

**LEGACIES OF VIOLENCE: SIKH WOMEN IN DELHI'S "WIDOW COLONY"**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines how Sikh women who survived the anti-Sikh massacre in 1984 in Delhi, India, cope with the long-term legacies of violence and trauma amid the backdrop of the urban space of the city. After the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, approximately thirty-five hundred Sikh men were killed in October and November 1984. Many of the survivors, Sikh widows and their families, were relocated shortly after to the “Widow Colony,” a designated slum also known as Tilak Vihar, within the boundary of Tilak Nagar in West Delhi, as a means of rehabilitation and compensation. The work arises from fieldwork carried out between December 2012 and March 2014. I begin by discussing in depth the space of the Widow Colony and its relation to the rest of the city of Delhi. I then analyze the events of the 1984 massacre through the narratives of Sikh widows and how they remember their experiences of violence. I discuss how violence can have long-term ramifications for everyday life in arenas such as kinship networks, economic stability, health and wellness, and social life. These experiences are further amplified by gender, caste, and class. I also examine the impact of the stigma of widowhood in this community.

This research seeks to interrogate how memories of violence inform, and are constituted by, embodied, affective practices carried out in a gendered space produced by the state. I argue that Sikh widows cope with long-term trauma by creating new forms of sociality and memory through their everyday lives and religious practices in the Widow Colony. The memory of the 1984 violence figures heavily among the Sikh diaspora. Thus, I also explore the relationship between the Widow Colony and Sikhs in the transnational arena.

## **Preface**

The following dissertation presents independent and original research by myself, the author, Kamal Arora, who carried out all aspects of the research program: design, ethics, conducting fieldwork, analysis and presentation of results. The author is therefore solely responsible for any omissions or errors in this regard.

Research methods were approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Review Ethics Board (BREB) under the title 'Sikh Women's Religiosity and the Legacy of Violence in New Delhi,' with the corresponding Certificate number H12-02570 (Principal Investigator: Dr. Gastón Gordillo).

Part of the discussion on diasporic Sikh youth in Chapter 5 draws from research conducted as a Research Assistant on Michael Nijhawan's (Department of Sociology, York University) SSHRC-funded research project "Predicaments of a 'post-conflict' generation: A comparative study of Sikh and Ahmadiyya diaspora formations." Along with other research tasks, I was responsible for interviewing Sikh youth in Toronto and surrounding areas for this project and at times co-writing findings with Michael Nijhawan and Duygu Gül, which have been published (cf. Arora, Gül, and Nijhawan 2013; Nijhawan and Arora 2013; Nijhawan 2016).

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## List of Persons

Names listed with an asterisk\* have been changed for confidentiality purposes. Any ages listed are at the time of writing.

\*Heema Bai: a forty-three-year-old woman living in the Widow Colony

\*Geeta Devi: a fifty-one-year-old woman living in the Widow Colony, and a relative of Heema Bai

\*Amar Kaur: a fifty-five or fifty-six-year-old woman living in the Widow Colony

\*Harnoor Kaur: a fifty-six-year-old woman living in the Widow Colony

\*Jasminder Kaur: a staff member at Nishkam

\*Jhansi Kaur: a woman in her mid-forties living in the Widow Colony

\*Kirat Kaur: a woman in her eighties living in the Widow Colony

\*Puneet Kaur: a fifty-one-year-old woman, retired staff member at Nishkam, and the mother of Surjit Kaur

Priya Jain: an activist who was involved in relief camps after the 1984 massacre

\*Surjit Kaur: a young woman in her early twenties and staff member at Nishkam, who was employed as my assistant

\*Taran Kaur: a staff member at Nishkam

\*Bhai Chetan Singh: a religious custodian, or *granthi*, at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

Harvinder Singh Phoolka: commonly known as H.S. Phoolka, a lawyer who has been representing women in the Widow Colony since the 1980s

Harbhajan Singh: a founder and current President of Nishkam Sikh Welfare Organization

Uma Chakravarti: a historian and Professor Emeritus at Delhi University



## **List of Abbreviations**

AAP: Aam Aadmi Party, or “Common Man’s Party,” a centre-left party that is currently the ruling party of the National Capital Territory of Delhi

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party, or “Indian People’s Party,” a right-wing, Hindu nationalist party that is currently the ruling party in India

Central Bureau of Investigation: CBI, India’s domestic security and intelligence service  
DDA: Delhi Development Authority, the government wing and urban development authority responsible for Delhi planning

