Figure 2: Painting Re-presenting 1984 Distinct from "Massacre Art" (source: sikhchic.com)

Memory workers call the Indian mass media into question through cartoons (see figure 3), in which the red pen of “Indian journalism” affirms the state narrative, erasing and omitting the Sikh story. Teachers at every educational level use red colored pens for correctional, pedagogical purposes. In using the color red the cartoonist is satirizing and calling into question the “veracity” of Indian journalistic accounts, the only form of knowledge available to lay people.

Sikhtoons.com©2010

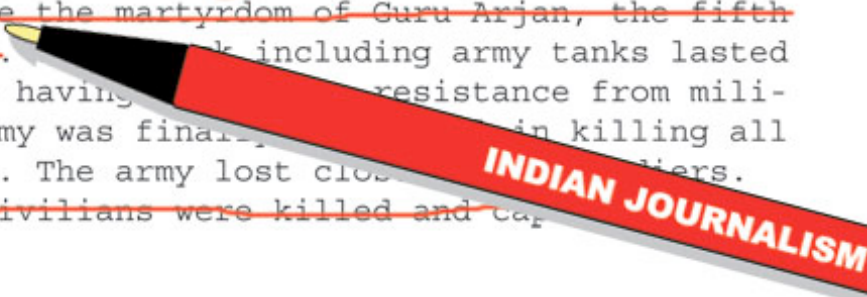
In June 1984 the Indian Army undertook Operation Bluestar to flush out Sikh terrorists from Golden Temple in Amritsar. ~~A corresponding operation took place in Gurudwaras throughout Punjab.~~ A curfew was imposed in the entire state. Journalists were ordered to leave the state. The terrorists had stored a huge arsenal on the temple premises. ~~Thousands of pilgrims had gathered at the Golden Temple to commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru of Sikhs.~~  including army tanks lasted for many days having resistance from militants. The army was finally in killing all the militants. The army lost close to 100 soldiers. ~~Hundreds of civilians were killed and captured.~~

Figure 3: Red Pen to Challenge the Veracity of Indian Journalism (source: sikhtoons.com)

Many websites carry identical images of the November violence. These pictures act as a “quotation, or a maxim or proverb” (Sontag 2003, 22) for the violence. A Sikh memory worker writing on ensaaf.org describes one of these photographs thus (see figure 4): “An image haunts me...a terrified Sikh man is sitting, cross-legged while a group of men casually take turns in attacking him” (PS, ensaaf.org). As this description shows, the emotion that these images evoke are pervasive, durable, cyclical and “affective” rather than “reactive”—as with the militant counternarrative (Jasper 1998). In other words, these images represent the violence of 1984 as an irrevocable loss, representing feelings denied to the community in the official 1984-as-justificatory, against “riots” interpretive framework.



Figure 4: "An Image Haunts Me..." (source: ensaaf.org)

Mixed forms of communication are particularly powerful in forming and deepening crevices in memory walls. The following artwork from sikhtoons.com (see figure 5) is an example of how juxtaposing cartoons and artwork can be a subtle yet effective way to tell a difficult story while also conveying critique. The artist conveys the horror of 1984 through images that are more easily consumed than massacre art. Criticism of the official narrative is evident in the title of the comic strip, “The Killing Fields,” and the use of language such as “genocide” to describe the violence. The artist laments the lack of justice and the neglect of survivors: “justice was burnt alive alongside thousands of innocent Sikh victims of 1984.” Graphics and colors command instant attention and are designed to engage otherwise indifferent audiences (see for e.g. Navasky, 2013)

1984: The Killing Fields

Sikhtoons.com

On October 31st, 1984 following the assassination of Indian Prime Minister by her Sikh bodyguards a terror was let loose on the streets of India that would consume thousands of innocent lives.



Within hours after the assassination mobs armed with petrol cans, lighters, guns and many under the guidance of police officers started hunting for Sikh men and women in the streets of the capital city, Delhi and cities across North India. The mobs would have free reign for the next 3 days in their genocidal killing spree.



Thousands of Sikh men were forced out of cars, trains, buses and their homes by mobs, to be burnt alive by having petrol poured over their bodies or rubber tyres forced around their bodies and then lit on fire.



Countless Sikh women and girls were gang raped, many before their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers before the Sikh men were eventually burnt alive.



Hundreds of Sikh places of worship were destroyed along with schools, businesses, vehicles and homes owned by Sikhs in cities across North India.



The genocidal fury of the mobs left thousands of innocent Sikhs dead. None of the perpetrators of these crimes against humanity have been brought to justice even 23 years after the genocidal days of 1984. Thousands of killers roam free the cities of India while the survivors of the pogroms have only the ghostly images to commemorate their loss. Justice was burnt alive alongside thousands of innocent Sikh victims of 1984.



Figure 5: An Example of "Commix" (source: sikhtoons.com)

Sikhtoons.com is an instance of what Art Spiegelman calls “commix.” “The strength of commix lies in [its] synthetic ability to approximate a ‘mental language’ that is closer to actual human thought than either words or pictures alone (Spiegelman 1993 quoted in Young 1998, 672). Sikhtoons’ “commix” belong to the same genre as Spiegelman’s work on the Holocaust (2011 [1973, 1986]). “Cartoon-izing” difficult memories dilutes and makes it possible to consume grotesque elements of massacre art, showing more complex and differentiated modes of re-presentation at work.

The complexity of crevices as counternarratives is the fact that while most websites distance themselves from separatist or Khalistan voices, some borrow from such counternarratives. But these are minority voices, a product of my selective sample of websites as well as the current general sentiment within the community of diaspora Sikhs. Some memory workers declare their rejection of separatist narratives outright. A pair of Sikh artists in their essay on sikhchic.com describe their painting (figure above-number) depicting the events of 1984 in the following terms:

[W]hilst wanting to create a piece that was direct in its criticism of what happened, we were conscious not to allow the painting to become an anti-India statement, or to be misconstrued in any way as promoting the cause of the Independent Sikh State of Khalistan (AKS and RKS, sikhchic.com).

The digital story of 1984 includes the lasting impact of violence, extending beyond the events of June and November. Websites such as ensaaf.org include documentation of the reverberations of 1984 beyond that year. For example in a report entitled, “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India,” published by ensaaf.org,

the authors examine the Indian state's role in the "disappearance" of young Sikh men. This report in combination with other documentation available on the website investigates the Indian government's abuse and killings of these "disappeared," by cremating them en masse.⁷ Websites including ensaaf.org and nov1984.org also make available templates, such as sample flyers and handouts, for mobilizing the community. These and other projects create connections between online and face-to-face interactions.

Digital crevices are representing 1984 through many different forms of expression to make sense of the senselessness of the attack on the Sikh collective body. They are asking several interrelated questions: What happened before 1984? What happened in 1984? What happened after 1984? What do Sikhs feel about these events? In contrast to separatist counternarratives, memory workers are providing a narrative plot to events. Militants were not able to tell the full story of 1984 because of their temporal proximity to events and the violent mode of expressing dissent with the state. Memory workers are translating feelings of loss, shame, sadness and rage in and through various cultural forms and creating crevices, thin, ambiguous and blurred representations in the unambiguous solid walls of the state story and Sikh nationalist narratives. In retelling the story of 1984, memory workers are borrowing from the Jewish Holocaust as an interpretive framework to explain the meaning of 1984 and establish legitimacy. Sikhs are also beginning to make some connections with experiences of other religious minorities in India.

Connecting Traumatic Memories

In constructing digital memories Sikh memory workers are making connections with traumatic experiences of other religious minorities to situate 1984 as a specifically Sikh but also a generalized experience shared by other disenfranchised communities. In particular they evoke language and imagery from the Jewish Holocaust to translate their experiences in a widely understood framework.

Most websites contain phrases like “lest we forget,” and memory workers often use the term “Holocaust,” to describe 1984. In a report entitled “1984 Sikhs’ Kristallnacht,” on ensaaf.org the writer draws upon Jewish history, anti-Semitism, and feelings of fear, of being hunted down and persecuted to explain the meaning of 1984 from a Sikh perspective.

Sikhs have a lot in common with the people of the Jewish faith...Both have faced centuries of persecution. The month of November has brought them together... Kristallnacht or the ‘Night of Broken Glass,’ though portrayed by the German authorities as a spontaneous outburst of popular outrage, were actually pogroms organized by Hitler’s Nazis. Synagogues and Jewish businesses were particular targets, while the police and fire brigade looked on. Jews were hunted down and thousands were deported. This marked the beginning of the Holocaust. 46 years later in India, a similar event occurred...In the days that followed, Sikhs, for the first time in independent India, felt like Jews in Nazi Germany, as mobs of Hindus ran riot, setting upon Sikhs, who, by their distinctive turbans and beards, were easy targets” (PS, ensaaf.org).

Images such as the following on sikhtoons.com (see figure 6) compare the Indian state’s complicity and impunity in 1984 with the totalitarian Nazi regime. Killing countless Sikh citizens under state auspices blurred the distinction between democracy and dictatorship. Sikh memory workers are calling out the “secular” state’s decimation

of a vulnerable community by using the language of the Holocaust trauma as common currency (see Stein 2006, 2014; see also Sarkar 2009, 13).

HAIL INDIA !

HAIL INDIA !



10-30-2004

Sikhtoons.com

Figure 6: Parallels between Indian and Nazi State

The main reason Sikhs are making connections with the Jewish Holocaust is to find legitimacy for their fairly unknown experiences and situate their suffering within a widely used template and language. While expressing solidarity with experiences of another religious minority is a way to form an effective and powerful coalition, there are also limitations to this translation. Each traumatic history is unique and context-specific (see for e.g. Stein 2014). The very practice of translation and mediation has inherent problems. The broad-brush of another traumatic memory, the Holocaust in this case, to paint 1984 highlights the tyranny of the Indian state but also runs the risk of overstating the Sikh case. Questions of power are also at stake in invoking the Holocaust narrative to situate 1984. The Holocaust has acquired “transcendental status” (e.g. Sarkar 2009, 13) in constructing cultural trauma for different groups. Yet, the narrative of the Holocaust had to be hard fought for by Jews, especially by the “second generation” (Stein 2014). These struggles to recognize the Holocaust have much in common with the work of memory of Sikhs today.

The very struggle to establish suffering as suffering also connects Sikh experiences to non-Sikh religious minorities in India. In a few instances Sikh memory workers are beginning to make these connections. Memory work is slowly expanding 1984 from a Sikh-specific politics of identity to a larger critique of the Indian nation-state’s majoritarian fabric. Despite the risk of creating an undifferentiated “category of communal riots,” (Kakar 1996, 40-41) these bridges identify and resist persistent threats to religious minorities in India, especially Sikhs, Muslims and Christians. Crevices in

state-organized memories have the potential question the state story about Sikhs and create fissures, letting in voices from other vulnerable minority communities in India.

By drawing connections with other religious minorities Sikhs are doing the work of translation. Translating unspeakable traumatic experiences is complex and elusive. Despite the limitations and risks of comparing very different experiences, these connections are giving some form to what was once incoherence. In retelling the story of 1984 digitally Sikhs are also representing gendered and classed voices.

Gender and Class in Digital Memory Work

Gender comes across in memory work in two main ways, *between* the Sikh community and external collective bodies, including the state and the dominant Hindu community; and gendered divisions *within* the community. In representing experiences of the larger community Sikh memory workers stress the “masculine” role of the state. Within the community, men mainly tell the digital story of 1984. In constructing the story of 1984 using digital technology, class is an implicit factor. Memory work is uneven, unequal and not representative of the entire community because of the issue of the “digital divide” separating those in the community with easy access to digital technology and an English education, and those lacking these resources.

On the whole, digital crevices challenge the Indian state’s patriarchal discourse. But there are also different ways to understand gender in memory work. While within the community, women are repositories of *izzat* or honor (Das 1976, 15), gender

morphs and takes on different forms depending on the level of confrontation: inter-community or intra-community. Between the Sikh community and state, Sikhs represent themselves as a community “emasculated” by a “masculine Hindu state.”⁸ In confronting the majority community, however, the distinction between Sikhs as “masculine,” and Hindus as “feminine,” brought out most keenly in the Sikh militant discourse, also continues to some extent in present day memory work.⁹ This is especially evident in reconstructing the June assault on the Golden Temple. Sikhs “felt the destruction of the Akal Takht as a humiliation inflicted upon the Panth, a humiliation demanding some counteraction to restore Sikh *izzat*” (Dusenbery 1990, 251), in relation to the masculine state and majority “effeminate” community.

Within the community, men are at the forefront of memory work, and relating their experiences. In keeping with the rigid private-public division between women and men, and “principles of silence, negation, accommodation and idealization” of women in Sikh history (Jakobsh 2003, 3), memory work remains a male domain. The digital narrative that is under construction focuses on the loss and shame inflicted on males, and female suffering in their relational roles as daughters, mothers, wives and especially widows to “carry the moral burden of narrating the wounds inflicted on others” (Kaur, 2014, 37). Men were killed, their bodies burnt alive, their hair or ‘*kes*’ shorn and they underwent the shame of letting go of the turban—all symbolic of violent emasculation, directly experienced by men and vicariously internalized by women. Female bodies and voices are less conspicuous, silent sites that both experienced the suffering and continue to bear witness to it. Visual narratives on websites convey this

“irrecoverability” of loss and bearing witness to violence (see figure 7). Widows in patriarchal Indian society are treated as less than human, contaminated, stigmatized and “discredited” by the loss of husbands (Goffman 1963, 4). In telling the story of 1984 digitally, memory workers represent this experience of the widows. In a patriarchal system “where widowhood is a prolonged curse, a punishment, a form of wound that never ever heals,” images of widows of communal violence “symbolize the tragic depths of that irrecoverable loss in the public sphere (Kaur 2014, 37).



Figure 7: Sikh Women Suffer and Bear Witness to Suffering (source: carnage84.com)

Digital narratives also make manifest class differences, both in doing memory work as well as representing those affected directly by the violence. The majority of Sikhs targeted in the violence, particularly the November massacres belonged to Siglikar caste and working classes (Das 2007, 142-61). This aspect of the violence is represented in various ways on websites. For instance, there is a detailed breakdown of violence according to locality on websites such as carnage84.com. Neighborhoods in Delhi are segregated according to class, and the economically disadvantaged and marginalized suffered the most.

On other websites, memory workers reflect on their class positions explicitly, explaining that this accounted for both the time lapse and the experiential distance between 1984 and the work of memory. As a first generation Sikh memory worker writes on sikhchic.com, it was the very distance with the economically marginalized Sikhs that made it seem that the experience of 1984 was not “ours,” but “theirs.” His middle/upper class belonging overrode his religious affiliation.

News of the ‘riot’ in Delhi did trickle through, but I don’t remember being particularly upset. I did look like a Sikh and was one, nominally, but I didn’t think of the residents of the shantytowns in Delhi who had been butchered as ‘my’ people, particularly (SS, sikhchic.com).

Class hierarchies are inbuilt into memory work. Sikhs in the diaspora have easy access to digital technology, compared to India.¹⁰ However, even in the diaspora, memory work is confined to a small segment of educated and professional Sikhs. Sikhs in the North American diaspora are a differentiated group with differences along socio-

economic status (see for e.g. Mitra 2012). Unskilled and semi-skilled working class Sikhs are excluded from digital storytelling.

In sum, memory work is challenging state and traditional media-constructed amnesias. Questions of gender identity vis-à-vis the Indian state and the majority community remain relevant, as do issues of class inequality. Splits within memory work also reflect divisions within the larger community, between memory workers possessing greater cultural capital and “everyday” Sikhs, as is evident from responses to digital crevices.

Responses to Digital Crevices

There are gaps even among those in the community who have access to digital technology. A graphic on sikhtoons.com (see figure 8) represents heterogeneity within the Sikh community vis-à-vis memories of 1984. Memory work is considered “radical,” while “liberals” recommend “moving on,” in keeping with the popular narrative.

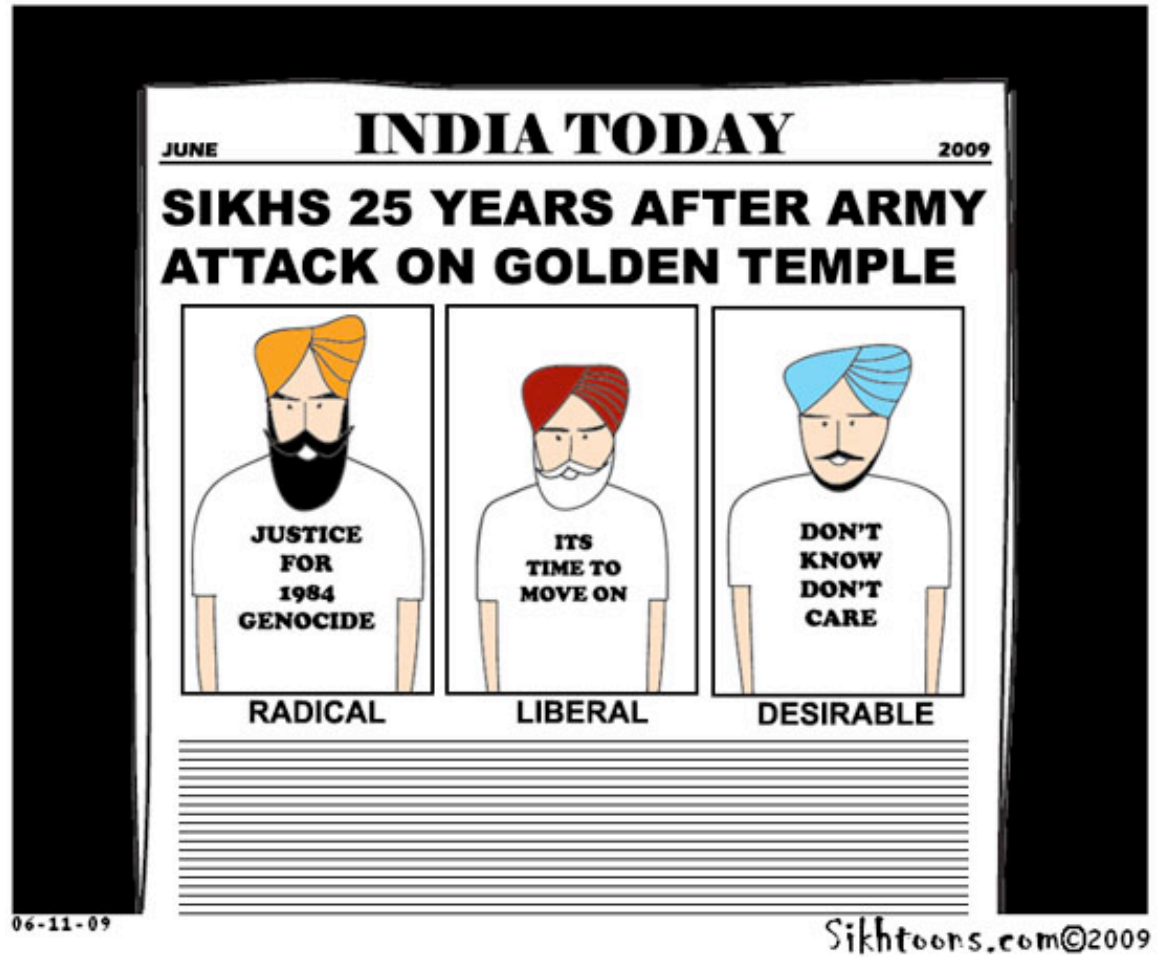


Figure 8: Heterogeneity within the Sikh Community (source:sikhtoons.com)

Bani, one of my first generation interviewees, summarized the splits within the community succinctly, characterizing engagement with 1984, as disengagement. Bani identifies three categories of Sikhs within the community. Most community members dissociate from 1984 for fear of being labeled Khalistani—again showing the difference between memory work and popular militant counternarratives. Another category of Sikhs live in the diaspora and possess the will but lack the resources to translate and represent their experiences. Finally, there are memory workers or producers of digital crevices. To quote Bani,

There are three categories I would say, I mean if I thought about it more, there would be more categories...one is people who lived in India...they were in India, er, and if they immigrated...that was recent, um, they are totally oblivious and...they want to move on and they won't talk about it...they think that talking about 1984 means supporting Khalistan...for some reason they have this idea...and that's a majority of Sikhs unfortunately...then the second category is those who remember, those who suffered directly but um, they are uneducated and are caught in survival in diaspora, they would talk about it, they're very angry with India, but they're not educated enough or resourceful enough or both...and the third category is a very, very small minority, that have the resources, that have education in English...they think it's important to communicate it to our children, what our roots are and what happened to us...

I observed these splits in my focus group discussions. Of the 18 “everyday” Sikhs, that is Sikhs who do not actively remember and represent 1984, I included a sample of first generation Sikhs including recent migrants, that is those who migrated anywhere from 10 years to 30 years ago and second generation Sikhs aged 18-40. In assembling my focus group sample, I encountered resistance from Sikhs to participate in my study. While my focus group participants provided consent, their reactions, recorded below, varied from disavowal and disapproval of digital work to a hearty approval and

endorsement. Sikh memory workers are creating digital projects to engage community members, encourage them to speak up about their own experiences, and/or share their opinions to build an effective public sphere counteracting the Indian state. The content of such websites is not esoteric; most websites include background information about the community and events for non-Sikhs to access the materials readily.

I showed participants samples of audio and visual texts from websites. Even as we were going through sample pages from websites several members of the audience responded with audible sighs or facial contortions, and uttered out loud *Waheguru* (God, the Supreme Being). First generation women and men who had migrated from India in the last 10 years or Sikhs who were visiting India in 1984 were more visibly disturbed than established diasporic Sikhs, that is older first generation and second generation respondents. For example when I asked for responses to the videos “Invasion: June 1984,” and “Pogroms: Nov 1984” from sikhgenocide.org, most first generation participants remained silent. As I pressed for reactions in my second focus group, some respondents expressed concern. As a 30-year first generation woman remarked, “This is political.” “It is provocative. It is too much.” Community members continue to carry sediments of a culture of fear engendered vis-à-vis 1984 in the national context. While first generation memory workers are on a journey to resist this culture of fear most members of the community share the popular sentiment of fear and the prudence of “moving on.”

Another reaction to public memory work that I encountered in my focus groups is the distinction Sikhs drew between the June and November violence. For instance, a 25 year-old second generation woman who was visiting India in November 1984 and had dim memories of her own explained that while the November violence was “indisputable,” website producers needed to be more cautious in representing the June massacres, because this was a murkier history. Overall, I discovered that the June violence is considered contentious even within the community. The state and mass media depictions, combined with the active engagement of Sikh political leadership, especially the disagreement over Bhindranwale’s role, makes some members of the community question the sympathetic portrayal of the latter. There is a much wider consensus about the injustice and senselessness of the November massacre. Still, most Sikhs, especially recent migrants and some second generation Sikhs, are disenchanted with the entire issue, expressing the futility of memory work.

The overall sentiment among first generation Sikhs is that 1984 was a “terrible tragedy” but that remembering it is divisive, reactionary and ineffective. Second generation Sikhs in my focus group sample spoke about parents never discussing 1984 with them. Some second generation Sikhs who were more aware of the 1984 story spoke about what one of them called “weird social dynamics,” in their parents’ generation. While the second generation cohort, “35 and under were more socially engaged and stood up for a cause,” for the first generation the choice between speaking about 1984 or maintaining silence was dependent on social approval or “social

endorsement.” First generation Sikhs said they discussed 1984 only if others in their social circle engaged with it.

While second generation Sikhs are most active in creating digital projects on 1984, some second generation respondents in my focus groups were unsure of the reach and impact of digital work. “Is it really percolating down?” was a question some of them asked. Most second generation Sikhs had not visited websites on 1984 until participating in my focus group discussion. They were skeptical about how ordinary Sikhs would access these websites. Other second generation participants were unsure of digital activism. “It is not enough to build an effective coalition,” one of them remarked, suggesting that “the online needs to be met with ground level work,” and evoking the continued rift rather than blurring between the offline and online. Yet most second generation Sikhs were open to reading texts about 1984 and expressed interest in evaluating them at length and more closely on their own. The segment most responsive to digital memory work was first generation pre-1984 diasporic Sikhs, that is those who were in the United States when the events unfolded. Many of them understood and supported memory workers’ aims and objectives. They believe a public conversation about 1984 was necessary, and “much called for.” As one person asked: “Why have we been so quiet?”

The different responses of recent first generation Sikh immigrants and more well-established and well-settled first generation immigrants, and the second-generation cohort, is encapsulated in the question: who tells the story and what version

of it is circulated? The difference in responses is a result of internalization of the larger discourse of silence, evasion and denial engendered by the Indian state and mass media. While it would be revelatory to see how recent immigrants' attitudes change with time, for my sample of urban, educated, middle class first generation immigrants, these sentiments abound. It would also be insightful to compare responses to websites along class lines. What is the difference between perceptions of 1984 among uneducated, semi-skilled and unskilled working class Sikhs and educated, middle-class Sikhs? Unfortunately, that is beyond the scope of this project.

Another reason for the heterogeneous responses from the community can be traced to how trauma shapes experience. "Silence protects both perpetrators and the notion (no matter how illusory) of a harmonious community and family; it also retraumatizes and isolates victims" (Rose 2004, 173). While memory workers are retrieving and speaking about difficult experiences, the very difficulties of relating and listening to painful experiences prevents speech, and is detrimental to forming a broad community of speakers and listeners. The façade of normalcy that silence makes possible is easier than questioning the perpetrators or working through difficult experiences. Theorists such as Judith Herman (1997, 7-8) and Dori Laub (Felman and Laub 1992, 68) have explained the importance of listening at the individual level. Abu-Lughod and Sa'adi write about extending the importance of an empathetic listener who acts as a witness to the collective level (2007, 12). My focus group discussions show that listening to and bearing witness to digitally mediated messages is still an uneven, slowly developing process within the community.

Distinctiveness and Consequences of Digital Crevices

While the dominant narrative has created and circulated images and feelings that Sikhs have imagined and internalized as negative portrayals of the community and its role in instigating 1984, digital narratives create crevices for Sikhs to break through walls of representations and also walls of feelings within which they are confined. Digital media is becoming a conduit to construct representations of 1984 that are fluid, changing and evolving, not fixed and static. The digital story of 1984, with its Sikh manufactured representations, is complex and malleable, underlined by many feelings: grief, nostalgia, frustration, anger, shame and fear.

In questioning representations of 1984, Sikhs are challenging feeling rules — which I call “feeling walls”—within which they found themselves confined in the Indian national context. I use the term “feeling walls” to capture the predominant sentiment among Sikh memory workers. Feeling walls are more draconian than feeling rules. While feeling rules are acts of emotion management produced in everyday interaction underlined by unequal power structures, feeling walls are acts of emotion management in periods of massive upheaval, such as during the political repression of 1984 and its aftermath, in which masking feelings, and making them invisible, is the only way to survive an oppressive political regime.

Memory workers spoke of the power and effectiveness of the Internet as a way of expressing affect that has been veiled and guarded. Memory workers explain that various forms of online communication, prose, poetry or art work are a way to “express our general frustrations,” a means to challenge silence and denial “forced by the powers that

be.” In reply to the official narrative that Sikhs had “done something wrong...and every Sikh should be punished,” Sikh memory workers spoke of the Internet as a “mechanism that we could express ourselves in.” One of my first generation interviewees, Kiran, referring to her digital account of 1984 writes that her feelings about 1984 came across online through “this voice, this pen.” Vikramjeet, another memory worker, explained that the purpose of an online archive on 1984 was to overcome “fear...stand up and say whatever you want,” including pro-Khalistan, anti-Khalistan, more nuanced opinions, “as long as it’s intelligent, written properly and argued well, we’ll print it.” Yet another first generation interviewee, Nikki talked of digital crevices as a means to translate feelings associated with 1984 in addition to awakening the community to action,

I continue to write, I continue to raise my voice online...so the ones that are asleep can wake up...so I feel that if my writing awakens a compassion, not in my people, in any people, and they look at the larger picture...if I cannot feel compassion for someone who is being brutally murdered or a community, there’s something wrong with me that I’m numb...how can it be right for any community to go through that or any people to go through that and for me to just stand and watch?

Despite the pervasiveness of official discourses that Sikhs have internalized, diasporic distance and consciousness and the advantage of hindsight helps memory workers become aware, acknowledge and reflect on externally imposed feelings of shame, stigma and fear associated with 1984. So while digital crevices have their limitations—lacking face-to-face, proximate interaction—they are mostly enabling.

The state response to 1984, a single-minded vilification of the secessionist movement without offering any redress, acknowledgment or healing measures for the community created feeling walls for everyday Sikhs that trapped them in a

“shame/shame or shame/anger” spiral (Scheff 1900), without any social buffer to prevent shame from reproducing itself or degenerating into anger. Scheff analyzes this at both the micro level and as a way to evaluate inter-group relations:

[S]hame may be recursive, acting back on itself. If shame is evoked but not acknowledged, the possibility arises that one may react emotionally to one’s initial emotional reaction, then react again to the second reaction, and again and again, ad infinitum. For example, one might be ashamed of being ashamed, creating a shame-shame spiral, or angry because one is ashamed, then ashamed because one is angry, creating a shame-anger spiral (Scheff 1990, 285).

By building their own time-delayed crevices, Sikhs are struggling to break free of the emotions of shame and anger that have become barriers to public speech about 1984. One of my interviewees, Satnam, deliberated on the importance of “creating and managing information.” In his words,

One of the things I see is whoever is controlling the story if you may, they get to define history in a way...today’s powers to be are not only making sure that justice is not served but making sure that that the narrative, the story is written and defined in way that will keep Sikhs and non-Sikhs including Indians and others in the dark..so for me, we need to take back the narrative and tell our own stories, so to me that is the most important thing, we have to be able to speak our voices, we have to be able to write our own history, write books and art comes in that...we have to manage information and we have to, have to create and manage information.

The story of 1984 is slowly simmering, consistently and continuously through digital communication (see for e.g. Ostertag and Ortiz 2013) as a way to offset the asymmetry of representations and create an outlet to articulate pent-up emotions. News stories about 1984 in state-supported media were quick to label Sikhs as “terrorists,” and “anti-national.” Digital crevices are giving Sikhs a way to reinstate “symmetry of the

communication process” (Goffman 1959, 8) and in turn break free from the tyranny of officially imposed, other-defined pejorative representations and emotions.

Digital communication’s diffuse democratization is giving Sikhs agency to express themselves through a language that emanates from their experiences and/or imagined experiences. These memories are not distilled or filtered by third parties like editors or museum curators. As texts produced and circulated by parties deeply invested in the process of remembering, affective engagement adds to the density and effectiveness of digital crevices.

Convergent (Jenkins 2006) and evocative digital narratives are especially helpful in challenging and questioning feelings of *sharam* or shame and stigma imposed on Sikhs in 1984 and post-1984. For a community already seeped in ideas of *sharam* and *izzat*, the effect of dominant narratives is even more insidious. While the Indian social-cultural context and construction of past events have created and imposed marginalized feelings and engendered “minority anxieties” (Gupta 2007) digital-diasporic cultures are creating a shift toward overcoming these fears and anxieties. Memory workers are turning tables and directing stigmatization and shame against majoritarian Indian politics of the state and their blatant suppression of human rights. New media is facilitating an affective reversal (see figure 9). In the following image the artist compares the attack on high-ranking state officials in December 2001 with the November violence, bringing out the stark differences in legal rulings between them, capital punishment to offenders in the former, and blatant state impunity vis-à-vis the latter. The graphic is labeled, “Hindustan’s Shame,” or India’s shame, showing the very different engagement

with feeling rules in the diaspora. Instead of internalizing shame, keeping stories private and secluded, as encouraged by the Indian state and mass media, memory work is negotiating with these feelings directly and publicly.

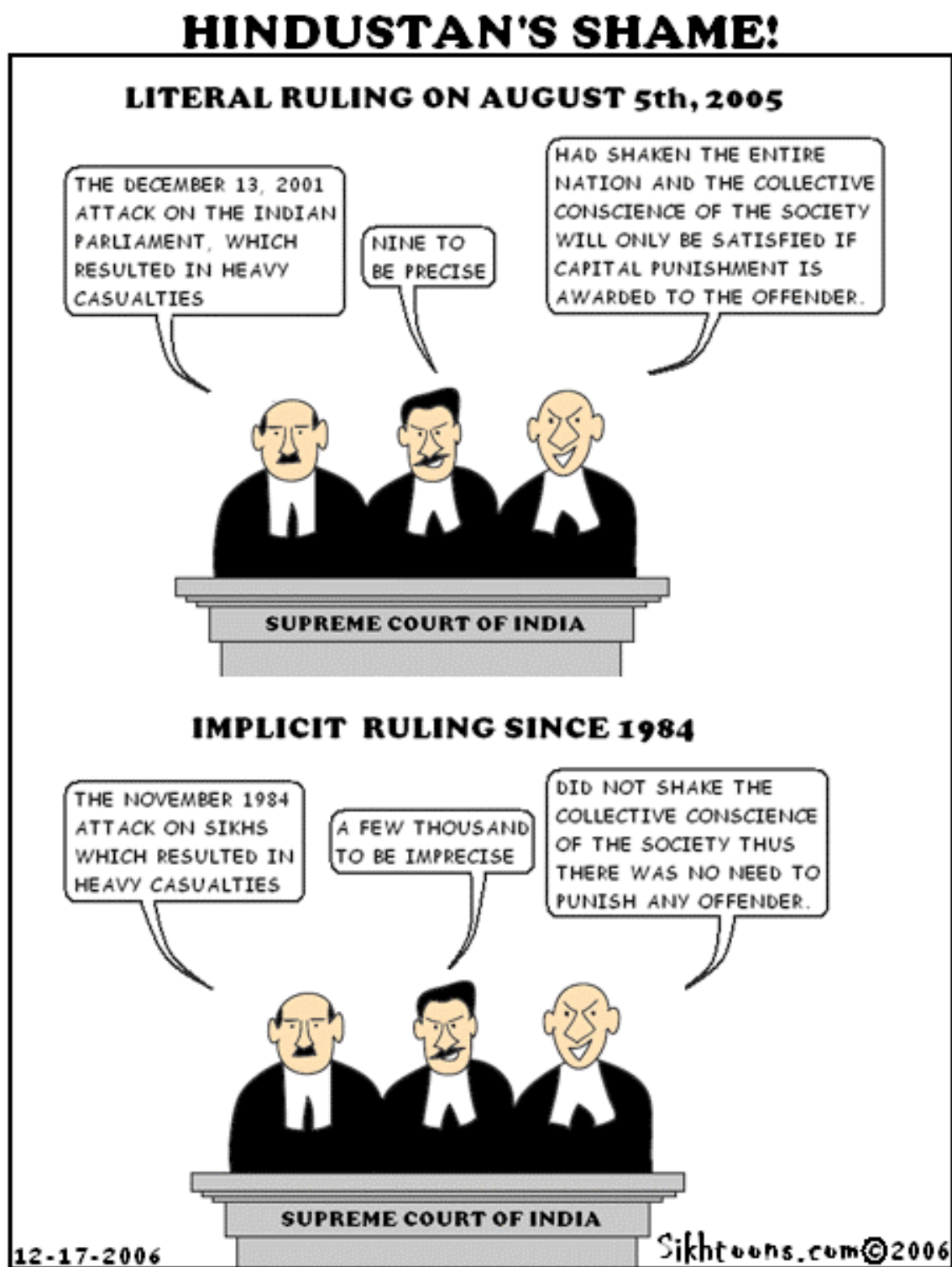


Figure 9: New media and Shaming the Indian State (source: sikhtoons.com)

Conclusion

In summary, Sikhs are using digital media to tell the untold story of 1984. Their narratives act as crevices to challenge dominant walls of representation and affect. Crevices are made up of multi-layered and complex experiential narratives to re-present the story of 1984. Digital media's mixed media form and content facilitate contestation, extending state and separatist accounts of 1984 beyond either/or frames. Sikhs in the diaspora are reinterpreting the violence of 1984 as orchestrated, deliberate, and calculated rather than as an accidental and spontaneous set of events. They are challenging the language of "terrorism," and "riots." Digital crevices contain many Sikh voices and these are supplemented by the voices of other religious minority experiences particularly the Jew, as Sikhs situate the story of 1984 within a cross-cultural template to make their experiences known to wider audiences.