DSGMC: Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, an organization that runs gurdwaras in Delhi, as well as various charitable and educational institutions

DTC: Delhi Transit Corporation, the main operator of public transportation services in Delhi  
Nishkam: Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council (Regd.), India

FIR: First Information Report, or a written document produced by the police based on a statement given regarding criminal offences

SGPC: Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee, the organization responsible for running gurdwaras in India

SGGS: Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the central religious text in Sikhism, considered the eternal living Guru

PUCL: People’s Union for Civil Liberties, a human rights group formed in 1976

PUDR: People’s Union for Democratic Rights, a human rights group based in Delhi and formed as a unit of PUCL

## Glossary

Amrit Vela: (literally, ambrosial period) period before dawn used for daily recitation of prayer  
Ardas: supplicatory prayer, especially of the Sikhs  
Darbar: court or gathering  
Five K's or five *kakkars*: five articles of faith worn by baptized Sikhs. These include *kachhera* (cotton underwear), *kanga* (wooden comb), *kara* (steel bangle), *kesh* (uncut hair), and *kirpan* (a small dagger)  
Ghallughara: extreme violence  
Granthi: religious custodian  
Gurdwara: a Sikh congregational centre  
Harimandir Sahib: the holiest gurdwara in Sikhism, located in Amritsar. Also known as Darbar Sahib or Golden Temple  
Izzat: respect  
Japji Sahib: a devotional composition recited by Sikhs usually as early morning prayer  
Jat: a caste associated with land ownership and agriculture  
Ji: an honorary suffix  
Kanga: see Five K's  
Khalsa: the collective body of Sikhs, particularly baptized Sikhs  
Khanda: the insignia of the Khalsa and an important symbol in Sikhism  
Khatri: a high-caste group associated with the administration and trade  
Khoon ka badla khoon: a saying meaning, "blood in revenge for blood"  
Kirpan: see Five K's  
Kirtan: devotional music  
Labana: low-caste group originally from Sindh and Rajasthan, who are known as labourers  
Langar: free communal meal served in a Gurdwara  
Matha-theek: the act of bowing down to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib as a gesture of devotion  
Madame or Mem-Saahib: an honorary term for a woman that can also imply a class distinction  
Naam Simran: to recite or repeat the Name (of God)  
Nishkam: selfless  
Paath: prayer  
Parshad: a semolina halva that is given at Sikh places of worship as a divine offering  
Ragi: one who musically performs text from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib  
Rehras Sahib: a devotional composition usually recited in the evening  
Sat Sri Akal: a common Sikh greeting roughly translating to "Eternal is the timeless lord"  
Seva: service  
Shakti: strength or power  
Shanti: peace, calmness, tranquility  
Sardar: an honorary term for a man with status; today associated with Sikh men, particularly those who wear turbans  
Shaheed: martyr  
Sri Guru Granth Sahib: the holy text of the Sikhs, regarded as the 11th living Guru  
Vidva: widow  
Vihar: dwelling  
Waheguru: Sikh term for ultimate reality or God

## **Notes on Translation**

All Punjabi and Hindi words have been translated using basic transcription. I have made this compromise to match anthropological convention in this area and provide simplified translations, at the expense of fine nuances in pronunciation. Some definitions in the Glossary were taken from the Punjabi University dictionary (*Punjabi University English-Punjabi Dictionary = Pañjābī Yūnīwarasiṭī Aṅgarezi-Pañjābī Kosha* 2016).

In the Indian Number system, one lakh denotes one hundred thousand and one crore denotes ten million. These terms have been translated into conventional numbering. Rupee amounts have been translated to their contemporary equivalent in United States Dollars to correspond with available literature in the area.

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To my family: my parents, Sukhwinder and Dalip, my siblings Kiran and Amritpal, my sister-in-law Anisha, and the “baccha party” – Daya and Gurtej – I love you and want to thank you for everything you have done for me. Thank you to the women and families of Tilak Vihar, who allowed me into their homes and shared their lives with me.

*For my father, Dalip Singh (1943 - 2011), and my mother, Sukhwinder Kaur*

*For the women and families of Tilak Vihar*

## Introduction

One Halloween, when I was a young girl living in Vancouver in the late 1980's, I remember returning from trick-or-treating with my cousins to news from India on the television that showed several Sikh women in white beating a burning effigy of the late Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, with cricket bats. The women were yelling in Punjabi, "Indira, bitch, hye hye!"<sup>1</sup> Frightened by the images on the television, I was told by my family that the women were widows of men who had died during violence against Sikhs in 1984. This was the first time that the violence had been explained to me, but I was too young to understand those women's anguish. My parents, Punjabi Sikhs who migrated from India to Canada in the early 1970's, had found out about Gandhi's assassination on Halloween evening 1984, at a dinner party thrown by some family friends. My mother recalls that someone had turned on the news and the adults in the room had become stunned and quiet when they had seen that Gandhi had been shot by her two Sikh bodyguards.

As I will discuss in further detail in subsequent chapters, Gandhi was rushed to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for treatment, and declared dead in the afternoon. As the day wore on, sporadic instances of violence against Sikh males in Delhi began to pick up speed, and by the evening of October 31<sup>st</sup> many Sikh men were being beaten and killed across the city. On the same evening, politicians from members of the then-ruling Congress Party<sup>2</sup> in part orchestrated the massacre by organizing the transport of men from Delhi's surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> *Hye* in this context is used as an exclamation, and most often a lamentation.

<sup>2</sup> The Congress Party, or simply Congress, are colloquial terms for the party, whose full name is Indian National Congress. In January 1978, Indira Gandhi and her followers formed the Congress (I) Party – the (I) standing for Indira, as a new opposition party to the Janatha Party. This term, Congress (I), was used throughout Gandhi's reign. For simplicity, I use the terms Congress Party or Congress throughout.

villages to take part in mob violence. Over the next ninety-six hours, the mobs, comprised of mostly Hindus and some Muslims, killed approximately thirty-five hundred Sikh men across Delhi, sexually assaulted women, and destroyed Sikh homes, gurdwaras (Sikh congregational centres), and businesses, in retaliation for Gandhi's assassination. The massacre left approximately fifty thousand Sikhs homeless, and many were put into refugee camps run by the state, gurdwaras, and various non-profit organizations. Many Sikh widows who had lost their husbands, other family members, and their homes were eventually "rehabilitated" by the Indian government and placed along with their children in an area to be called the "Widow Colony." In addition to the massacre affecting long-term economic stability, family relationships, and physical and mental health among Sikhs, it brought about fresh feelings of fear and insecurity among them. The violence is seen by many Sikhs and Hindus as marking the beginning of a sense of separation and widening social differences between the two groups (Chakravarti and Haksar 1987).<sup>3</sup>

In the years following the massacre, my parents would tell us little of the events unfolding back home in India in an attempt to shelter us from the gruesome dimensions of the violence, unless we prodded them with questions. Yet the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 became an unavoidable topic as we grew older, surrounded by the experiences of our family members and our own experiences growing up as second-generation Sikhs in Vancouver, as I will discuss below. One of the things that struck me when I began researching the massacre in 2006 was the

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<sup>3</sup> Sikhs in Delhi have remarked to me that previously, both groups visited each other's places of worship regularly and many first sons of Hindu families were raised as Sikhs with turbans. This fluidity of practice has been present in my own family; my maternal grandmother, for example, converted from Hinduism to Sikhism upon marrying and changed her name from a Hindu name to a Sikh name, a move that was supported by her family.



fact that 700 Sikh widows and their families, who had lost loved ones in the massacre, were ghettoized by the Indian government in the neighbourhood of Tilak Vihar, also known as the Widow Colony:<sup>4</sup> a small, cramped, low-income housing colony within the larger district of Tilak Nagar, on the Western side of the city.

While I continued being interested in the case of the Widow Colony, I was also interested, on a personal level, in the legacy of the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in the Punjab, and the framing of both events in relation to each other. This was related to the experience of both maternal and paternal sides of my family, who were forced to migrate during Partition to India from present-day Pakistan and were affected by the political upheaval and turmoil of the following decades, particularly the 1980s, which saw prolonged violence perpetrated by both the Indian state and Sikh separatists fighting for a separate Sikh nation-state. I thus became concerned by forms of violence that, as a young girl, to me seemed particular to India, going as far as writing an essay on the 1992/1993 Bombay violence (known as the Bombay Riots) in grade school. Growing up, I found that women's narratives of Partition and other sociopolitical upheavals were marginalized and often wholly ignored. So by the time I enrolled as a university student, I was interested in how women were represented by dominant Sikh discourses, especially since my search for writings about Sikh women's lives yielded few