Digital texts on 1984 also highlight gendered differences between the community and the Indian state as well as gendered splits within the community. Through these websites, the community is questioning the Indian state's patriarchal discourse. Within the community, however, women's voices are less conspicuous. Class differences underline the violence of 1984 and continue to inform digital memory work.

Overall, digital crevices are making invisibilized affect more visible. They are breaking dominant feeling walls to re-present 1984 as experience more than event, feeling more than fact. Digital re-presentations have the potential to disrupt the state narrative. The story of 1984 is inextricably connected with the individual stories of memory workers

that are culminating to bring about a narrative shift. It is these stories that I turn to in the next chapter, which draws an intergenerational portrait of memory workers.

¹ Testimonies constitute a form of remembering (Langer 1991, 2). Testimonies are acts of speaking out about painful pasts and they constitute “a necessary and political act for the teller because they reveal injustices” (Wolf 2007, 156).

² For interactivity, see for e.g. Fornäs et al (2002), Baym (2000); for digitally mediated communities and relationships see for e.g. Rheingold (1993), Chayko (2002); for online place, see Meyrowitz (1985); and on social interaction and cognition see Cerulo (1997).

³ Carnage84.com is the only website created by an India-based Sikh lawyer along with a team of other lawyers, journalists, social workers and activists.

⁴ Affidavits are “sworn oaths, testimonials furnished in the presence of a recognized public authority, and authenticated by authorized judicial agents to be true” (Kaur, 2014, 35).

⁵ See for e.g. Jeffrey (1987), Murphy (2012).

⁶ I have used initials instead of pseudonyms for my “digital interlocutors” to maintain anonymity while being cognizant of the fact that these websites are publicly available.

⁷ <http://www.ensaaf.org/publications/reports/cremations.pdf>

⁸ Militant Hindus aspire for just such a masculine identity of Hinduism, “more vigorous and uncompromising in the defense of its devotees” (Lal 1999, 149).

⁹ As Das explains, in the Sikh militant discourse masculinity contained in the idea and body of the heroic Sikh martyr, is synonymous with the Sikh community while the “Hindu community was characterized by an emasculated femininity that, in turn, slides into the idea of the Indian nation” (2007, 112.)

See also Axel (2001) on creating the body of the Khalistani male subject digitally. The militant discourse constructed the Sikh community as unequivocally masculine and the community at large echoed this sentiment.

Dusenbery (2000) makes a distinction between the masculinity of Sikh militancy and patriarchalism of other fundamentalist ideologies. About Sikh militant masculinity, he writes, “It is an idiom of protecting masculine honor without policing the public behavior of women” (329).

¹⁰ In the U.S. for example, 84% use the Internet: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/13/emerging-nations-catching-up-to-u-s-on-technology-adoption-especially-mobile-and-social-media-use/>

Canada has similar numbers: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/131126/dq131126d-eng.htm>

In India, however, only 13% use the Internet: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/15/india-ends-the-telegram-but-internet-access-is-not-close-behind/>

Chapter 5

Challenging the Official Story: An Intergenerational Portrait of Memory Workers

An intergenerational cohort of memory workers is producing digital crevices. Memory workers mainly live in the diaspora, in North America, and this distance is playing an important part in challenging Indian state authority. They tend to be well-educated professionals, and are largely but not exclusively men. In this chapter I focus on the core or nucleus of “first generation” survivors and witnesses and “second generation” descendants, and their roles as memory workers.

First generation Sikhs are direct migrants from India, having migrated before 1984, as well as post-1984 survivors and witnesses. They are refugees as well as voluntary immigrants. The second generation is comprised of children of pre-and post-1984 survivors and witnesses. I examine first and second generation memory workers’ trajectories into memory work. Individual journeys are idiosyncratic and particular but also reveal certain common patterns that construct and reinforce a culture of memory work, creating crevices and fissures in dominant walls of representation. I seek to answer the following interrelated questions: What are the similarities and differences between first and second generation memory workers? How do memory workers’ biographies reveal the larger social process of evolution from private memories to public memory work?

Based on my interviews I draw an intergenerational portrait of eight memory workers, who are representative of first and second generation Sikhs. The process of

evolution into memory work unfolded differently for the first and second generation, accounting for the differences between generations. The first generation started sharing their experiences over a period of time and for several reasons, including: their journey to understand the meaning of the faith; grappling with feelings of shame and stigmatization imposed by the Indian state and media, exaggerated because of Punjabi cultural notions of *sharam* or loss of face and upholding *izzat* or honor; stability and security that they experienced after settling down in their new immigrant contexts; the growing temporal gap between 1984 and present that made it possible to revisit past pain and grief; and the desire among some to transmit their stories to future generations. Some first generation Sikhs had started protesting against the violence in India even in the immediate aftermath of 1984. Second generation memory work is situated within this early diasporic mobilization but it is not just about “reactive” emotions (Jasper 1998).

Second generation Sikhs are doing the work of memory and the work of emotion to channel spontaneous and scattered emotions of first generation diasporic dissent and create a more durable and diverse archive of 1984. Also, unlike first generation memory workers from the Indian national context who struggle with socially imposed silence and shame, second generation Sikhs, growing up in different contexts and with different interpretations of 1984, did not internalize feelings of shame and fear engendered by the Indian state and media. The second generation’s simultaneous physical and temporal distance from the events combined with their quest for roots and genealogy in

the diaspora lead them to engage with 1984 more directly and publicly than the first generation.

Second generation experiences of 1984 derive from socialization within the family or in community spaces such as periodically organized Sikh camps (explained below). Sometimes the second generation's knowledge of events came from serendipitous discoveries and in other instances they were witnesses to the events via mass media reports in 1984. For second generation memory workers an initiation into the experiences of 1984 constituted an important rite of passage into feelings of belonging with their community and faith. My interviewees explained that children and young adolescents who were roughly between eight and fifteen years old in 1984 were deeply impacted by the events, which solidified their identity as against those born before and after 1984. For the second generation, the ghosts of 1984, combined with their own experiences of marginalization and stigmatization in the North American diaspora, particularly the aftermath of September 11, 2001, led them into memory work, an issue I will return to in some detail in the next chapter.

Despite the differences in evolution between the first and second generation, their memory work is converging today and creating an intergenerational archive. First generation memory workers are active participants in digital projects mainly constructed by second generation Sikhs. Both cohorts are active "producers," "coaxers, coaches and coercers" of 1984 stories (Plummer 1995, 20-21) consciously recalling and reinterpreting a complex history. Sikhs from both generations are talking together to talk back to dominant representations of 1984.

In the following I draw on eight first and second generation voices to compare experiences and memories of first generation Sikhs with second generation “post memories” (Hirsch 2007). These portraits also show the differences in the pace of the evolving process: the first generation started creating public narratives gradually and tentatively, while second generation Sikhs took on the mantle of memory work more swiftly and decisively.

Direct Encounters: Journey from Silence to Speech

I begin with four voices from my interviews with the first generation to bring out the long and difficult journey from silence to speech. My respondents—Satnam, Bani, Nihal and Nikki¹—were direct survivors of the violence of 1984; one of them had lost members of her family during the November massacres. Their stories contain multiple layers and show how the first generation started confronting their silenced and suppressed memories slowly and tentatively. There are several reasons for the long temporal gap in shifting from silence to public speech, especially compared to the second generation. Most first generation survivors and witnesses resigned themselves to painful memories, in some instances renouncing their faith after migrating from India; or because they internalized state and media imposed feelings of stigma and humiliation. Combined with their culturally learned emotions of *sharam* or shame, this formed a barrier to speech; first generation survivors were also situated within a larger structure of silence in the Indian national context; and the fragmented experience of

trauma and accompanying loss of speech also made it difficult to articulate their memories.

The themes I outline below are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping and are representative of the topics that emerged in my interviews. In the following, I address the questions: How do memory workers reconstruct their memories today? What were the feelings coursing through them as they talked about initial and subsequent experiences? Why did they not talk about what they had witnessed at first? What led to a gradual shift from silence to speech?

Resignation, Renunciation and Recurrence

I had forgotten about '84, I mean it was not something we talked about much (Satnam, 43, male).

I'll begin with Satnam's account of 1984. He described his experiences as "creepy," or "spooky," speaking of the complicity of police, an exaggerated self-awareness of being Sikh in 1984, the widespread disillusionment with the Indian political leadership and justice system, and his personal journey of losing and consequently finding the faith that set him on the path to represent memories of 1984. Satnam talked of an absence of a culture of dissent among not just non-Sikhs, but also Sikhs, and his own renunciation of the faith that created an estrangement with memories of 1984. He started revisiting these memories in the early 2000s, as a culture of memory work slowly started emerging.

Satnam is a 43-year old first generation man who was born in the United States but moved back to India with his parents and brother until high school, before returning

to the US in the early 1990s, where he has lived since. He is currently married and a successful IT professional. Satnam wears the external articles of Khalsa, the tradition founded by the last living Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, including a beard and keeping his hair long in a *pugh* or turban. He renounced these symbols and also developed a distance from his Sikh identity when he moved back to the United States. Yet today Satnam is one of the most prominent voices on 1984, and on other xenophobic issues confronting Sikh-Americans. In addition to his day job, Satnam runs a website that uses graphic art, editorial cartooning, to depict the events of 1984 and other diasporic Sikh concerns. Satnam started confronting the “ghosts” of 1984—or the absent presence of events that are seemingly in the past but continue to inform people’s reality—in the early 2000s, following a series of events, from his experiences in Delhi to gnawing fear in the wake of September 11, 2001 (Derrida 1981 [1972], Gordon 2007).

Satnam was 13 years old when the events of November 1984 unfolded. He was in school in Delhi at the time that Indira Gandhi was assassinated and recalls the suddenness with which Sikhs were made to feel “different” after this episode. Satnam, like others with direct memories of 1984, recalls an ominous, premonitory feeling that enveloped them, first, when he heard of the Golden Temple being invaded by the Indian army in June, and then when he heard of Indira Gandhi’s assassination. These seemingly idiosyncratic and isolated feelings are shared by most memory workers, reflecting the larger culture of fear in which Sikhs were living at the time. The environment of suspicion and animosity against Sikhs, manufactured by the Indian state and media, had made them vulnerable to emotions of fear and anxiety, even without suffering or

witnessing the violence. Satnam laughingly recounts that he and his friends had sneaked in a transistor radio to class on October 31, the day of Indira Gandhi's assassination, to listen to commentary about a cricket match. He contrasts this air of frivolity with the grave solemnity that ensued after the announcement of the Prime Minister's assassination that broke through to interrupt the cricket commentary. He recalls thinking at the time that "this is something very bad actually, you could sense that with the way the adults were behaving, our teachers, our principal, something didn't smell right, you know it's not safe, obviously we're being sent home early..." His voice contained a hint of intrigue, the neat sequence of his story indicative of the active and deliberate process of remembering. In other words, the experience of 1984 is constructed in its very narrativization and representation.

The next recollection about October 31 he shared was the apprehension with which his family awaited the arrival of his father at home. He remembers hearing "reports of trouble brewing," that made them fearful, but his father made it home safe. It was the next day, and in the subsequent days, that Satnam realized he was a Sikh and that he was different from his non-Sikh friends. He recounted the "self sanctioned" acts that his family created in the face of the larger environment of suspicion and fear that pervaded the city. They decided to stay indoors and keep the curtains closed. Satnam recalls policemen patrolling their neighborhood and feeling secure as he and his family witnessed banal, everyday life outside, with children playing cricket and the usual humdrum as they peeked through the "cracks in our curtains." This safe feeling, however, soon gave way to what he called "freaking out a bit," when they saw the same

policemen guiding a mob of men and returning some hours later with “cans of Parl  biscuits, somebody had a sack of wheat...you know their hands were full.” As they watched the mob dissipate, Satnam and his family stepped out into the balcony of their house. This is when Satnam and his family were spotted by the mob and targeted directly:

...but then we saw there is this guy in the distance and this guy was fiddling with his *chappal* (slipper) and you could tell he didn’t have anything with him and so he spotted us and as soon as he saw us he basically started screaming...and you know we went inside and we were freaking out, we locked our doors and before you know this guy along with a bunch of other guys...and you could hear them say, you know, bring these guys down, there are Sikhs living here, we need to take revenge and we could hear that, I remember hearing that... we basically my parents started praying basically and they figured that this might be the end...

He recounts the terror those moments evoked. The mob dispersed after his cricket-playing friends intervened and pleaded with them. Satnam’s voice and expression remained relatively placid as he remembered these tense moments. The build-up to this particular episode contained more emotion, his voice became quieter. Satnam remembers his parents packing up a small suitcase and moving to a neighbor’s house where they were offered refuge. This was Satnam’s direct encounter with the events of 1984. The larger environment created and reinforced the fear of being Sikh at the time. Satnam’s recollections of what he saw on the state-controlled television channel, *Doordarshan*, is repeated in account after account online and in new cultural forms, such as films and books, which are slowly carving out a public space in which to talk about 1984 (see for e.g. Jaspreet Singh 2013).

I remember *Doordarshan*, Indira Gandhi’s body was in, I forget where it was, basically it was live telecast and I, and I, one thing I remember very vividly was that when people were passing by her body, the chants of *khoon ka badla khoon*

say lenge (blood for blood), so that I can never forget cause when we heard that, I was like, as a kid, this is serious stuff here, even at that point, I think we did not realize, we knew people were getting killed in some areas of Dilli (Delhi), but we didn't know the extent, but it did happen that er, we started hearing stories from our neighbors, because the bizarre aspect is that our neighbors were going about their lives as if things were okay...

In addition to absorbing mass mediated hate messages against Sikhs in chants such as “blood for blood,” Satnam recounts the normalcy with which his non-Sikh neighbors were going about their lives. In other words, as he witnessed the events of 1984 unfold he started developing a consciousness of being Sikh that was separate and distinct from his non-Sikh neighbors. Satnam told me about how these feelings crystallized in the next few days.

I do remember, this took a while and when I first went out, people looked at me a strange way and I did not feel comfortable and people looked at me as if I had done something bad...it was a few days before we started going out...but when we did go out, it felt *creepy*, er,...we started hearing stories of so many Sikhs were burnt alive, mostly poor Sikhs, women getting raped...so yeah, it took us a while to realize things had gotten that bad (emphasis mine).

Satnam used the terms “creepy,” and later “spooky,” and “weird,” in talking about the targeting of the community, its people and properties including *gurdwaras*, and the swiftness with which the normalcy of life resumed after the violence he had seen, heard and felt so intimately. Satnam recalls what he calls a “huge marker,” which created disillusionment within the community. This was Rajiv Gandhi's speech to the nation, who succeeded his slain mother as the Prime Minister and the line that created a deep sense of betrayal and despair among members of the Sikh community: “*jab bada ped girta hai to dharti hilti hai*” (when a mighty tree falls, the earth shakes). For everyday Sikhs this phrase was undisputed evidence for state indifference and

complicity; it became a mainstay of the evolving cultural narrative of 1984. For example, this phrase is also the title of one of the few recent books on 1984 by Manoj Mitta and H.S. Phoolka, *“When a Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and its Aftermath”* (2007).

Satnam talked of feelings of defeat that issued from within the community and the indifference of Indians, and Hindus at large, that made him realize that the violence of 1984 would go unaccounted for. He explained that any shock or horror associated with 1984 was expressed privately:

...but we didn’t see people going out on the streets and saying, we need to demand justice for what has happened and regardless of who was affected, and in this case it was Sikhs, but it could be anybody else, it could be us...so that is one thing I took out of it, and then even for me after a year, life just went back to normal, the rat race started.

Satnam admits to getting caught up in the mundane. This, along with his parents’ lack of involvement in social/political issues, led him to “move on,” from memories of 1984. Another factor that explained Satnam’s disassociation from 1984, echoed by other memory workers in the diaspora, is their distance from religious and cultural identity. He talked of how he “cut his hair” and was “very removed from the culture...I was as removed as you can be culturally from my roots, which is language or be it friends, so I left my faith...”

It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that Satnam started slowly retracing his steps back to the Sikh faith. The decisive shift from estrangement with memories of 1984 to a public engagement began in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Satnam started reflecting about his precarious position as a Sikh in India and the diaspora as episodes of hate crime and racial profiling escalated. As I explain in the next

chapter, many of my interviewees interpret September 11 as a continuation of past assaults on community identity rather than an isolated event. Historically, Sikhs have felt vulnerable and misunderstood as a community in both India and the diaspora. 1984 was a major breach in trust in the Indian state. September 11 opened this festering wound for the first generation with a direct connection with 1984. For the second generation, the fear and suspicion-saturated environment provided an interpretive framework to imagine what it was like to be Sikh in 1984. For Satnam, the vicious social climate in post September 11 United States brought back memories of being in hiding and living in fear of being attacked in 1984. It led him to consciously and publicly embrace difficult memories and start rediscovering his faith.

Satnam's story shows that memories of 1984 are part of deep, intimate sense of belonging as a Sikh. While Satnam had confronted 1984 vividly at very close quarters, social forces prescribing quickly moving past these horrific experiences, combined with his own distance from the faith, kept him disengaged from 1984. Eventually, he reestablished a sense of belonging with his community-based faith, with 9/11 acting as a mnemonic trigger that compelled him to remember experiences of being "the other."

Shame and Stigma

I think the most difficult thing is, was not being able to talk about it, when we were in India we had to next day pretend that nothing happened to us because if we talked about things we were labeled separatists... (Bani, 42, female).

Bani's story brings to attention feelings of shame that all Sikhs, irrespective of their political affiliation,² were made to feel in the immediate aftermath of 1984. Sikhs

were stigmatized simply for being Sikh during this period; many of my interviewees talk of direct or vicarious feelings of marginality. Shame is negative self-evaluation, feeling small and reprehensible, and imagining others' judgments and expectations. So even though shame is directed toward the self, it is a social emotion, produced by the failure to meet deeply internalized other-derived expectations (for e.g. see Scheff 1990, Stein 2006). Shame has a specific Sikh or Punjabi equivalent, *sharam* and its relational counterpart, *izzat* or honor.

Izzat and *sharam* are "moral affects" or emotions with "clear, conscious, social, and cultural components (and attendant questions of judgment and morality)" (Michelle Rosaldo quoted in Dusenbery 1990, 241). In other words, these emotions are socially produced and culturally determined, with severe repercussions for "transgressors," or those who bring *sharam* or shame. *Izzat* or honor entails self-denial or "a sacrifice which lifts an individual from his 'lower-self' to his 'higher-self, among Punjabis, and its negation in *sharam* or 'loss of face' is to be avoided, even at the expense of "normal sentiments and emotions" (Das 1976: 2, 14). *Izzat* and *sharam* are complementary, gendered concepts and are central to the operation of patriarchy. Notions of *izzat* and *sharam* are "guided by male interest... 'a man's *izzat* is his woman's *sharam*'" (Mooney 2011, 58). Within the community, women must avoid *sharam* or shame, and this in turn preserves and enhances male *izzat* or honor. *Izzat* is also related to power, reciprocity and protection of one's social domain. As Pettigrew explains:

Feelings are direct and uncomplicated, a decisiveness which in many respects is reflected in the political formation of the "paarti" or faction, i.e. there are only two "paartis"- that to which one's friends belong and that of one's enemies" (1975, 5).

(I)zzat was also associated with sanctioned resistance to another who trespassed into what was regarded as the sphere of influence of one's family. This "other" might be other Jats (agricultural caste) belonging to the opposing faction; in the past it also applied to the state and foreign powers..." (1975, 58-9).

In other words, honor (or *izzat*) and shame (or *sharam*) are starkly defined in either/or terms. Loss of honor is defined vis-à-vis other members of the community or keenly experienced in relationship to state power.

In a culture so heavily saturated with ideas of *izzat* and *sharam*, the official state and media narratives of 1984 were well received by the "collective conscience" of the community. This comes through both in the militant resistance and larger silence following 1984. On the one hand, Sikh militant resistance to 1984, especially the early mobilization in the diaspora, is an expression of the cultural imperative of "direct and uncomplicated" and "sanctioned resistance," against the oppressive state. On the other hand, however, the state and mass media encouraged shame, evoking and exaggerating cultural ideas of "loss of face," and retreating into silent submission. These contradictory and ambivalent responses from within the community continue to define narratives of 1984 today.

Does the community resist or submit to state representations? While militant responses sought to salvage *izzat* (Dusenbery 1990), memory workers grapple with the ambiguity and fuzziness of contradictory coexisting emotions, forming narratives of resistance while sifting through officially-imposed shame and cultural norms to avoid loss of face. Bani's story makes evident the complex process of disentangling culturally defined *sharam* from state-imposed shame and retrieving the *izzat* of the community in

challenging the tyranny of state narrative. Bani is a 43-year-old first generation Sikh woman living in the United States. She is an active participant in community events and recently started writing children's books drawing on Sikh heritage. Her teenage son was going to start college when I spoke with her, and during our interview she was tending to her little daughter. Her calm demeanor and voice are simultaneously indicative and deceptive of the storm of traumatic memories raging inside her. She not only witnessed the events of 1984 unfold first hand but also lost her cousins in the November violence.

Bani's narrative can be juxtaposed with voices of the militant resistance. The Indian state, intent on maintaining their hegemony, and quelling voices of dissent that culminated in 1984, painted not just Sikh militants resorting to violent means, but any Sikh attempting to speak up against the state as dangerous and anti-national. Some prominent Sikh writers have talked of their experiences of being singled out only because of their community membership (see for e.g. K. Singh 1992). However, there are few everyday voices that recall externally imposed feelings of shame and stigma that prevented Sikhs from speaking about atrocities and indignities suffered in 1984. Bani and others are beginning to share these experiences and break free from state constructed feeling walls.

She migrated to the United States for college in the early 1990s driven by this tragic witnessing and loss. In addition to writing online columns and blogs on 1984, Bani is an important spokesperson voicing the pain of 1984 and organizes commemorative events in her local community and *gurdwaras* including candle light vigils, lectures, and poetry sessions.

Bani confronted the violence in the immediate aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination. At the time, she was in a central Indian city away from the capital city, New Delhi. She begins with her recollections of the evening of October 31 and the violent spillover onto the next days. A mob attacked their family and then started threatening Bani over the phone. She recollects the profane invasion and the moments of terror her family confronted in her digital narrative:

We are coming to your home soon. We will....you in front of your mother, your father and your brother...hundreds of us...before we kill you all." ...The security never showed up. But the mob did. This time, they came with more bricks, as well as torches, in their hands. They hurled the bricks first....and set fire to our car and the scooter...None of the neighbors came to help... Little did we know that it was the government who was sponsoring the pogrom against its own people...Before we knew, some had jumped the gate, broken the front door open and entered the living room... Blood-curdling screams of "Kill them! Get them!" filled the space...The door went back and forth a few times between us...Then something happened...Dad and I somehow managed to shut the door and latch it closed...

Bani and her mother managed to escape the mob and a neighbor let them into their house but she also writes about her father, brother and sister who went missing for some time before they were reunited. Bani lost three male cousins in the violence that broke out in several parts of north and central India and she writes about their wives and daughter being made to watch the massacres. The neat and ordered chronology that Bani conveys in this online account is a function of both the time between the event and now, as well as a product of digital spaces of communication, facilitating a prolonged expression and reflection of emotions and experiences.

In her interview, Bani did not recount these memories again. Instead she talked of the difficulty of not being able to voice these memories in India. She talks of the

“face” that Sikhs were expected to put up that “nothing happened to us.” She explained with feelings of dismay and disillusionment and in a cynical tone that if they tried to talk about their experiences they were “labeled separatists right away and we were told that we called it upon ourselves and we lived in shame for the rest of the time we lived in India, as if we had done something wrong because those two people who had killed Indira Gandhi, er, for them every Sikh had to be punished.”³

Bani talks of suppressing her feelings about what happened and developing a distance from the injustice and outrage she experienced. In contrast to her digital narrative, in my interview with her, Bani had a hard time constructing full and coherent sentences and kept shifting from one thought to the next. Her calm demeanor was visibly disturbed as she talked about her feelings of being singled out as a Sikh and blaming all Sikhs for the political tensions between the Indian and Sikh political and militant leadership. She talked of persistent feelings of non-belonging that her parents had experienced when they moved from the Pakistani side of Punjab to India, during the subcontinent’s Partition in 1947, and that she understood this experience of displacement post-1984. The feeling of being a perpetual refugee, but also of being made to feel ashamed for being Sikh, came with her own confrontation with violence in November. Her experiences left a deep wound that she was not able to speak about until much later. She felt alienated not only from the dominant discourse constructed by the state and mass media, but also from her close friends.

...it was suppressed, and it was just move on and just forget and don’t talk about it, talking about 1984 somehow meant that you were anti-India or anti-establishment and you were labeled separatist...I remember one of my class mates... she said such derogatory things about Sikhs...um that was my first

public, and she was a friend, she was a friend in school. And that was my first um I guess notion you know that we don't belong here um that we're always going to be somebody from outside um ,what she had said was we gave you, you were refugees to India and we gave you shelter and we gave you this and we gave you that and we, and now you turn around and you start speaking for your rights and something to that effect, that you should be ashamed of yourself to do this to India...er, you couldn't talk about those things because you were just told to get out.

The community started developing a minority consciousness because of the representations and portrayals of the impersonal state, but also in response to the attitudes and behavior of non-Sikhs. In many ways this was the most hurtful for Bani. In a social climate when even close friends started questioning her Sikh identity it became difficult to find a sense of belonging. The impersonal disavowal of the state, combined with distance from hitherto intimate relationships, created a sense of estrangement that scarred direct survivors and witnesses. They carry this sense of estrangement in their memory work today.

Not only did it become impossible for members of the community to talk of their experiences, but even their mere affiliation with the faith was enough to bracket them as “anti-national,” seditious, or as separatists during this period. In the immediate period following 1984, the idea of Khalistan itself went from having sporadic support from within the diasporic community to becoming increasingly accepted as a viable alternative to state repression (see for e.g. Tatla 1999, 113-6, LaBrack 1999, 380-1).

Many of my respondents spoke of the great honor and pride they feel in being an integral part of Indian history stretching back to the Guru period and extending to the Indian independence struggle. They contrast this with the shame inflicted on them later. The grievances that the community started developing vis-à-vis the Indian state

can be traced to the Partition and the independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Their marginalization assumed a concrete face and ordinary Sikhs felt betrayed by their “own state and people” in 1984. Their feelings of pride and intense belonging to the Indian nation-state contrasted sharply with the deep humiliation they felt during this period—enduring feelings which are experienced and acknowledged in the diaspora today.

Bani began to express her feelings of shame and stigma after she migrated from India in the early 1990s. She explains, “that was my plan all along to just leave India.” She talks of finding a community of people in the diaspora, primarily in the West Coast of the United States and Canada, who were already engaged in discussions of overcoming socially inflicted shame and upholding the *izzat*, honor, of the community. The gradual formation of a collective who experienced similar feelings of shame in 1984 altered the diaspora as the events of 1984 were unfolding, and provided a framework for first generation survivors like Bani to make a shift from submission to forming a public language to express their feelings.

Bani also spoke of the Internet as an important conduit through which an evolving community of memory workers started sharing their experiences. Even though digital media did not gain full force until the second generation came of age to start forming concerted public spaces for 1984 narratives, digital platforms as a site of re-presentation were already emerging in the 1990s. Bani recalls,

Here I could connect to people who felt the same way I did and I guess Internet was the mechanism that we could express ourselves, er, early on when I came here there was a forum, er, Internet was not that popular, I mean web-browsing was not that popular but there were Internet forums and discussion groups at

the time in 1991 or so and I met some of the Sikhs in the area, mostly Seattle area that were part of that discussion group and everybody had a story to tell...so that's when we started talking about our stories and expressing, that was the start of it.

Bani's describes the lasting impact of state and media-created representations which made Sikhs feel shame, unworthy of sharing their experiences. As she and others suggest, digital media is enabling Sikhs to negotiate with state and culturally imposed feelings of shame and share their experiences with each other.

Silence in National Context

I don't think personally I had any kind of psychological inhibition in talking, if there was anything subconscious I won't know, but I didn't have any, it's just that it took me time to settle in, but also people in general didn't talk about it... (Nihal, 62, male).

Of all my interviewees, Nihal perhaps was most intensely affected by the 1984 violence. His account highlights the overarching silence in the Indian national context that followed immediately after 1984. By his own admission, Nihal did not have particular psychological reservations about sharing his experiences. But it was not until an organized and sustained challenge to the fabric of silence started emerging in the diaspora that he, along with other survivors, could start telling their stories. His seemingly idiosyncratic inability to share was part of a larger, socially imposed silence.

Nihal is a 62-year-old Sikh man with a salt and pepper beard and wears the *pugh*. He is an academic who migrated to the United States in 1985 on the heels of his brush with death in 1984. He lives with his wife at present, while his children attend schools in different parts of the country. His daughter is one of the second generation memory

workers I interviewed. Nihal was composed and in control as he talked of his experiences of the time; his narrative flows relatively uninterrupted despite the emotion in his voice. Nihal had recently started sharing his experiences publicly before our interview. His account was coherent and measured with only a thin layer emotion betraying his recollections. As a member of the older generation he had internalized not just the national representations but also the cultural importance placed on downplaying loss (see for e.g. Raj 2000). His emotional state suggested that he was performing masculinity; his voice was staid and controlled.

Nihal was on a train heading to Amritsar when the train was stopped at a small station that was not on its usual route. A crowd of people gathered around them, boarded their compartment, singled out Sikhs and beat them up. Nihal was one of the many Sikhs who were beaten up. He lost consciousness and was presumed to be dead. His body was dropped on the train tracks and left there. After some time, however, Nihal regained consciousness and got back onto the train. He managed to get off the train before it reached New Delhi because of stories or rumors he heard from fellow passengers.⁴ He recalls finding shelter with much difficulty at an army base, after which time he was sent to a local *gurdwara*. He encountered many injured Sikhs, and stayed there for some days until things calmed down and he was able to return to Amritsar.

I asked Nihal about how he felt immediately afterwards, and what prevented him from talking about 1984. He explained that he felt it was not pragmatic to talk about experiences of 1984 because the community was under siege in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the Indian national context. After moving to the United States, his

diasporic location created a necessary cathartic distance between what he had encountered in India and its vestiges. As he explained, it was not until he started feeling comfortable, safe and secure in the rhythm of his newly found immigrant life, and acquired legal-political immunity by obtaining Western citizenship, that he began to remember 1984 actively. His inability to speak was not so much because of survivor guilt at having overcome the direct attacks, while others perished, as it was the deeply internalized representations and silences imposed from above by the official discourse. In Nihal's words,

...it took me a few years to get comfortable in my position and so on... I think it's still a topic as you can see has not been addressed much at all, for multiple reasons, there is a tendency not to talk about it, both, I mean in all segments of our interaction with society, so er...I don't think there was any such thing, the guilt of survival while others suffered and died, inhibiting me from talking, I think it was just a question of there being no such attempt either on my part or somebody else's part to talk about it, I think it was just a question of, it was not talked about...

In all my interviews with first generation Sikhs survivors in the 1980s, I could sense a continued brokenness, an inability to articulate their stories, and perhaps even reluctance to speak about their experiences, despite their public memory work. This was the product of the experience of loss as well as remnants of fear, shame and grief carried over from the past, in addition to the difficulty of talking to a non-Sikh stranger. The only point that Nihal kept asserting as I tried to get him to elaborate on the silence surrounding 1984 was that "people in general have been quiet about it..." Still, as I pressed on, Nihal spoke about factors such as a larger political environment that blamed all Sikhs. Talking about the trauma of 1984 was (and is) popularly perceived as seditious separatism. Further, he explained that the culture of silence was a manifestation of

majoritarianism at work. It was in the interest of both dominant Hindus as well as majoritarian political mobilizations to actively intimidate the newly made Sikh “other” into submission or maintain a safe, indifferent distance (see Gupta 2007). In Nihal’s words,

There are probably political factors, I don’t know, the country in general, has been unwilling to address either this or many other such incidents like this that happened and I can speculate...it may include things like in India there is general tendency to polarize people...if the larger community that is not affected, that feels, well, these guys deserved it, then the political environment etches in their mind that this was needed kind of thing, then obviously there is a climate not to discuss these things...another factor that comes to my mind is an active, active intimidation...I have come across people who will not talk openly about their experience, which is far more serious than my personal experience, they are unwilling to talk about it because of they feel afraid of the consequences... when somebody goes through a trauma like this, they feel internally suppressed, and it’s very difficult to talk about it...

Nihal’s narrative describes how seemingly individual silences were in fact a product of structural conditions which forced Sikhs into submission. Settling down in diasporic contexts created conditions where first generation survivors started grappling with seemingly voluntary repression. The relative stability and security afforded by their new immigrant contexts, along with the strength of collective voices that started emerging in the early 2000s, enabled memory workers to break the silence.

Grappling with “Unintegrated” Traumatic Experience

I did not open my mouth and tell a soul, why didn’t I tell anybody, I don’t know...every time I would think about what happened, I would shut it back, because some tears would come and I would say I don’t want to touch it... (Nikki, 56, female).

Nikki describes the temporal gap between trauma and speech in narratives of loss. Traumatic experience is “unspeakable” (Herman 1992) “unintegrated” and “belated” (Caruth 1996). While individual or psychological trauma is a sudden and intense emotional or physical injury that creates deep and durable damage to the psyche leading individuals to go into shock and “withdraw into themselves, feel numbed, afraid, vulnerable, and very alone,” collective trauma is “a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson 1976, 154). Individual trauma can become collective trauma if and when there is realization of shared experience. Collective traumas contain social and cultural elements (Ostertag and Ortiz 2013, 4). Cultural trauma is a “dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion” (Eyerman 2004, 123).

While 1984 is in the process of being experientially reconstructed as a cultural trauma by community members, their narratives remain partial and broken. For many memory workers the silence around 1984 stems from the “unintegrated” nature of trauma (Caruth 1996). The question psychoanalysts working on trauma raise are also important for cultural trauma. Can a community that has undergone severe damage because of a monumental event or series of events ever be able to integrate this trauma into its collective consciousness or does this process remain fragmented and disjointed? Nikki’s narrative speaks to the life-after-life character of traumatic experiences and the difficulty of expressing and comprehending events even after passage of time.

Nikki is an eloquent 56-year-old female who lives in the United States with her husband. She has two daughters, both working professionals, who live nearby and whom she sees frequently. She writes children's books in addition to being involved in community events and organizations, including Sikh feminist initiatives. Her strength as a storyteller is reflected in the account she tells me; her voice and facial expressions give me goose bumps as she tells me about her close shave with death. She was born outside India but went back to India to attend boarding school run by Roman Catholic nuns. Nikki feels like she was a "practicing Catholic for all intents and purposes." Yet, her grandfather and father were patriotic and loyal to India, and her grandfather had been part of the Indian independence struggle to overthrow British colonial rule. As with other Sikhs, she felt honor, pride and entitlement as an Indian citizen before she was made to feel less-than-full-Indian. Today Nikki writes online of her family's involvement in the 1947 Partition and her own recollections of 1984. She told me that her family's stories and the fear associated with 1947 started assuming meaning for her after her own confrontation with impending loss post-1984. Yet, it was not until the 20th anniversary of 1984 that Nikki first started writing online and publicly talking about her encounter.

She remembers first learning about 1984 in her home in the United States. She was watching the news with her mother-in-law at the time. Her mother-in-law had gone through the Partition of 1947 and Nikki recalls her intense anxiety and fear as the news poured in. Her mother-in-law was reminded of the "ghosts" of the 1947 Partition. Nikki

recalls what happened as she and her mother-in-law heard news of the November massacres.

I remember, she was sitting, we had this big armchair, she put a shawl around her and she started moving, *satya naas ho jayega hun saara, Sikhain nu phir maar daange, saara kuch chala jayega* (everything will get destroyed, they will kill Sikhs again, everything will be lost) you know it was back again, because she knew she had to go back again (to India) and she was terrified...I don't think I understood what she was feeling and to this day I regret not having been more compassionate or more understanding, but I had a 5 year old who needed to be dropped for this thing or that, so I wasn't aware...

In her online column, recalling this episode, Nikki writes, "I heard her stories; I witnessed her tears; I thought I understood, but I was wrong. I could not have understood because I did not experience it."

Nikki writes about her own 1984 experience online. She had gone to attend her brother's wedding in New Delhi in 1985. It was her own chance encounter that both created a disruption in the linear, systematic way in which she understood events before this episode, while at the same time creating a shared "intersubjective," space with her mother-in-law's experiences. Intersubjectivity is an important, unsaid aspect of everyday life when individuals inhabit the same social world and share "commonsense knowledge...with others in the normal, self-evident routines of everyday life" (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 23). Traumatic experiences are not part of everyday routines. It wasn't until Nikki's own intimate encounter with loss that she came to a shared understanding of her mother-in-law's "ghosts."