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<sup>4</sup> While some residents use the area's administrative name Tilak Vihar (*Tilak* after Indian nationalist Bal Tilak, and *Vihar* meaning "dwelling") others use the term *Vidva/Vidvawaan di Colony* (Widow Colony/Widows' Colony); throughout Delhi the neighbourhood is referred to largely as the Widow Colony. For some, the term "Widow Colony" brings about a sense of stigma by youth residing there, who are often labelled as a lost generation. I came across this sense of stigmatization in the colony from some of the youth, and Yasmeen Arif has also mentioned this in her work which briefly discusses the neighbourhood, adding further that it is difficult to find employment given the constraints of being known as a colony inhabitant (Arif 2008). Throughout this dissertation, I use both the term Tilak Vihar and Widow Colony interchangeably, to evoke the different meanings and nuances associated with each term, by residents of the neighbourhood itself, the rest of Delhi, India, and by extension, the Sikh diaspora.

results. I was also affected by Shonali Bose's film about the Delhi massacre, *Amu* (2005), and stories I had heard about 1984 from my family in India. These experiences and interests led to my research among female Sikh militants in India for my MA research at the University of Sussex (Arora 2007). During my fieldwork in Amritsar, Punjab, I analyzed gendered expectations of the behavior of widows whose husbands were considered martyrs. I found that the women I interviewed in Amritsar positioned themselves as wives of "martyrs" and that they were expected to celebrate their husband's contributions to the Khalistani, or Sikh separatist, cause.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, it seemed that the women who were widowed during the 1984 massacre in Delhi were viewed by others as apolitical subjects in a continuous state of victimhood. Also, while Khalistani women expressed pride along with loss, and believed their husbands' deaths were a contribution to the Sikh cause, widows I had met in Delhi saw their husbands' deaths as senseless, without purpose. My interest in the colony also grew after I discovered my extended family's relationship to political instability in Punjab, which resulted in histories of migration, incarceration, and violence that I describe in the methodology section.

I first visited the Widow Colony during the monsoon season of 2010 when I was interested in exploring further the experience of Delhi widows for my PhD project. After conferring with a lawyer who represents many of the survivors of the massacre, Harvinder Singh Phoolka, I visited the sole NGO in Tilak Vihar: the Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council (hereafter referred to as

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<sup>5</sup> Khalistan means "place of the Khalsa." The word Khalsa (derived from the Arabic word *khalis*, or pure) refers to the collective body of Sikhs who accept an orthopraxic definition of being Sikh that developed at the close of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The use of the term in Sikh contexts is generally understood to reflect its use in the early modern period for land under the control of central imperial administration, rather than the control of local elites; the formation of the Khalsa by the tenth Sikh Guru brought the community under his direct control, without intermediaries, replacing a previously more distributed authority structure (cf. Murphy 2012, 56).

Nishkam). Nishkam was created as a religious non-profit relief organization to aid widows in Tilak Vihar shortly after the massacre, and has been running ever since. It now provides a wide variety of services, including medical services, a pharmacy, training classes, a library, and advocacy work, for all residents of the colony.<sup>6</sup> At this NGO, I discussed my intent to conduct future fieldwork in the area for my PhD. During those short visits in 2010, I was immediately struck by the neighbourhood's configurations and the social relations among women within the colony, particularly the widows' participation in a sewing centre run by Nishkam (this centre was shut down approximately a year later due to an ownership dispute). It seemed to me there were frequent disagreements between the women who used the sewing centre, but that this place was also one of community-building. I was interested in the sewing centre as a place that engendered and gathered local relations. I also became interested in the spatial, social and material figurations in the Widow Colony at large, and what it meant for these women to live in such a prescribed place created as a result of the violence of 1984. In December 2012, I returned to Delhi to conduct long-term fieldwork among the women in the Colony.

This dissertation examines the experience of the women living in the Widow Colony, by interrogating how they remember the violence of 1984, how their everyday lives have been transformed in light of gender-specific killings of Sikh men, and how their religious beliefs, practices and gendered cultural norms shape their public and private memories and mourning. In particular, I pay close attention to the spatial and affective dimensions of their memories and religious practices, given that these women live in close spatial proximity with each other in an impoverished neighborhood that was created by the Indian state for their "rehabilitation." I also

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Nishkam, see Chapter 3.

analyze how this place is entangled with the rest of the city of Delhi, with the politics of contemporary India, and with the transnational Sikh diaspora.