Nikki was at her aunt's house when their Hindu neighbors came rushing in to tell them about mobs that were advancing to burn Sikh homes. She remembers her family seeking refuge in various Hindu homes in the neighborhood. Nikki and her grandmother

were sent together to a particular home. In her online narrative Nikki writes, “That night will forever be etched in my DNA. My grandmother and I were put behind a tall steel cupboard in a pitch-black room. She was clinging to her large black handbag (into which she had stuffed her gold jewelry) and was saying her prayers.”

In my interview with Nikki her narrative was even more evocative as her voice trembled, dropped to a whisper and then picked up again. She remembers feeling numb and listening almost impassively to her grandmother praying incessantly and forewarning her that if an intruder broke in, she would kill them both. Nikki couldn’t understand the reason her grandmother carried her jewelry in her bag but later understood that this was a residual memory from the 1947 Partition when people were left bereft and suddenly lost all their material possessions.

I think sitting, sitting with my grandmother with that big black handbag behind a cupboard, and I think I was numb, I did not cry, I can’t remember any emotion, I was just there with her, it wasn’t that I was scared, because I don’t think I knew what to be scared of...I was with my grandmother, er, and she was saying her prayers, just reciting her prayers, and somewhere in the middle, she just opened her handbag and she said, *o darwaza khulega na, agar o lok aange, eh chaaku main pehlan tainu marangi, phir main marangi* (if that door opens and if those people break in, I will first kill you with this dagger and then kill myself), I mean she had this dagger in a black bag and her gold jewelry...I mean I don’t think I understood it, I don’t think I would have done it, but then I haven’t lived through ’47.

Even though the news of the rampaging mob proved to be a false alarm and Nikki and her family survived that night and her brother’s wedding took place, Nikki talks of the silence that shrouded this episode. She was unable to talk about this episode on her own. After many years, when she asked her mother, she was asked to forget about it. “We didn’t talk about it, the entire family didn’t talk about it. It was like

it never happened. And it *very much happened* (emphasis). I remember many years later asking my mother, mummy that night...she said, *chhad paré, kee gal karni eh* (let it be, what's there in talking about this?) and I said okay, you don't want to talk about it..."

Nikki explained that this episode left an indelible imprint on her but she did not share her story with her husband, sister or anyone else. She asked me, "why didn't I tell anybody?" and answered herself that she could not fathom the reason. She admitted that she tried to write about her encounter but then "I would say I don't want to touch it."

Nikki started talking about 1984 20 years after the event, at a time that the younger generation had started creating public spaces for memory- and meaning-making. She explained her emotional experience of sharing her story for the first time, "20 years later when I started to write about it, I just cried and howled and this, whatever it was came out...(pause)." She compares herself with other trauma victims, "but you know people say, now I know when people say when women are raped it takes them a very long time to talk about it..."

Nikki could experience the wall inside her preventing her from speaking about what had transpired. The internal wall was both individual trauma but also an echo of collective trauma, because the unspeakability of trauma and the temporal latency between experience and speech was shared by other first generation survivors. The community is initiating ways of addressing these difficult memories. They are doing so because of their location in space and time. Nikki's story is part of this larger cultural-

structural shift. The second generation's consciousness of 1984 and of being Sikh lies at the heart of this shifting public engagement.

Vicarious Experiences and Evolving Awareness

The second generation's mediated encounters with 1984 led to several different, intersecting outcomes: sudden discovery of personal connections with the event, social mobilization and the development of a collective voice, and a new embrace and understanding of their community and religious identity. Unlike first generation survivors, who could not find a way to articulate their experiences because of structural constraints discussed above, or because of the messiness and confusion of immediately felt emotions (including the different relationship to vertically organized mass media, compared with the younger generation and facility with digital media), the second generation began looking for ways to translate their indirect experiences of loss into a coherent language relatively quickly. Unlike the time gap between the first generation's experiences and memory work, the time between the second generation's first discovery of 1984 and memory work was shorter. For second generation memory workers, 1984 became a rite of passage initiating them into the collective memory of their community. As several of my respondents explained, being marked as the "other" on religious, racial and ethnic basis—especially after the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States—created an impetus to draw closer to Sikh history and culture, including the complex memories of 1984.

While second generation Sikh memory workers are emotionally invested in memories of 1984, they are equally concerned with “presenting” and “managing” this information in a way that is accessible to a wide and heterogeneous audience. As a corollary, while Sikh memory workers do not vilify militant counternarratives, they are taking the story of 1984 beyond militant resistance. Second generation Sikhs are uninhibited in expressing dissent against state-imposed feeling rules, while also emphasizing the importance of giving meaning to incoherent experiences through a community narrative.

Militant counternarratives questioned shame imposed on the community by the official discourse and sought to regain lost *izzat* or honor, as well as express feelings of anger, sadness, fear and betrayal. But the accompanying violence left this work incomplete and inadequate. In contrast, memory workers, especially the second generation, is doing the work of memory by weaving emotions into their stories, communicating and disseminating these re-presentations to diverse audiences, primarily Sikhs but also non-Sikhs.

Second generation memory work is influenced by several factors, including their Sikh identity, values they internalize as members of the community, experiences as the “other,” and search for “roots.” Sikh-specific notions, such as *seva* or altruistic service, *ardaas* or prayer that contains recollections of the “community’s glorious and traumatic past” (Mooney 2011, 83) and *sarbat da bhal* or concern for not only the community but larger society and humanity, are instrumental in facilitating commemoration and public re-presentation of pasts. In addition, their experiences of discrimination because

of their racial and religious identity in diasporic contexts, particularly assaults on Sikh identity post September 11, 2001 contributes to a keener awareness of “difference.” They are also situated in a social context where several groups are looking for genealogical roots, specifically those “for whom war and genocide severed a connection to their familial roots, who wish to construct a sense of continuity” (Stein 2009, 294). Most notable among these is the influence of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. Second generation Sikhs’ genealogical search combined with everyday experiences are important reasons for their journey into memory work.

In the following I draw on four stories from my interviews with the second generation to highlight patterns that emerged. How did the second generation discover 1984? What did they feel when they first found out about these events? What led them to actively carry this “burden of memory”?

Family and Mass Media Socialization: Productive “Hauntings”

...in every Sikh family you talk about 1984 and you are aware of and I grew up reading books about 1984, but it was in my mid-20s that I picked up the *Manushi* magazine and I read the testimonies of these widows and I was just torn... (Manjyot, 36, female).

Manjyot is a 36-year-old woman who was born in India and moved to the United States at the age of two. She is married and lives with her husband, who is also a memory worker. Manjyot has a distinctive appearance, covering her hair in a turban. This is a practice uncommon for Sikh women even within the diaspora (see for e.g. Jakobsh 2010). Manjyot studied communications and worked in television before becoming an independent filmmaker making documentaries on Sikh-related issues. Her

film on the widows of 1984 is the first audio-visual account of female survivors. Manjyot was socialized into memories of 1984 early on. She explained quite matter-of-factly that it was a topic of discussion in every Sikh family and that she grew up hearing her parents' views of the events. Based on my other interviews with memory workers, digital narrative analysis, and focus group discussions, it is evident that speaking about 1984 is not common in every Sikh family. Nonetheless, another first generation memory worker named Vikramjeet told me, 1984 is an important issue for Sikhs worldwide and they think about it everyday, whether or not they talk about it consciously and deliberately. Still, there are families like Manjyot's, that instill a conscious awareness in their children from an early age.

Manjyot's access to mass media reports, a source for her first memories of 1984, also spurred a willingness "to do something about this issue." The very availability and easy access to media reports is itself a function of being in the diaspora. The media reports that filtered through diasporic contexts were vastly different from media broadcasts in India. I found further evidence of this disparity in communication when I could not find copies of the *White Paper*, Citizens for Democracy reports, and the book containing narratives of victims of the Delhi massacre, *Delhi Riots* in India. I located these books and documents online, most of them shipped from Australia, and some of them were the last copies available in e-stores—evidence of the public repression and silences which continue in India.

Manjyot spoke deliberately and slowly as she recounted that she was in her mid-20s when she came across a leading Indian feminist journal, *Manushi*, and read

testimonies of widows, and that she felt “just torn” after this. She was referring to the widows of Sikh men who had been killed in the November carnage in New Delhi. The widows live sequestered in a working class neighborhood in New Delhi due to the lasting impact of the devastation of 1984. Manjyot was “haunted” by the stories of the widows of 1984. “Haunting” is a way to apprehend marginalized, excluded and invisible individuals and their experiences, especially when an oppressive past is considered finite and/or denied. As Avery Gordon explains,

Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What is distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known...Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future” (1997, xvi).

“Haunting” creates the need to transform, change, or a “something-to-be-done”

(Gordon 1997, xvi). This is quite different from the ways the traumatic experiences of the first generation rendered them speechless.

Manjyot’s “haunting” is also an important basis of community identity and belongingness in the diaspora. The experiences of female survivors of 1984 that Manjyot encountered created a consciousness of belonging to the community. As I explained above, Nikki was able to develop an “intersubjective” or shared understanding of her mother-in-law’s experiences after her everyday life was ruptured by her own encounter with loss. Manjyot developed a similar understanding with other Sikh women—not because she had directly experienced 1984, but because of the power of the imagined community and solidarity with the women of the Guru *Panth*, or the community of the Guru. This powerfully imagined, empathic connection is an important

reason many second generation individuals feel the injury of 1984 so keenly and intimately despite their distance from the event. This, in turn, leads them to take on deliberate and active memory work. Manjyot explains her disbelief and guilt as a member of the community who is a spectator to Sikh women's experiences. She decided to take an active stance and create a memory project that would contain audio-visual testimonies of the widows of 1984.

I couldn't believe what I was reading and I felt guilty because I felt that okay 1984 is history, it's over, but when I read the testimonies of these widows it all came to life and I realized you know what, these widows are still there, you can actually go meet these widows, it was at that time that Sarabjeet and I decided that you know their voices have to be documented and I quit my job, went to India and decided to make documentaries specifically on...that's how we got involved in this project, because I felt if I can be moved just by reading the testimonies, er, and be so touched, if I can bring their voices out to the world and bring them on screen, it would have a huge impact...

Manjyot was able to combine her strong affiliation with Sikhism, deep internalization of the trauma of 1984, search for an identity and voice in the diaspora and professional skills to embark on a film project. Her project contains important testimonies and accounts of women who survived the Delhi massacre. Unlike state and media representations, these voices are key to re-presenting the experiences *of* the community *to* the community as an alternative mode of learning about 1984.

In sum, Manjyot's socialization into knowledge of 1984 through her family, along with print media, led her to revisit painful memories. She went back to India to document and record excluded voices. Her "haunting" led to a one-of-a kind memory project to retrieve voices that were drowned in the mayhem of state and militant representations.

Serendipitous Discovery of Personal Connection: “Private troubles and Public issues”

Initially actually I did not know anything about what had happened in 1984 and the reason why my family came to the US, in fact the first time I heard about 1984 was at a camp in the late 90s or maybe 2000s, it was the first time I learnt about, maybe 13 or 14 years old when I heard about it, I was so shocked that this significant piece of history was completely missing from my memory and our collective memory, that no one in my family discussed this... (Manbeena, 29, female).

Manbeena is a 29-year-old physician with an impeccable academic record. She moved to the United States with her family as an infant and has lived there ever since. She is married to a fellow memory worker, and together they are invested in many kinds of community events, including running an organization for Sikh youth.

Manbeena is a prominent second generation voice on 1984. There is a lilting quality to her powerful voice, her expressive face lights up as she speaks, even when she talks of difficult issues. Manbeena was born in 1984 in Punjab and moved to the United States as a nine-month old baby. Her father is a direct survivor of the 1984 violence. She did not learn about the events at home, nor did she know that 1984 was the motivation for her family’s migration. Instead, like most of my other second generation interviewees, she first learned about the events at a Sikh camp in the late 1990s or early 2000s. She talked of her initial shock at discovering what had happened in 1984; her voice became animated and excited as she explained her disbelief about finding out that “this significant piece of history was completely missing from my memory and our collective memory, that no one in my family discussed this and in fact at that time I didn’t even know my family had such strong links to 1984 and what had happened.”

It was after this serendipitous discovery that Manbeena recalls going back home and discussing the events with her family, and learning of her own intimate connection with this tragic past. Her motivation to get involved came from this initial moment of discovery as she explains,

...recognizing that as a member of the community, as someone who had actually been born in this context, I didn't even know what had happened in '84 and if / (emphasis) didn't know, how would anyone else have known, and so that was really, was where the motivation came from and I said to myself that someone needs to be documenting this history, and educating others about what has happened and what continues to affect the people of Punjab.

Manbeena's memory work followed from her ability to make a connection between "private troubles and public issues" (Mills 2000 [1959]). Her memory work took shape because of a combination of reasons: the shock of first finding out about 1984, belated knowledge of her own family's experiences, and strong ties with the community. She underlines her agency and commitment to memory work as both a direct descendant of survivors, and as an act of solidarity with other community members who suffered. Like many other memory workers, she did not speak as much about coaxing her father to speak about his experiences as ensuring that these events and experiences percolate into the community-at-large.

Manbeena's story illustrates the silences that exist within family spaces. She serendipitously stumbled upon her personal ties to the event. This familial shadow, along with the deep connection with the *Panth* or community, engendered a deep awareness about the larger context of affliction, suppression and pain, and became the basis for her memory work.

Socialization through Sikh Camps: 1984 and Emotional Connection with the Sikh Faith

...I mean we grew up in a Sikh context doing *paath* (reading the holy scripture) and *kirtan* (hymns) and all that stuff but our first real interaction or emotional connection with Sikh occurred when I was about 13 years or so and that actually happened through a camp I went to where for the first time I learned about the events of 1984... (Harjot, 29, male).

Most of my second generation respondents stumbled across the events of 1984 at Sikh summer camps. Sikh summer camps and peer groups have played an important role in socializing young Sikhs into values, history and memories of Sikhism in general, and 1984 in particular. Camps are usually annual events one of the most important places for young Sikhs, children of educated professionals, aged approximately nine to seventeen, to congregate and learn Gurmukhi language, history of Sikhism, *kirtans* or religious hymns and initiate them into Sikh values. They are organized by several Sikh organizations in various parts of North America with state and national chapters. The following mission statement from the Sikh Youth Alliance of North America (SYANA),⁵ one of the many Sikh bodies that organize camps, is representative of the aims and objectives of Sikh camps:

At the heart of SYANA is our week-long Sikh Gurmat⁶ camp. This yearly event aims at bringing together Sikh youth from across North America to an environment where the Sikh way of life can be experienced... The camp is structured to encourage relationships that strengthen a spiritual experience through Sangat⁷...Through the use of history, Keertan,⁸ special lectures, and daily Divaans,⁹ young Sikhs are exposed to the various facets of the Sikh faith... By no means does this Gurmat camp substitute for teaching and exposure to Sikh principles at home but the hope is that each child becomes moved by the Guru's word that it inspires a desire for life-long learning and practice.

Second generation individuals might have had personal connections like Manbeena's, but they often did not find out about these connections within family settings. This initial encounter with 1984 created a deep sense of affinity with the faith for many of my second generation respondents because of the vividness with which they imagined the wound on the Sikh collective body. Younger Sikhs, already placed in a liminal place between their community and North American identities, felt the assault on the community especially keenly. The story of 1984 became a basis for developing an intimate relationship with the faith and community.

Harjot is a 29-year-old male graduate student at a leading American university. He and his wife Manbeena, are engaged in many important community activities. Harjot writes for newspapers and serves on the board of many Sikh organizations. His social activism extends beyond the Sikh community, to encompass human rights and civil rights in the United States.

As Harjot explained, his connection with 1984 starts with the year of his birth: 1984. His family moved to the United States when he was two years old. Harjot embraces visible Sikh symbols; his hair is tied in a *pugh* and he has a beard.

Harjot recalls growing up in a part of the United States where there were very few Sikhs and his connection to Sikhism was mainly through his family, especially his parents and members of the extended family. In his own words, his narrative of 1984 has an "arc to it." He learnt the *kirtan* or hymns from his mother and *Gurmukhi*, the script in which Punjabi is written, from his uncle. He started going to Sikh camps as a young child where he met other Sikh kids. Harjot recalls that even though his family,

along with a handful of others, constituted a small congregation of Sikh worshippers in his neighborhood, he grew up in a Sikh context doing *paath*, reading from the Sikh holy scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, and *kirtan*. Yet, according to Harjot, it was the knowledge of 1984 that led him into a journey of feeling emotionally connected with the Sikh faith, Sikhi. The desire to understand his religious identity and traditions started when he found out about the events of 1984.

[O]ur first real interaction or emotional connection with Sikhi occurred when I was 13 or so and that actually happened through a camp I went to where for the first time I learned about the events of 1984...but it was through that I started actually connecting with Sikh theology more deeply and understand my heritage and belief systems and things like that.

Harjot spoke slowly and carefully, but as he recalled his first impressions of 1984 the way he spoke became even more measured. He found out about 1984 through a slide show presentation at one of the camps he attended. His first experience of learning about the event was through a mix of images and sounds—a medium of presentation and communication that left a lasting impression on Harjot. He explained that in addition to images of the Golden Temple, desecralized and wounded, it was the grim and grotesque pictures of Sikh bodies that left an indelible imprint on his memory,

...in which they were flashing pictures and some texts about what happened in '84 and a lot of those images were, er, heart-wrenching in the sense you saw the brutality of the actions and how it affected people on an individual level and so of course you have this outrage that the Golden Temple, the Darbar Sahib is being attacked or whatever, but the emphasis was on, and at least for me, what stuck with me was the bodies, the corpses, the real savagery of everything...

In recalling the images all over again, Harjot was overwhelmed. His voice drifted off and he stayed silent for a couple of minutes before talking again. He remembers crying immediately after they saw these images, and “trying to act cool” because they

were teenage kids. He explains that this was a “very strong bonding experience...in the sense that we found out that you know, we all know about this and now let’s do something together...” Harjot and other young Sikhs at camps experienced a sense of solidarity over a shared past and translated their discoveries into narratives.