In addition to drawing from the insights learned through fieldwork in Delhi and the theoretical orientations outlined below, this dissertation engages with several literatures it seeks to contribute to. The literature that exists on the 1984 massacre is wide-ranging and rich, and includes, first, several general books that have been written on the subject (Grewal 2007; Mitta and Phoolka 2008; J. Singh 2009) and the official reports written immediately or shortly after the massacre (Chakravarti and Haksar 1987; Citizens' Commission 1984; Kishwar 1984; PUCL-PUDR 1985).<sup>7</sup> Academics have also written about the impact of 1984 on Sikh migration (Chopra 2011; C. K. Mahmood 1997), about Sikh youth's relationship to 1984 (Nijhawan and Arora 2013; Verma 2006), the memory and memorialization of the event (Ahluwalia 2010; Chopra 2010; Shani 2010; Tatla 2006), the iconicity of martyrdom associated with it (Axel 2001; Fenech 2000), and musical forms of remembrance (Nijhawan 2006; J. N. Singh 2013).<sup>8,9</sup> Most of this scholarship has highlighted the importance of the 1984 massacre in constructions of contemporary Sikh identity and discussions surrounding relationships between various ethnic and religious groups in the Indian nation-state.

The most relevant anthropological work here is Veena Das's groundbreaking ethnographic work on the experiences of Partition and the 1984 massacre, focusing on violence, gender, and subjectivity. In particular, Das deftly discusses the articulation of trauma and violence, its manifestation in language and its ties to identity (Das 1985; 1990b; 1992; 1996a; 1998; 2007).

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<sup>7</sup> There have also been fictional treatments of 1984 (Sandhu 2012; Jaspreet Singh 2013), a number of film treatments, both documentary and fictional, and a theatrical play, *Kultar's Mime*.

<sup>8</sup> The conference was closed due to concerns regarding the sensitivity of the topic area.

<sup>9</sup> For more work on Sikhs and internet use, see (Axel 2005; Sokol 2007; Jasjit Singh 2014).

My work draws heavily from Das's important work on women survivors of 1984 violence, but covers a crucial dimension that is relatively absent in her research, namely a discussion of Sikh women's religious beliefs and their religious practices in a specific place of worship. This dissertation examines that it is through religious practice and religious belief, in religious places, that many Sikh widows not only situate their life experiences and cope with the traumatic, long-term effects of the massacre, but also create a sense of community with other survivors. In the chapters that follow I seek to show that a focus on religiosity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Sikh women's lives.

### **Sikhs in 20<sup>th</sup> Century India and the Events Leading to 1984**

The massacre of 1984 continues to play an important role in Indian politics and in the transnational Sikh arena. The events of 1984 remains a specter haunting Indian elections, and Congress Party involvement in the violence has been regularly mentioned by the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the ruling BJP Party (Indian People's Party), deflecting focus away from Modi's involvement in the Gujarat 2002 riots in which two thousand Muslims were killed by Hindu nationalists (cf. Associated Free Press 2014; Brass 2008; A. Tripathi 2017). Yet in mainstream narratives in India the events of 1984 have been often presented as "communal violence." In the popular sense of the term, communal violence is defined in the South Asian context as violence self-contained between ethnic and religious groups with little state involvement. Yet, as I will show, so-called communal violence is not only configured around notions of social and religious difference; it is also defined by the relationship between the Indian state and its minorities.

There has been much debate as to what to name violence in India and South Asia in

general – as “communal violence,”<sup>10</sup> “pogroms,” “genocides,” “riots,”<sup>11</sup> or “massacres.” The conflicted nature of naming the violence also comes to the fore in Sikhs’ terminology used to describe the 1984 massacre. Over the course of my fieldwork, people referred to the massacre as *hamla* (the attack), *ghallugara* (the massacre, great attack, or bloodbath, although, tellingly, often mistakenly referred to as meaning a holocaust), *khoon-kharabi* (literally, ruining blood), *thaka* (to push, or the act of being shaken), *kaali raat* (black night). Alternatively, with the assumption of shared knowledge about the event, people would refer either to *churasee* (’84) or *jo hoye si* (“what happened”).<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the language used, these overlapping terms show that there is a sense of flexibility in usage, in English, Punjabi, and Hindi, which allows a more nuanced and multiple understanding of what happened. The various debates around these terms illustrate that violence can be unnamable (or perhaps *multiply nameable*) and that the insistence of using one particular term over another can be a futile exercise, yet still illustrate discursive beliefs about violence.