Harjot explained that at this time it was uncommon for Sikhs in general to talk about 1984. He recalls a time when it stopped being part of the public conversation to today, where “its become part of the popular discourse and everyone knows it.” Despite the immediate mobilization around 1984, as the militant struggle started becoming more violent and aggressive, and the power of Indian state and mass media representations grew, Sikhs on the whole developed an ambivalent relationship with 1984, it was not openly discussed even within the community.

Harjot’s narrative highlights the importance of knowledge about 1984 in shifting consciousness of being a Sikh. Many, if not all, second generation memory workers talked of how their self-consciousness about being a Sikh began with their initial knowledge of the event. A sense of solidarity with “absent present” community members in India who suffered the massacres of 1984 developed (Gordon 2007).

Who tells the story of 1984 and what version of the story do they tell? The slide show presentation that Harjot watched, and the other texts that circulated in Sikh camps about 1984 were vastly differed from the dominant narratives which circulated in India.

Witnessing through Mass Media: Shock Transforms into Action

...I was seven or eight, you know, years old when I, I distinctly remember two moments in my life, one is finding out that er, that the attack on the Darbar Sahib had happened, not knowing, I'd been there...it is the heart of the Sikhs and so I remember at the time I was seven or eight...my mom's family had moved to Canada...and all the extended family there and I remember them hearing and phone calls coming in and crying, just absolute shock and disappointment... (Khushwant, 35, male).

Some second generation memory workers recall first finding out about 1984 through news broadcasts or “media witnessing” (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009). Children often made sense of media texts in relation to reactions from adults. Important here is the difference in access to mass media texts in the diaspora versus India. Whereas first generation migrants like Satnam and Bani internalized the discourse of shame and stigmatization created and circulated by the Indian media (when such news was made available after the media blackout) the news stories that diasporic Sikhs were exposed to were much more comprehensive accounts of the events as they were unfolding. This is not to say that news stories by international media were not “constructed” (Tuchman 1980, Schudson 2011[2003]) but simply that their construction was more inclusive than what was (and still is) circulated by partisan Indian state interests. Sikhs themselves write and speak about this.

Khushwant is a 35-year old Sikh male entrepreneur who lives in Canada with his wife and children. Khushwant wears a turban and beard and is visibly recognizable as a Sikh. He was born and raised in Canada where his parents moved in the early 1970s. He is outgoing and enthusiastic about his involvement with the community. His memory work on 1984 is part of a larger repertoire of community engagement. Khushwant

recalls his own memories of how he found out about 1984. He remembers being seven or eight when he first found out about the attack on the Golden Temple. He remembers going to the *gurdwara* as a child, having grown up with photographs of the sacred complex in his house, and he described the shrine as the “heart of the Sikhs.” His reference to “heart” evokes the intimate connection between the material embodiment of Sikh traditions and the feelings attached to this corporeal structure.

Khushwant recalls his extended family being present when news of the Golden Temple’s invasion first broke. He remembers phone calls that started coming in and everyone started crying along with “absolute shock and disappointment,” over what had happened. His story was evocative, of how the loss suffered by the community was felt very personally. He describes the importance of 1984 in engendering intense proximity and rootedness in Sikh community and identity.

I could see in the, in the, I sensed, in retrospect in looking at it, I can see how quickly the pain, the absolute shock, it was almost like losing a loved one in the family, of what happens there but then realizing that the loved one was murdered and the anger and the rage at the absolute frustration and how in the communities in Canada, you know up until 1984, Sikhs in North America were very secularized, there were very, there were practicing Sikhs, non-practicing Sikhs, very casual level of er, er, you know, you come to the new world, out with the old...we’re in a different place now and it’s a different situation, that was very much the mentality, and instantly I remember that had changed, you found people who had never, they called themselves Sikhs but had never really practiced the faith, all of a sudden the orange *dastaars* (turbans) came out, and people, it was the wake up call, of the narrative of 1469¹⁰ and 1984 came together and post ’47 narrative of a list of grievances with the Indian state that then culminated in ’84...

Khushwant’s account brings out the utter sense of desolation that resonated across several families in the diaspora in the aftermath of 1984. His account evokes the tear in community identity that issued from the attack on the Golden Temple, reminding

Sikhs of other attacks on the community, specifically the *Chhota* and *Vadda Ghallughara* or the lesser and bigger holocaust respectively. The term “holocaust” is used to evoke large-scale genocide and massacre. While its association with the Jewish Holocaust is unclear, Khushwant and other memory workers speculate that the term gained currency post-1984 to facilitate cross-cultural comparison and gather support and empathy for the community. Like Harjot’s account, Khushwant’s story highlights how knowledge of led Sikhs to reclaim their religious-cultural identity that they had been gradually renouncing as they assimilated and settled into North American immigrant contexts. Second generation Sikhs like Khushwant grew up in an atmosphere of renewed awakening and return to a conscious and deliberate Sikh identity.

According to Khushwant, the events of 1984 “shook the core of the community.” As he recalled, “I saw it in my family.” He talks about the rage and frustration that ran through the community even at a distance from India, even when their sources of information were indirect and vicarious and how Sikhs mobilized to protest the attack on the Golden Temple.

After June ’84, Sikhs mobilized like never before and this is a community where almost no one is second generation, everyone was brand new, there were no institutions beyond *gurdwaras* or anything but Sikhs organized themselves into demonstrations of 25,000 in downtown Vancouver, 15,000 in downtown Calgary where I grew up and it was just over the top...I grew up going to demonstrations in front of Indian embassies, er, and in the 80s and fighting and saying this is, an army is meant to defend it’s people and not attack its people and its seen very much as an absolute direct attack on the Sikh community, Sikhs have no role left in India and complete betrayal is what Sikhs felt...

So even in the immediate aftermath, there were protests against the Indian state actions in the diaspora. These protests, however, soon lost momentum as members of

the community started withdrawing into silence. While most first generation Sikhs are still struggling to find a language for expression in the aftermath of the dark social cloud of elisions, evasions and humiliation, the second generation has grown up with a greater sense of autonomy, and fewer feelings of shame, and is therefore more likely to voice concerns about this episode in Sikh and Indian history.

Khushwant's story illustrates the power of trauma's transmission through mass media and media's role in evincing strong feelings of belonging and identification with the community in the face of an external assault. Khushwant, like other second generation memory workers who came of age in the 1980s, marks the evolution of the diasporic community, and a time when being Sikh became a "master identity" transcending and negating affiliation with the Indian nation-state.

Conclusion

An intergenerational cohort is taking on the work of memory. First and second generation memory workers' personal trajectories are intersecting to challenge the silence around 1984. Yet, the journeys of first generation Sikhs into memory work are different from the second generation's evolution.

First generation memory workers are slowly evolving from silence about their experiences to sharing them publicly. These direct survivors and witnesses have traversed a tremendous temporal, spatial and experiential distance to arrive at the current moment of public memory work. First generation Sikhs, who found themselves confined by a larger culture of silence, distanced themselves from their faith and their

difficult memoirs. They grappled with broken-ness of traumatic experiences, and struggled with feelings of shame and stigma, state-imposed and culturally designed.

First generation Sikhs started voicing their discontentment with state and media representations in the immediate aftermath of 1984, but in relatively unorganized ways. To some extent, the second generation is amplifying these voices by giving them narrative structure. The second generation, having grown up with a very different story of 1984, is engaging with 1984 more directly. While not all second generation Sikhs' parents were direct survivors of 1984, knowledge of 1984 became an important way for second generation Sikhs to connect with the community, especially in the diaspora. For memory workers who came of age in the 1980s, Sikh became a "master identity," a product of generational developments and consciousness. Most second generation Sikhs found out about 1984 through mediated messages, leaving a deep imprint on their identity and development. Second generation memory workers, largely unfettered by the official discourse, are breaking affective walls of shame and stigma built by the state and mass media.

Increasingly, an intergenerational cohort of memory workers is building a public archive of 1984, creating an ambiguous, complex and differentiated public space for challenging state versions of history. The digital cultural moment, diasporic location, passage of time and the impact of other minority groups' narrativization (particularly Jews' Holocaust stories) are some factors which have led to this culture of memory work. I examine these factors in greater detail in the next chapter.

¹ I gave my interviewees pseudonyms.

² Given that there were several points of view within the Sikh community, and some members of the community were directly invested in the political confrontation with the state, some Sikhs were key political players in the events of 1984: the Akali Dal and militant Sikhs. This is not to say that the members of the Akali Dal or militants should have been targeted, and others exonerated, but it is to only bring out the vulnerability of an entire community, irrespective of their standpoint or political engagement.

³ Gandhi's assassins are not purely stigmatized by community members. For example, a recent controversial film "Kaum de Heere," or "the community's diamonds," a reference to the assassins, is indicative of their valorization within the community (<http://www.npr.org/2014/08/28/344036665/india-tries-to-find-the-fine-balance-between-censorship-and-public-safety>).

⁴ See Veena Das (2007) on rumor.

⁵ <http://www.sikhyouthalliance.org/gurmat-camp/>

⁶ *Gurmat* or *Gurmatta* literally means the "mind, or intention, of the Guru" or the will of the eternal Guru (McLeod 1976, 48-50).

⁷ *Sangat* or congregation.

⁸ *Keertan/Kirtan* or religious hymns.

⁹ *Divaan/Diwan* is a Persian word for court, and refers to a *gurdwara* gathering or congregational gathering.

¹⁰ Year of Guru Nanak's birth.

Chapter 6

Contextualizing Memory Work

What is it about the present socio-cultural context that is creating a culture of memory work? I identify four main transformations in this chapter: the rise of digital media; the temporal lag since the event; growing Sikh diaspora consciousness; and the circulation of Holocaust narratives.

First, the digital cultural moment is facilitating the horizontal, personalized, and interactive, rather than vertical, impersonal and distant engagement with media. This has important repercussions for re-presenting the past and bridging private experiences and public narratives. Unlike in 1984 when the state controlled the mass media, disseminating and obscuring information at will, Sikhs are able to use ready and easy access to digital media to engage with memories of 1984 and make visible their “invisibilized” stories.

Second, the temporal lag between the event and today makes it possible for the community to look back, and for submerged voices to make themselves heard. First generation Sikhs are beginning to speak about their losses after a passage of time because their tremendous loss and suffering can be only be experienced and articulated belatedly. The second generation started becoming engaged in memory projects as they began their search for identity and belonging in the diaspora.

Third, growing Sikh diasporic consciousness, their imagined nearness and simultaneous physical distance, is shaping memories of 1984 in ways that are impossible in India. The work of memory in the diaspora is also rooted in cultural and religious

values, such as *seva* or altruistic service, the importance of *shahidi* or martyrdom and importance of the past, especially remembering “innocents butchered by successive waves of invaders” (personal interview) as it comes across in *ardas* or supplication. These values provide a cultural frame to take up the work of memory and themselves acquire meaning in doing the work of memory. Also, diasporic experiences themselves, particularly in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, became an impetus to revisit the community’s difficult memories, of which 1984 is perhaps the most significant contemporary episode.

Finally, the diaspora’s exposure and proximity to Holocaust narratives influences Sikh memory work in implicit and explicit ways. Memory workers draw parallels between the systematic extermination of Jews and the organized massacres of 1984, borrowing language and imagery from the Holocaust to translate their experiences into a language that is widely understood. In the following, I examine each of these factors in some detail, situating memory work in a broader socio-cultural framework.

Digital cultural moment

The upcoming generation...the way that they perceive the world is all through digitized media so I know people who have never had a letter sent to them, they don’t even know what it’s like to put a stamp on something and put it in the mail (laughs)...everything is online... (Manbeena, 29, female).

Sikhs are doing the work of memory in a social age when communication rests on digital technology. Digital media extends face-to-face interactions, facilitating communication among not just absent present people,¹ but also absent present experiences or hauntings. Sikhs are using digital media to communicate and narrativize

marginalized experiences, buried and made invisible by mass media in India. Second generation Sikhs with the most facility with new technology, “digital natives,” (Prensky 2011 [2001]) are creating a complex, diverse and differentiated digital story. The digital “noise” (see Lindgren 2013) that Sikh memory workers are making is an illustration of the vital exchange and effervescence of digitally mediated representations—unlike hierarchical, vertical and top-down media forms.

In addition to changing the form of communication and bridging the distance between people and experiences, the both/and quality of digital platforms that weds the public with the personal, is proving helpful in communicating silenced and taboo subjects. Digital spaces are public because they are collectively produced, openly accessible, and shared. Digital platforms are also personal because people are sharing their unique and idiosyncratic experiences. Personal narratives converge to create public stories digitally, constructing safe and socially approved spaces for individuals to speak out. Because of this unique quality of digital media, individual stories are accumulating and speaking to each other, transcending individual experiences and making the story of 1984 public, while facilitating the working through of loss and grief. Nor are digital narratives finite and finished: they are continuous ways of managing the residues that trauma leaves in its wake. The asynchronous mode of digital communication means that individuals reflect on 1984 continuously, sifting through many layers of experiences to construct an ongoing representation of difficult experiences.

Sikhs are creating memory projects, deepening the blurred distinction between online and offline² reflecting the absent presence of difficult pasts. Digital technology does not begin and end at finite points but is interspersed and inextricably intertwined with the minutiae of life, making subtle inroads into life offline, and extending the reach and content of online communication. Similarly, traumatic experiences of 1984 are repetitive and enduring, seeping into community consciousness. Sikhs are finding a language to translate silenced and private experiences of pain and loss, and make the invisible visible in liminal offline-online spaces.

Digital media facilitates the formation of a community of “tellers and speakers” (Laub 1992) to grapple with the enormity of trauma. While the period immediately following 1984 made speech taboo, and instilled and exaggerated cultural notions of *sharam* or shame, digital technology is aiding the creation of an empathetic and vocal community of Sikhs. This community of first and second generation memory workers are using digital technologies to relate their experiences of 1984 and to listen to others’ experiences. Digital interaction can be seen as a kind of dialogic communion to grapple with loss. The importance of “speaking out is a (that it is) a political as well as a therapeutic act, and as such, is a claim to power. It involves risk and power” (Rose 2004, 164). The act of listening is not easy, however. Again to quote Rose,

Ultimately, recovering from trauma is not just an individual but a collective process: it demands dialogue. While bearing witness to trauma is a process that involves the listener, many people are unable or unwilling to listen, and trauma-survivor narratives often meet with great resistance from the larger society. A backlash against speaking out occurs because it exposes the atrocities in our midst and challenges both those who abuse power and those who stand by as muted witnesses (Rose 2004, 173-4).

The digital cultural moment is facilitating the working through of collective trauma and collective memory. The temporality of digital communication, which is ongoing and continuous, is situated within a larger time frame, the layers of time that have accumulated between 1984 and today. The temporal gap between 1984 and today is necessary to re-present traumatic pasts.

Temporal lag

I think there are many reasons, one would be the kind of generational separation from what happened to the point where now a lot of people consider this to be history, whereas for my parents' generation, they knew it was the present.... another reason would be very simply, people pushing the envelope over time, you know, initially something it's silenced and you start speaking little by little, and er, you gain a voice (Harjot, 29, male).

Present day memory work is informed by and situated in the passage of time.

The hallmark of traumatic experiences is the inability to integrate extraordinary experiences into everyday consciousness. This is true at the psychological level, and also at the structural level: there is a gap between a difficult event's occurrence and understanding its impact on a collective body.

The Sikh community, traumatized and suffering experiences of loss, does not share a neat and finite relationship with the past. Superficially and in terms of socially accepted, taken-for-granted chronology, time is divided into past, present and future. For Sikhs nursing wounds of the past, painful experiences continue to resonate into the present and future such that difficult pasts never really assume the shape of a well-defined past or time neatly boxed away in temporal back regions. 1984 is experienced "after" through its representations and imaginings.

Trauma and its wounds render collective identity chaotic and incoherent. Nikki's account from the last chapter brings out the fragmented nature of traumatic experience. Throughout her interview with me, referring to her narrow escape from the violence, Nikki kept asking me, perplexed and thinking aloud, "what happened?" "what changed?" Trauma disrupts linear, continuous time and ruptures coherence because it rests on repetitive pasts which continue to define present and future temporality and identities. Traumatized individuals and groups cannot speak of their experiences in the immediate aftermath, and yet are defined by these experiences relentlessly. Speech after a lapse of time is a form of "translation" and "integration" of difficult-to-translate-and-integrate experiences.

One of my interviewees, Vikramjeet, explains the shift underway. He is a 62-year old Canadian first-generation male who worked as a full time lawyer along with doing occasional journalistic work before he created a website on Sikh-related issues, including 1984. He moved to Canada with his parents in 1971 along with members of his extended family. He found out about the attack on the Golden Temple through newspapers and as he explained, "our lives were turned upside down, and it is very difficult for anyone outside the community to imagine that this was across the board." His motivation for creating a Sikh-specific website was to construct a platform to address the "living nature of the issue."

Memory workers are belatedly confronting memories of 1984 because trauma continues to have life-after-life. Vikramjeet explains that there are many splits within the community vis-à-vis the reactions to 1984, separatist, patriotic or more nuanced. He

elaborates that the many silences emanate not only from outside the community, but also within, and representations of 1984 are beginning to emerge in the diaspora and in digital spaces today. Representations of 1984 will keep evolving and responding to temporal exigencies. To quote Vikramjeet,

It's alive and it's staring us in the face, it's an issue that every Sikh in the world, whether she or he *talks* about it, is in *denial*, thinks it's *resolved*, thinks it's *exaggerated*, whatever, think about everyday in some form or the other, uneducated, educated, the whole gamut...there was this feeling that you can't talk about it, if you talk about '84 you would be either called pro-Khalistani or anti-Sikh, and we wanted that fear to go away, stand up and say whatever you want, particularly in the diaspora, India there is some, er, er, lack of freedom, certainly for minorities, Sikhs for example can't openly talk about 1984, should there be a Khalistan, should there not be a Khalistan, these are considered seditious in India (emphasis in original).