It is critical to view the violence in Punjab and in Delhi within a larger historical context. What popular definitions and usage of “communalism” and “communal violence” omit are the

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<sup>10</sup> Communal violence began being used as a term in the colonial era by British authorities to describe violence between various religious and ethnic groups in India. Dictionary definitions themselves point to the association between “communal/ism” and South Asia (“Communalism, N.” 2015). Pandey (1990) argues that colonial discourses of political violence in India highlight religion as the motivating force behind conflict, and this has become a model for contemporary discourses. The contemporary trope of “Hindu vs. Muslim” was promoted by the colonial apparatus to ease political control to the detriment of factors such as kinship and caste (Pandey 1990).

<sup>11</sup> “The riot” occupies a central role in the South Asian imaginary. Gyanendra Pandey outlines the colonial construct of the Indian crowd as aggressive and fanatical, caught in religious passions, and removed from norms of colonial civility (Pandey 1990, 64). Destructive crowds were to be dealt with by the colonial administration (Chandavarkar 1998).

<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion on the Holocaust as a narrative descriptor to describe the 1984 massacre, see Chapters 2 and 5.

relationships between this violence and the nation-state.<sup>13</sup> Within this discourse, what is known as communal violence is viewed as a natural, inevitable outcome between religious and ethnic groups, something that “just happens.” The massacre that took place against the Sikhs of Delhi was not communal nor spontaneous, as eyewitness testimonies and reports overwhelmingly indicate that there was an amount of preplanning and organization involved. Some commentators called it a *conspiracy* between criminals, politicians and the state (Sethi and Kothari 1985, emphasis mine). In addition to the overt involvement of politicians, Congress Party members and the police, the massacre was also enabled by the lack of involvement of the police, the army and the Delhi administration in the timely quelling of the violence.<sup>14</sup>

In light of these debates, I have generally used the term “massacre” throughout this work.<sup>15</sup> I believe the term avoids the pitfalls and debates regarding naming while simultaneously carrying a historical weight which lends to understanding violent events and atrocities as things that are repeated with consistency (cf. Malkki 1995). We have seen these repetitions unfold in contemporary India with similar events, such as the violence against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002.

The violence in Punjab and Delhi in 1984 arose due to ongoing political instability in the Punjab, particularly created by Sikh militants’ demand for Khalistan, or a separate Sikh nation-state. This reflects a broader colonial history of regional, linguistic, and ethnic contestation in the region, a history that resulted, for instance, in the partition of British India upon independence in

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<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch has aptly captured this relationship, by outlining communal violence as a force that is promoted by governments through patterns of discrimination and manipulation of ethnic tensions to polarize groups (Human Rights Watch 1995).

<sup>14</sup> These planned tactics were utilized later in the Gujarat pogroms against Muslims in 2002.

<sup>15</sup> “Massacre” is described primarily in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a. The indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people or (less commonly) animals; carnage, butchery, slaughter in numbers; an instance of this, b. In the names of certain massacres of history, c. fig. A great destruction or downfall; an act of wholesale or ruthless destruction” (“Massacre, N.” 2015).

1947 and the division of Punjab between the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan along religious lines. It also emerges out of specific demands regarding language, agricultural issues, water use, minority rights, and other related factors in post-colonial India. The political conflicts that led to the 1984 massacres are related to the actions of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947-1984), a Sikh priest and leader from Faridkot, Punjab. Seen as a charming and prophetic figure by his followers and supporters, Bhindranwale articulated his nationalist goals in a language rooted in his interpretation and experience of Sikhism; he drew a following of largely alienated youth in post-Green Revolution Punjab.<sup>16</sup> From 1982 to 1984, Bhindranwale toured Punjab, baptized Sikhs, disseminated religious audiotapes and spoke about Sikh discrimination and alienation. While his popularity grew, so did the instances of violence, killings, and agitations between his supporters and the Indian government. During their search for Bhindranwale, the Indian police committed multiple acts of arson and violence against Sikhs at large, and, in turn, violence between Sikh militants and the state increased. As part of these growing tensions, on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian army to carry out Operation Blue Star - an attack on “the Golden Temple” or Harimandir Sahib, the spiritual home and seat of temporal authority of Sikhs in Amritsar, in an effort to flush out Bhindranwale and other Sikh militants who had taken up arms and were inside the complex.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In the 1970's, the ruling Congress Party attempted to use Bhindranwale as a political tool to discredit the popular Akali Dal Party in order to continue the Congress Party hold of power in Punjab (Axel 2001; Banerjee 1990; Chakravarti and Haksar 1987; Human Rights Watch 1994; C. K. Mahmood 1989). He subsequently asserted himself as an independent political leader fighting for Sikh autonomy (Guha 2007; Juergensmeyer 1988).