In addition to the temporal lag between the occurrence of a traumatic event and its experience, life stage also shapes willingness to talk about 1984. First generation memory workers, especially, talked of their current life phase as a significant factor that allows them to confront the well-entrenched culture of silence. As Nihal put it, "...it took me a few years to get comfortable in my position and so on, but I think I started talking about it..." Memory workers have traveled in time, and arriving at a secure economic, political and social place, is frequently a precursor and precondition to actively and consciously remembering 1984. Economic security, combined with the stability issuing from legal citizenship in North America, is creating a "safe space" and what can be called a "safe time," for forming public conversations and constructing representations of a turbulent past. While the first generation needs layers of time to start grasping the enormity of directly experienced losses, the second generation needs time to embark on a quest to find their "roots."

As the second generation stepped into adulthood, they began a process of interrogating and understanding their language, heritage and culture. 1984 is an important piece of a bigger puzzle of belonging and identity in the diaspora.

Supreet was one of my second generation interviewees. She is a 28-year old Sikh woman who was born in Punjab and moved to California with her family around 20 years ago. She finished graduate school and is part of a digital narrative project on the Partition of 1947. Supreet explained that she did the work of memory because she was “removed from the language and the heritage and er, the culture, and you’re reaching and trying to find out where your roots are from and this gives you an opportunity to really connect on an emotional level...” In looking back, second generation Sikhs are embarking on a journey to carve out a self-identity and find an emotional anchor amidst the ambivalences of diasporic belonging. Second generation Sikhs struggle with finding their feet in an ambivalent social context. They are in familiar surroundings, and feel at “home” because of their ascriptive citizenship. Yet, this familiarity goes hand in hand with feelings of unfamiliarity and alienation because of their familial settings, shaped by their parents’ experiences and memories, combined with racialized identity in the diaspora.³ One way to work through these ambivalences is the search for “roots,” of which 1984 constitutes an important missing link.

But even temporal lag is not enough to overcome silences associated with 1984. The time gap between 1984 and today falls short in addressing the stigma attached to 1984 even among diasporic Sikhs. One of my interviewees, Surinder, a 38-year-old second generation male from Canada, explained that the passage of time does not

necessarily lead to coming to terms with loss, or enabling individuals to move on in a clear-cut either/or manner. While the community deals with loss in many different ways, the predominant strategy within the community is what he calls “escapism.” He suggests that while the systematic targeting of the community affected the collective body of Sikhs, most Sikhs still resist the work of memory. They ignore or do not share the knowledge of events among themselves and their children, and choose instead to live with the *presence of an absence* (Raj 2000, 31, emphasis in original). Ignorance is different from “forgetting,” the “erasure of knowledge” (Raj 2000). Surinder laments that most of the community fails to or finds unable to acknowledge the experiences of 1984. While some Sikhs resorted to legal action to question the state and others declared a violent struggle for a separate state of Khalistan, most of the community retreated into themselves, unable to face the loss, pain, fear and shame. In Surinder’s words,

because we’re dealing with humans, some will cry about it, some will pick up arms, some will just fight legally, some will not fight and say let me get away from the ugliness of it, escapism, I think most of the community is in that mode, escapism.

Surinder’s explanation of “escapism,” is bolstered by Prabhjot’s account.

Prabhjot is a 75-year-old first generation male academic living in Canada. He broke down several times during our interview as he recounted his experiences during the Partition of 1947 and related them to 1984. Prabhjot explained that repressing his traumatic experiences was not deliberate but only a way to deal with suffering. Talking of 1984 specifically, he explained that “forgetting” was “probably part of human nature, people have forgotten it who lived in Delhi, who saw it, when you probe today,

memories come back and people talk about it but normally, in day-to-day living it just becomes history.” This “forgetting” is socially produced. Memories lie below the surface, experiences exist but are ignored, or the visible is made invisible. Rather than “forgetting,” being naturally produced or “part of human nature,” it is constructed by hegemonic structures of memory, or memory walls. Ignorance and forgetting are coerced and a product of the fear of persecution by the Indian state. The growing time lapse between the event and the present makes it possible to make some of the ignored and forgotten silences heard. Temporal distance from 1984 meets spatial distance from India, and the rise of diasporic consciousness, an important basis for re-presenting painful memories of events unfolding in national contexts.

Diasporic Consciousness

We were outside the Indian and Punjabi milieu...we need to think in the idiom of the diaspora and language has become so fluid and all pervasive, that it has become international...the idiom is somewhat common between Canada and the US and England, certainly...so we needed something and it was not sufficient to have an Indian or a South Asian or a Punjabi focus, but something that had that orientation, but was a North American site, so it was local but that thought, spoke, behaved as a diaspora citizen (Vikramjeet, 62, male).

Diasporas are fluid, combining many different, often contradictory times and places within a single existence. The Sikh diaspora is at the center of representing 1984 and doing repair work (Hirsch and Spitzer 2011, Ostertag and Ortiz 2013) because of its in-between or liminal (Turner 2009 [1969]) location between places of origin and settlement.⁴ The spatial distance from “home” intensified by the temporal rift between past and present trigger memory struggles that would not be possible in national

contexts. Diasporic in-betweenness combined with the enhanced possibilities to self-represent experiences via digital media enable catharsis through narrativization. Diasporas are also engaged in a continuous process of interrogating identity and belonging. Together, memories of times and places left behind, anxieties about finding and making “home” in a new context (for the first generation) and the search for “origins” (for the second generation) creates a distinctive diasporic consciousness. The work of memory is situated in the intersecting diasporic consciousnesses of first and second generation Sikhs.

Diasporic memory is often ambivalent, reflecting nostalgia, or desire to return to a time and place left behind, combined with a disavowal of economic conditions, political structures or culture, no longer easily comprehensible. The Sikh diaspora embodies these ambivalences, burdened by the painful memory of 1984, its marginal status in India as a religious minority, but also its subordinate status in the North American context as a “visible minority.” It longs for the land of its origins, Punjab, while searching for “home” in the diaspora. Sikh culture continues to evolve in diasporic contexts, while retaining its importance for successive generations.

Diasporic consciousness includes an evolving awareness of being Sikh by taking on a concerted and purposive search to find meaning in religious and cultural values within the dominant non-Sikh context. This awareness is spurred by external structures: Sikh identity was manufactured as the “other” in India in the 1980s, and in the North American context from their very first arrival Sikhs faced a hostile racialized environment, including violent attacks on Sikhs and the *Komagata Maru* episode (see

for e.g. Johnston 2014 [1989] Takaki 1989). Racism against Sikhs has become less blatant since the early years of migration, at least in and through legal inclusion as citizens, but Sikhs continue to be racialized, and confront discrimination and stigmatization, often for wearing religious insignia (see for e.g. Lal 2000). Hate attacks on Sikhs in the United States after September 11, 2001, and the August 2012 murder of Sikhs in Wisconsin,⁵ are stark reminders of the position that Sikhs occupy in North American, specifically in US society. Sikh diasporic consciousness combines their memories of India and outside. As a Sikh blogger notes,

Sikh history suffers no shortage of watershed moments – those instances in time after which everything changes. In recent history for Sikhs, the year 1984 was one of those times; 9/11 and its backlash was another. And now, Sunday, August 5, 2012 takes its place on that timeline (RMS, Americanturban.com).

My second generation interviewees particularly identified memory work on 1984 as a pathway to understand their community's long history of persecution and alienation in both national and diasporic contexts.

Kirat is a 20-year-old second generation Sikh male who is excited about starting college. He was around 10 when his mother first shared her experiences of 1984 with him, leaving a deep impact. Building on these recollections, Kirat has developed a sense of responsibility for carrying the stories of 1984 forward. He explained that he needed to share his “mom’s burden.” This personal connection with 1984 was strengthened by his immersion in Sikh history and heritage including stories of the Sikh Gurus, ideas of *shahidi* or martyrdom and *seva* or service. Kirat attributes his connection with Sikh identity and the “sense of purpose” younger cohorts find in this identity to experiences

of being the “other” in the diaspora. As he was growing up, he recalls being made aware of his differences as a Sikh, not only because of distinctive religious practices and rituals that he followed but also because of the visible external insignia that he wore. He contrasted this difference with “there”—India—where Sikhs took their identity and belonging for granted. In India, despite the fault line between Hindus and Sikhs, that continues to inform Sikh identity and belonging, some superficial order and calm has been restored.

In the diaspora, Sikhs are confronted with episodes of violent racial profiling such as bullying in school,⁶ what Kirat summed up as “dealing with adversity.” Kirat elaborated that growing up in the diaspora is different from being in India because Sikhs are asked to explain their identity on an everyday basis. Second generation Sikhs are forced to embark on a quest to find answers to questions of identity issuing from their social milieu encouraging them to gravitate toward the faith, or at least some form of active engagement with the *sangat* or community. In Kirat’s words,

I feel that almost in a sense, I feel like almost that a lot of responsibility and hope lies with my generation here in the United States, in the diaspora really, more so than in India...I feel the kids here have much more of a sense of purpose to their identity and they understand why the religion teaches us to grow our hair and keep our turban and I think because of that a lot of responsibility lies here, with this generation ...I think it’s something that growing up here, we face a lot more, we are different, we are different from, over there, I guess Sikhs are a little bit different...you grow up with people asking you about who you are, why you are the way you are...in India it’s one of those things that is accepted, you are a Sikh, okay, but people never actually learn the importance of the religious teachings or keeping your hair or more importantly they don’t learn how to deal with any adversity towards it.

Other second generation Sikhs echo Kirat's sentiments, explaining the relationship between being marked as the "other" in the diaspora and taking on the work of memory. The connection with 1984 is not due to their personal relationship with the event/s but rather their close ties with the Sikh community. Proximity with the community is both ascriptive—by virtue of being born in the community and the cultural importance of the community as Guru—as well as a result of external circumstances, complicated feelings of belonging, and alienation in diasporic contexts that spur the search for meaning in and of the community. As some of my respondents explained, as a religious minority in the diaspora, Sikhs must learn to develop a "survival instinct," rallying together, issuing from the community and in turn strengthening solidarity. This was true for first generation Sikhs, and it continues to remain pertinent for second generation Sikhs, who engage in actively retracing steps and finding identity and meaning in community values.

Khushwant, a memory worker I introduced in the last chapter, explained the importance of holding on to Sikh values in the diaspora, and their relevance, in turn, for memory work on 1984. He talked of how remembrance was part of Sikhs' daily routine, expressed in *ardaas* or prayer, where they recalled and recited the sacrifices of their ancestors. He talked of sacrifice for the greater good in the Guru and post-Guru period, also related to ideas of *seva* or altruistic service. According to Khushwant, an active remembrance of 1984 must be "contextualized" within this tradition that underlies Sikhism and is transmitted more earnestly, with enhanced awareness in the diaspora. The community has a tradition of passing on and preserving stories across generations

through oral history or stories. As Khushwant explains, “our history is very close to us, very near and dear to our hearts.” Second generation memory work is located within this intimate affective connection with the past. To quote Khushwant, “we’ve done a lot of activism stuff around fighting for the victims and trying to support those that are fighting for the prosecution of the perpetrators...so we focus on the heart and the hands with all the events that we’ve done.” The “heart” and the “hands” is a reference to the action-oriented, or service-based community identity. In doing the work of memory on 1984 Sikhs are doing service, or *seva*, remembering the past, honoring the “sacred” loss of lives to repair broken community ties and make sense of incoherent pasts. Memories of a disturbed past have joined hands with assaults on the community in the diaspora, exaggerating marginal experiences, especially the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

September 11 constituted a major temporal break, compelling Sikhs to look back to 1984, and make sense of their continued stigmatization. Just as first generation Sikhs explained that losses of the 1947 Partition started making sense to them after what they witnessed directly or indirectly in 1984, second generation memory workers started making a personal connection with 1984 because of their post September 11 racialized marginalization. Ajeet, a 32-year old visibly identifiable Sikh American entrepreneur, grew up in Texas and moved to New York for work. Growing up, he had been one of the few Sikhs in his neighborhood. His new geographic location was ethnically and racially diverse and he celebrated his new life in the vibrant, dynamic financial hub of the world. His perceptions changed after 9/11. Sikhs suddenly found themselves defined and represented along their differences, caught in xenophobic fervor that swept the US.

Ajeet explains that as a Sikh he felt he had a “choice” under the circumstances to either “give in, cut your hair and assimilate or it makes you a very strong person, it makes you question your beliefs, it makes you insecure temporarily, but then you go and find those answers, you go find the logic and the reasoning behind it and it makes sense.” The attacks on Sikhs led many to find refuge and solace in their faith. In the process Ajeet reacquainted himself with 1984, an event that “he’d heard about, but never gave much thought to earlier.” This shift in consciousness, and active engagement with memories of 1984, began with Ajeet’s own experiences of marginalization in the diaspora. This was echoed in other memory workers’ stories.

Sarabjeet is a 40-year-old Sikh male entrepreneur who worked with Manjyot on the documentary film on the widows of 1984. He lived in India for the first few years of his life, moved to other parts of the globe before settling down in United States. He was in India during 1984 and recalls a distinctive “‘us’ versus ‘them’” feeling between Hindus and Sikhs that members of the community experienced after 1984. Sarabjeet’s family moved from India in 1984. Sarabjeet carried dim memories of 1984 but it wasn’t until after September 11, 2001 that his memories assumed a more robust form. Along with Manjyot, he started making films about Sikhs to raise consciousness about the community among Americans at large. 9/11 and 1984 became continuous in memory workers’ collective consciousness, and they created a heightened awareness that the community was under siege. Second generation diasporic Sikhs began the process of reflecting on the orchestrated, deliberate and systematic attacks of 1984 after their close encounter with the swift, blatant and socially approved process of marginalization.

As Sarabjeet explained with anguish in his voice, "...the attacks on Sikhs in '84, so it's become the 9/11 of the Sikhs before 9/11 ever happened."

To return to Satnam's story from the last chapter: in tracing his genealogy, he had spoken of his role as a witness during 1984. He had become estranged from his religion after moving to the United States. However, gradually he started feeling a sense of connection with his faith and this re-rooting came full circle with 9/11. In addition to drawing parallels between what transpired in 1984 and 2001, especially recalling images of incinerated and burning bodies, Satnam also underlined the quick social shift in perceptions about Sikhs as "outsiders." Like 1984, September 11 made Sikhs feel threatened, forced to hide and find safe sanctuary. The external circumstances and the perpetrators were different in 1984 and in 2001, but the community was targeted in similar ways, inducing Sikh memory workers to look back at the community's difficult pasts and start re-presenting them. In Satnam's words,

9/11 in many ways, for me personally, was very similar to '84, er, something very big has happened, er, and people, for me, my connection was these people suddenly getting incinerated, they got burnt alive literally in these buildings, for me that was a visual kind of connection, why this has happened but over the course of 3 days and in a very *different* (emphasis) way, er, but that was how I kind of saw 9/11 and '84, and the weird thing is now again for a couple of weeks we inturned ourselves into our houses because things were really bad for turbaned Sikhs...I mean it was rough, people gave us nasty looks, people called me all kinds of names and same with my brother and we tried our level best not to go out that much...but also 1984 was big for me...I knew that justice is not going to happen, I mean it's not going to happen most likely, but at least we need to start expressing ourselves, our frustrations through our writings, through arts...after 9/11 I really got into it.

Despite similar experiences of stigmatization in national and diasporic contexts Sikh memory workers construct a hierarchy of precarious belonging: the perils "here," in

the diaspora, are lesser, more tolerable than the persecution “there,” in India. Sikhs were made to feel like a “problem,” (Du Bois 1994 [1903], Bayoumi 2008) in 1984, in the wake of September 2001 and other everyday episodes of discrimination in the national and diasporic contexts. Yet, political-economic factors combined with the long history of Sikh diasporic webs and better systems of legal redress, are some reasons Sikhs continue to find home and belonging in the diaspora while negotiating with marginalization “here” and “there.” As SS, a second generation memory worker notes in an online account, there is a better fit between the American and Sikh narrative.

I’m not saying the U.S is perfect. I don’t agree with all of our political decisions, and I also realize that we’re not entirely clear of human rights violations. There’s a lot that can be improved. Yet I find that the values and ideals of my religion, Sikhism, resonate more closely with those of America. Like the Sikh religion, the U.S. is founded on freedom, equality, and justice. This is the appeal of America, and it’s precisely why my parents immigrated here (SS, sikhchic.com).

In doing the work of memory in the diaspora while also rooting themselves deeper in diasporic soil, first generation Sikhs reflect on the widespread, diffuse and generalized feelings of “otherness” the community experiences in India. Natasha, a 35-year old filmmaker who grew up in India and moved to the United States in 2005 recalled popular derogatory stereotypes about Sikhs in India, revolving around the idea that the community is “intellectually weaker.” Prominent among these jokes is a reference to Sikhs and time which evokes the idea of the community as “slow” and “inferior.” Natasha recalled the jokes with derision and frustration, “you know all these Sardar (term by which Sikh males are colloquially referred to) jokes...*sardaran de barah wajj gaye* (Sikh minds’ have struck 12’o’clock).” The distance from India gives many first

generation Sikhs an alternative lens with which to reflect on these seemingly benign “narcissism of minor differences,” (Freud 1962 [1961], 61) exaggerated differences between communities in close proximity with more similarities than dissimilarities.

Yet, Sikhs in the diaspora did not always pronounce this narrative of marginalization. Today while many, though not all, diasporic memory workers telling the story of 1984 draw strong boundaries between Sikhs and Indians, “Hindus,” the Ghadar movement of the early 1900s (see for e.g. Puri 1983), a powerful pan-Indian transnational movement is an illustration of evolving diasporic consciousness. Being Punjabi and Indian was not at odds with each other in the diaspora before 1984 (Tatla 2012, 63). The Ghadar came about because of a combination of reasons, a keen sensitivity to insecure conditions under which migrants left Punjab and racial tensions in North America. The Ghadar movement consisted of mostly Sikh, but also non-Sikh Punjabi migrants, including unskilled laborers and farm workers, contractors, priests and students as well as political refugees. They came together to bring about violent revolutionary change in India and carve a niche for themselves in their new diasporic locations.

The movement had its headquarters in San Francisco. They printed revolutionary literature against British rule in India and attempted to send arms and guerilla soldiers into India for what proved to be an unsuccessful revolutionary uprising planned for 1915. The *Komagata Maru* episode bolstered the Ghadar movement by raising consciousness among Indians in North America.⁷ While the confluence of being an “outsider” in both Indian and North American contexts had produced an inter-

community struggle, the Ghadar in the early 1900s, 1984 marked a landmark shift in relations between Sikhs and the Indian state and therefore, Sikhs and non-Sikhs.