<sup>17</sup> This site is generally known in English as the Golden Temple, in recognition of the façade of the central shrine in the complex. As Harimandir Sahib serves as a spiritual home for Sikhs around the world, it was thought to be protected from violence. June 3<sup>rd</sup> was a holiday, where Sikhs were celebrating the martyrdom of one of the ten Gurus, Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji. Somewhere between 10,000 to 15,000



My mother's younger sister, my *Masi-ji*,<sup>18</sup> lived near Harimandir Sahib at the time of the attack. During one of my visits to Punjab, she told me how the police raided her home and the homes of her neighbours, coming and going for many hours, while they made the residents stand outdoors in a line and began shooting people indiscriminately. She remembers neighbours running away from their homes across the rooftops of nearby houses in an attempt to flee for safety. When one of my *Masi-ji*'s daughters, my cousin, began to cry, a police officer told them to run and save themselves. The attack by the army killed a large number of Sikhs, including Bhindranwale, with numbers ranging from 892 (the official Indian army figure) (Brar 1993) to more than eight thousand (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) 1996). Most accounts calculate that about five thousand civilians and seven hundred army officers were killed (Deol 2000). Operation Blue Star in particular has been called a "critical event" which has become central to the articulation of a Sikh diaspora and a Sikh nation (Das 1995; Shani 2010; Tatla 2006). It is these events that led to the assassination of then Prime Minister Gandhi and the subsequent 1984 massacre.

What sets this particular conflict apart from the case of other religious minorities that have suffered persecution is that Sikhs in India have been a relatively well-off ethno-religious group, one that has often been respected in India and in the diaspora as a "model minority" known for their professional, business, and educational pursuits.<sup>19</sup> This class status has shaped the ways in which Sikhs have both benefited and suffered from class and caste tensions within India. The intersections between minority identity and class, and how they play out in everyday life in the

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pilgrims had come to Amritsar to celebrate. Attacks were also carried out on about 40 other gurdwaras in the vicinity.

<sup>18</sup> *-ji* is frequently used as an honourific suffix in Punjabi and Hindi.

<sup>19</sup> According to the latest data available, Sikhs in India comprise 1.7 percent of the nation's population of 1.2 billion persons (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India 2016).

Widow Colony, will be explored throughout the dissertation.

### **Main Theoretical Orientations**

I locate my research at the intersection of ongoing interdisciplinary debates and anthropological inquiries regarding the politics of place, the anthropology of violence and everyday legacies of violence, and religious practice, as well as the embodied nature of memory and the impact of the aforementioned on Sikh women's lives. This dissertation draws primarily on three bodies of literature with a focus on gender in all three areas: violence in India and its relationship to urban places, embodied religious practice and affect, and private and public forms of memory. My research aims to bridge these areas by focusing on how legacies of violence contribute to shaping gendered, spatialized and embodied everyday life and Sikh practice in the context of struggles within urban space in the Indian nation-state. Drawing on the authors below, I argue that, while the Widow Colony has been marked as a fixed and bounded place produced by violence, it is also connected to the rest of the city of Delhi, the Indian state, and the transnational Sikh diaspora in different ways that impinge centrally on its being (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997). These connections are inseparable from bodily experiences and memories of Sikh women in living in the Widow Colony.

The literature on place and space has demonstrated that places are historical products that are often sites of contestation, and authors such as Lefebvre (1991) and Gordillo (2004) have shown that violence, in particular, is usually a major force in the production of space. This is certainly crucial to understand women's experiences in the colony, for this place would not exist today if it wasn't for the massacre that shook the city in 1984. Casey (1997) and Lefebvre (1991), through their phenomenological and Marxist approaches respectively, highlight how spaces and places can only be understood through the body. Drawing from these authors, in this

dissertation I examine how the women living in the colony experience this place through their bodily habits and religious routines, and how many of their memories of the violence of 1984 are embodied in these practices. The body can be seen as a product of being-in-the-world, a term first used by Heidegger (1962) and then elaborated upon by Merleau-Ponty (1962). This captures the immediately existential and historical conditions of our lives, rather than relying on the body as a text to be read or subsuming the body under text (Csordas 1994).