The Sikh diaspora is placed in between “here” and “there,” in an ambivalent both/and position. This fluidity and flux, along with specific experiences of discrimination in the diaspora (especially post 9/11 US) has motivated many Sikhs to find themselves in their community’s histories. Diasporic location also makes it possible to draw parallels with other minority groups, particularly diasporic Jews.

Proximity to the Holocaust Discourse

The Sikh diaspora draws inspiration from and parallels to the experiences of other dispossessed religious minorities. The Jewish experience of Holocaust is an especially powerful and useful resource for Sikhs to draw on to tell the story of 1984. The Holocaust is the common, shared “currency of feeling,” (Hochschild 2003 [1983], 18) that Sikhs are borrowing from to make their experiences of 1984 visible and known to the Sikh community and beyond. In my interviews with memory workers the common sentiment was, “1984 was something like the Holocaust.”

Simi, a 34-year-old memory worker has created a digital archive on the 1947 Partition. In my interview with her she talked about the importance of 1984 as a “rallying point” for the younger generation in the diaspora, “parallel to how the Holocaust is the point of mobilization for the Jewish community,” despite the differences in the “scale, breadth and depth,” of the Holocaust. In making the comparison, memory workers focus on what Simi calls the “trauma, recency and

universality” (of suppressing a minority community). Sikh memory workers looking to make the story of 1984 public find a powerful template in the stories of the Holocaust (Stein 2014).

The accessibility of the Holocaust as a form of “cultural capital” is a way for Sikhs to translate their losses to themselves, the larger community as well as non-Sikhs.

Dominant narratives of the Indian state have obscured painful experiences, not only from the outside world, but even from community members. Harjot explained that it is important to make the story of 1984 public by drawing comparisons with the Holocaust, even using the term “Holocaust,” to describe 1984. To quote Harjot,

we need to make sure our story is told in the same way as their story, er, in addition to trying to put that on a more public stage and frame it in a very similar sort of way, er and you have these sort of positionings of Indira Gandhi and Hitler, you know things like that, the SS and the Punjab police, the Indian army or whatever er, with those, I think without being on a public stage where other people are recognizing and sympathizing with your story, ere, or even this issue of defining it as a Holocaust or genocide, er, I think that contributes to the feeling of marginalization in which the Sikhs still often feel like nobody really knows our story.

Yet there are limitations of making an unqualified comparison between the Holocaust and 1984. As I explained in a previous chapter, placing very different traumatic experiences along the same continuum takes away from the “sacred” losses suffered by individual communities. Each traumatic experience is different and specific. It is hard to translate trauma into language or borrow vocabulary from a very different traumatic memory.

Still, many Sikhs consider this comparison and translation work as an important way to address the silence and lack of ownership of memories within the community. First

generation Sikh memory workers condemn fellow Sikhs who are comfortable with the idea of their children growing up with knowledge of the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide but not 1984. Public narratives of 1984 are informed by the Holocaust as a master “frame” to evoke genocidal destruction, victimhood and the mobilization of a minority group (Stein 2006, 131). Sikhs call for a similar creation of awareness, consciousness, and mobilization to acknowledge the 1984 violence. Sikh memory workers are conscious of the differences between 1984 and the Holocaust, including the specific nature of anti-Semitism, the difference in the length of time, scale of death and destruction, and the massive calculation and deliberation behind the Holocaust compared to 1984. This does not prevent them from identifying with and seeking to emulate the Jewish community.

Holocaust consciousness itself, which is taken for granted by Sikh memory workers, varies by national, cultural and familial contexts and came about with a passage of time, the passing away of survivors, and the need to salvage stories and claim a distinctive identity in a multicultural context, especially in the United States (Stein 2009, 2014). While Sikhs are often unaware of the social processes behind the development of a Holocaust consciousness, they recognize the Jewish community’s successful mobilization in creating a narrative of the Holocaust and passing it on to future generations. They feel a sense of solidarity and kinship with Jewish experiences. Sikhs express a desire to learn from and borrow extensively from this narrative because of the Jews’ success in telling their story. In the following excerpt from a website, for

example, “never forget,” is emphasized—a phrase immediately and closely associated with commemorating the Jewish Holocaust:

Why is it that the world knows all about the Nazi Holocaust, but no one knows about the massacre of innocent Sikhs in 1984? Is it because the Jews have made an effort to tell everyone?"... "Never forget," ...auntie said, "You, the next generation have to promise us, that you will keep this memory alive and never forget it. If we forget 1984, it will be a crime. Promise me, you will not forget what happened to us in 1984. Forgive, yes. Forget, never! (KK, sikhchic.com).

Memory workers also highlight other questions of language that limit the intent and magnitude of violence in 1984 and make a case for using terminology associated with the Jewish Holocaust. For instance, Sikh memory workers contest the use of the term “riots” to describe the October-November massacre of 1984. Following from their immersion in the Holocaust discourse, they argue for the semantic appropriateness of acknowledging the violence of 1984 as a “genocide” and “pogrom”—and even “Holocaust.” Laying claim to this vocabulary is part of forming a critical discourse that brings out the orchestrated and planned quality of violence aided and abetted by the state. The following is a representative narrative explaining the necessity of using “genocide” over “riots”:

The vast majority of victims were people who shared a common religious identity, the Sikhs...Article Two of the UN Convention on Genocide defines genocide as "any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group - Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." (SS, sikhchic.com).

Sikhs place the experiences of 1984 along the index of state-sponsored terror to create a transnational and cross-cultural web of memory work. While Sikhs draw most

from the widely accessible language of the Holocaust, they also evoke episodes of the genocide in the Ottoman Empire and Rwanda to explain the experience of 1984 and the necessity of doing the work of memory. The Holocaust and other events act as a “common symbolic referent” (Stein 2006, 147). To quote one of the writers on these websites:

The orchestrated killings of Sikhs in 1984 and beyond remind one of the genocidal killings of Armenians at the turn of the last century, the Holocaust of the Jews in Nazi Germany and the killings in Rwanda just 20 years ago...The parallels come from the techniques used: how a government goes about demonizing a segment of its own citizenry, and how it manipulates public opinion, both within and without its borders... (IJS, sikhchic.com).

Sikh and non-Sikh memory workers are placed in a unique position of geographic and cultural proximity to memories of the Holocaust. Members of the Sikh diaspora are familiar with this discourse through educational programs in the West, or personal interactions and/or friendships with Jews who hold on and carry forth these memories. Sikh memory work is finding an anchor in non-Sikh narratives, primarily Jewish ones, to shape and find a language for enduring and incoherent feelings of loss. Sikh memory is situated within the larger Holocaust narrative as both an effective emotional and strategic practice.⁸

Conclusion

Memory work takes place in the context of changing technologies, temporalities, diasporic imaginings, and cross-cultural influences. The story of 1984 is becoming public because of a confluence of factors: the rise of digital culture, the temporal distance between the past and present, diasporic consciousness, and proximity to the Holocaust

narratives. Digital technology makes a continuous engagement with 1984 possible, and threads together absent present pasts and people. Temporality is of particular importance in constructing time-delayed representations of 1984. While the first generation had to arrive at a safe space to start talking about their hauntings publicly, the second generation actively remembers 1984 in their journey to find a sense of belonging in a diasporic landscape where they constitute the racial-religious “other,” particularly in a post 9/11 North American context. Sikhs are also creating a transnational and cross-cultural language within which to situate the traumatic experiences of 1984, drawing on the language and imagery of the Jewish Holocaust. Together, these factors are helping to bring about a narrative shift in relation to 1984: they are making invisible stories visible and public and fracturing memory walls. Crevices, or fractures, in polarized narratives of the state and militant resistance are emerging within this socio-cultural landscape.

¹ For e.g. Baym (2000), Chayko (2002) and Gergen (2001).

² Recent research on digital media does not draw a strict distinction between online and offline. Instead there is an emphasis on online and offline mutually constituting each other: see for e.g. Orgad (2009) Gajjala (2009).

³ See Puar (2007, pp. 166-202) for affects inscribed on and experienced by turbaned bodies in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

⁴ Diasporas’ liminality is combined with the liminality of digital spaces as well as in-betweenness of many times. Together, these are shifting narratives of 1984: “Virtual commemorative crevices lie interstitially linking the national and diaspora, past, present and future...The intersection between their current diasporic and virtual location disrupts the framework of hegemonic narratives-at-large. Sikh immigrants can recall or remember vicariously the events of 1984 as a community and that provides them with a sense of belonging both in India as well as transnationally” (Devgan 2013, 228).

⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/06/us/shooting-reported-at-temple-in-wisconsin.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁶ See for example, <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/endschoolbullying>

⁷ Juergensmeyer writes, “The struggles against the oppression in America and in India became fused in one struggle: Ghadar” (1979, 174).

⁸ Recent fiction on 1984 such as Jaspreet Singh’s *Helium* (2013) also affirms the influence of the Holocaust consciousness on 1984 memory work. Singh’s novel is inspired by W.G. Sebald’s work.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: The Unfinished Work of Memory

“Jis tann lāgé soee jāné,” is a Punjabi maxim that roughly translates into, “only those whose bodies have suffered the pain, can know its intensity.” In studying memory work in the diaspora, I show the importance of the transnational Sikh collective body to represent experiences of marginalization and stigmatization. While Sikhs in India suffered the violence in 1984, Sikhs in the diaspora are grappling with memories of this difficult past. An intergenerational cohort of diasporic Sikhs are constructing and representing unfinished trauma experienced in the Indian national context through the work of memory and imagination. Diasporic Sikhs with their physical and temporal distance from India and 1984, situating themselves in their cultural traditions, and in turn replenishing and nourishing them, are embarking on a journey to piece together difficult pasts through the interactivity and mixed modality of digital media. Their representations of 1984 are crevices in dominant narratives, emergent cultures, articulating neglected experiences and contesting dominant feeling walls.

My study is many-layered, containing multiple juxtapositions: the erasures and amnesias of the official story of 1984 and the emerging Sikh narrative; top-down mass media constructions and intimate and interactive digital media representations; emotions and perceptions of first and second generation memory workers; experiences in national contexts and a growing diasporic consciousness; and understanding the past in the present. In bringing together these disconnected and heterogeneous narratives, voices, spaces and times in conversation with each other, my dissertation makes an

important contribution in understanding the processual, evolutionary characteristic of collective memory and collective trauma.

Of particular importance is my focus on dialogue between various media as a source of changing memories and representations. The Indian state employed mass media to stigmatize the Sikh community in the 1970s and 80s. These popular constructions rendered representations of the community and 1984 frozen and ossified. Today, first and second generation diasporic memory workers are challenging and thawing such static constructions in and through a more personalized and intimate medium of communication, digital media. 1984 is experienced and felt by community members in and through the very process of narrativization and representation in digitally mediated communication.

My dissertation is one of few studies examining a non-Western group's construction and representation of trauma. I situate memory work within nondualist and heterogeneous Sikh cultural traditions, expanding the existing repertoire of collective memory studies while also challenging an overemphasis on militant counternarratives.

Present-day counternarratives of 1984 are crevices in dominant memory walls. These crevices build on both Indian-initiated counternarratives (especially reports by Citizens for Democracy and the People's Union for Democratic Rights and People's Union for Civil Liberties) and diasporic mobilizations in the immediate period following 1984. Crevices in the dominant story of 1984 are evolving, drawing attention to the inevitable absences contained in all representations. Digital media enables Sikhs to tell a

story about the ghosts of 1984 haunting community members and alerts us to “absent presences” in state-orchestrated versions of the story.

Both first and second generation Sikhs are doing the work of memory and the work of emotions. Some Sikh memory workers were directly affected by the violence. But most memory workers were already in the diaspora in 1984. Digital memory projects are being designed and shaped by the second generation, or descendants of first generation survivors and witnesses. They grew up with many hauntings or present absences of 1984. Second generation Sikhs learned about 1984 as the experience of their parents or community members which was horrific, oppressive and degrading. The first generation grapples with feelings of shame and fear from Indian state and media narratives. The second generation grew up with the knowledge of 1984, but developed very different interpretations and affects. For the second generation, the ghosts of 1984 combined with their own diasporic experiences of racial and religious marginalization in North American contexts. In the United States in particular, the events of September 11, 2001 exaggerated differences for second generation Sikhs and created new anxieties, new hauntings. Digital re-presentations of 1984 express these diasporic hauntings. Re-presentations of 1984 challenge official narratives of the Indian state, and also make visible affective erasures underlying Sikh diasporic experience.

Digital media, with its many writers and readers of texts, interactions between absent present people to excavate absent present hauntings, and asynchronous communication facilitating periodic and long-drawn out meaning-making practices,

instead of sporadic and short-term reactions to events, is slowly and consistently drawing crevices in memory walls.

Yet, memory work has its limitations. Memory workers tell the story of the community and 1984 without making many explicit connections with experiences of violence confronted by religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians in India. A coalition between different marginalized voices, brought together by common experiences, can be an effective means of challenging status quo but this is still lacking in memory work on 1984. Immediate diasporic responses to 1984 was informed by an identity politics, driven by the need to belong in their countries of residence. In the process, Sikhs started developing distance from the larger Indian and South Asian community. While one of the reasons for these limited connections has to do with identity politics that continues to inform memory work, many of these burned bridges result from the different responses to 1984, both within the community and outside.

Despite early crevices or civil rights organization reports that contained wide non-Sikh perspectives, especially activist and academic, the only people who voiced their dissent against the state were members of the community, mostly in the diaspora. This stands in contrast to a more widespread public response to the anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002.

One reason for the different narratives of 1984 and 2002 is the change in media constructions and coverage. While the narrative of 1984 got lost in state-sponsored media blackout or media manufactured images, media landscape in India has changed considerably since the economic liberalization of early 1990s. This had effects on

coverage of violence in Gujarat in 2002 and other such episodes. Despite the lack of justice in the Gujarat pogroms and the election of Narendra Modi (accused in aiding and abetting the violence) as Prime Minister in May 2014, the Gujarat case has attracted more public attention and sympathy. Many competing private media organizations have reported and constructed the story of the 2002 pogroms. This is not to say that media coverage is transparent or anti-minority violence has lessened or is addressed, but simply that the proliferation of mediated narratives has consequences for the way violence against a minority community is made visible. Neither is media blackout a thing of the past. Rather, media censorship and muffling anti-establishment voices has gained renewed strength in India. The Internet acts as a conduit to express alternative viewpoints in some such instances.

Another reason for different reactions to 1984 and 2002 stems from the connection made between 1984 and an “essential” Sikh militancy. As I have explained, Sikhs were labeled “terrorist” and “anti-India,” especially when militant counternarratives to the state degenerated into wanton violence. This gave the state a reason to exonerate itself and justify its targeting of Sikhs in 1984. There were no such militant counternarratives to use as an alibi to deflect attention from the orchestrated, state-sponsored massacre of Muslims in 2002.

Finally, the difference in public engagement between 1984 and 2002 lies in the clear line drawn between the political ideology behind the two genocides in academic and non-academic discussions. 1984 is considered an isolated act, an “aberration” committed by the so-called “secular” Congress (I). On the other hand, anti-Muslim

pogroms of 2002 are seen as organized and systematic, a product of “communal ideology” of the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its alliance with the paramilitary organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

As I show in my dissertation, there is a distinct genealogy of constructing the Indian nation as “Hindu.” The very fabric of Indian secularism is torn and tattered. It is not the prerogative of rightwing political parties, though it issues uniquely and blatantly from such fascist organizations. In the 1970s and 80s, the Sikhs suffered in the appropriation of majoritarian community identity by the Indian state under the leadership of the Congress (I). State power has shifted hands many times since, and the pattern of appropriating “Hindu” identity as a political tool has become well established. Xenophobic nationalism of the Indian state has only picked momentum in recent years, especially targeting and stigmatizing Muslims for shallow political gains.

What might be important for future memory work on 1984 is to locate the Sikh religious nationalist movement within its larger context. Despite its problems, militant Sikh response must be understood and contextualized especially vis-à-vis state-assumed and media-endorsed “Hindu” identity. The story of 1984 is specific to the Sikh community, but the story of 1984 is also the story of other religious minorities in India. The Indian state has used the same strategies of representing and attacking minorities as “anti-India,” “outsider,” and “other” in a “Hindu nation state” since 1984. An examination of Sikh militant counternarratives without an interrogation of the role of state and mass media in creating this discourse is incomplete. My study makes an important shift in this direction.

However, my work falls short of doing a comparative analysis of the potential and limits of digital-diasporic subversion. While diasporic Sikhs are telling the story of 1984 because of the Internet's existence as a (mostly) deregulated and decentralized zone, digital media is also used by rightwing Hindu organizations to erase certain histories and create a narrow "Indian=Hindu story." So while digital crevices are liberating Sikhs from state-imposed representations and affect, there are other digital spaces in the making that place limits on these efforts. These Hindu-dominant spaces echo the Khalistani cyber archives that preceded digital crevices.

What is the future direction of these tensions between different digital spaces, each with its own set of interpretations? Will digital technology create more crevices, or perhaps a new set of "digital walls," such as seen in Hindutva cyberspace? I suggest that in the face of increasing media censorship and bans in India, the Internet will remain a space to contest dominant discourses. Despite pockets of digital censorship, restrictions on speech online, I anticipate digital media to facilitate more speech than silences, more crevices than walls.

General limitations of digital technology also plague memory work. Despite the increasing access and availability of digital media, the "digital divide," creates a gap between those with access to media and others without easy accessibility. The division between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (those with in-depth knowledge of the media versus those lacking these skills) makes digital representations of 1984 incomplete and partial. For example, most of the websites on 1984 are in English, which excludes Sikhs without the necessary cultural capital, both in India as well as in the

diaspora. Digital memory work, despite being a powerful re-presentation of 1984, remains partial, due to the nature of mediated experiences, but also because it excludes voices from within the community.

In conclusion, in digitally mediated re-presentation of diasporic hauntings, different generations of Sikhs are talking to each other to create a shared, public story of 1984. The digital story of 1984 is never finite or finished: it is a continuous way of managing residues that trauma leaves in its wake. What will be the future of digital memory projects? Will the diasporic retelling of 1984 find its way to India? Will memory work on 1984 inspire other projects among other minority groups? Will the work of memory be able to form alliances to resist religious nationalism rearing its ugly head in India so vociferously? The work of memory holds potential and promise to write unfinished pasts and prevent some foreseeable futures.

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