In particular, I analyze how the character of the Widow Colony as a socially produced place is made apparent in the bodies of the women in the colony: through how they behave, grieve, and engage in religious practices which are sometimes policed by men. To be embodied is to be in a particular place, and one's positioning and perspectives are influenced by where we are situated (Casey 1997). Both the place of the colony and the bodies of women that reside in it are profoundly affective, and Sara Ahmed's (2004) work on 'affective economies' (economies of affective circulation between signs and bodies) aids us in thinking about how places and bodies are related; in other words, how places engender affects and vice versa. These related concepts allow us to delineate where and how violence has taken place since the 1984 massacre and elaborate on how bodies experience violence vis-à-vis spatial and affective configurations.

Yet these women's experiences of this place are marked not only by their own practices and memories but also by the ways in which they are reified as "widows" and "Widow Colony residents" by other social actors, such as other Indian citizens, Indian politicians, charity organizations, and Sikhs both in India and the diaspora. The neighbourhood continues to be produced by the everyday lives of residents living there as well as the national and transnational discourses around the survivors of 1984 that continue to operate in the everyday. The place of the colony therefore can be seen what Edward Casey calls a "keeper of memories" (Casey 1997,

213), acting “as a grid onto which images of items remembered are placed in certain order (Casey 1997, 183).

A focus on place aids us in thinking about the production of the colony as a specific place and the relationship between Sikh women’s bodies and where they live. As I explore throughout the dissertation, the place of the colony, through its production, has become a symbol in larger discourses surrounding contemporary Sikh identity. As Anne Murphy has argued, within the Sikh context, historical places and material manifestations of the ten Gurus<sup>20</sup> (such as objects used, worn, or gifted by a Sikh Guru) are important physical markers in the construction of a Sikh imaginary (Murphy 2012). These concepts are important to this work because Sikh women’s bodily experiences of violence take place *in* and are attached *to* the place of the Widow Colony and its specific configurations of local spaces.

Because the colony is far from being a bounded place, it has also become a centralizing node for national politics in India. During elections for example, at both the state and national level, the Widow Colony and the survivors of 1984 often come to the fore in political discourse (Panditl 2017; S. Tripathi and Haider 2016). Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP has often brought up the 1984 massacre in order to discredit the Congress Party. I would often see debates regarding the massacre on NDTV, India’s well-known news channel, during fieldwork in the months leading up to the 2014 national elections. The 1984 massacre then, is a central issue within the discourse circulating about Indian nationhood. And these discourses have also shaped, as we shall see, the bodies of widows affected by violence.

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<sup>20</sup> Sikhism’s teachings were established by ten male Gurus, or divine, enlightened spiritual messengers, beginning in 1469 with the first Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy text of the Sikhs, was declared the 11<sup>th</sup> living Guru by the tenth Guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, and is therefore treated by Sikhs with great reverence.

My understanding of gender and performativity among Sikh women in Tilak Vihar draws from contemporary feminist theory and feminist anthropology regarding the body. Gender is “performative” and “always a doing,” as Judith Butler has argued, (Butler 1990, 34) and it is this performativity and doing of Sikh women, in the specific ethnographic particulars outlined here, that this research seeks to examine.<sup>21</sup> Butler points towards the political possibilities of subversive actions that disrupt gendered assumptions and fictions – what she terms “gender trouble” – in which gender identities are confused, mobilized and multiplicitous. Yet my research also draws from Saba Mahmood’s critique of the use of Butler’s ideas by Western liberal feminism in her work on Muslim women and piety in Cairo (2005). Mahmood shows that orthodox Muslim women exploit gendered norms in some ways that redefine them through their own agency: they strategically employ and display gendered docility and passivity and call upon Islamic virtues to inculcate piety and navigate their marriages within patriarchal contexts. In a similar manner, as I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, women in the colony also follow a set of prescribed gender norms as to what a widow should behave like, openly eschewing their own agency, positioning themselves as passive subjects, and calling upon discourses surrounding God and belief to navigate their lives. Also, just as many Muslim women hone their raw emotions by repeated bodily actions in order to train desire, memory and intellectual conduct (Mahmood 2005)<sup>22</sup> so too do Sikh widows engage in bodily modes of restraint (limiting social interactions,

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<sup>21</sup> Drawing from speech act theory, Butler describes the performative as “that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (1993, 13). Butler argues that binary frameworks of gender and sex are “regulatory fictions” (1990, 46) that consolidate regimes of heterosexism and masculinity. Ortnor (1972), Haraway (1985), and Strathern (1988) call into attention the perceived universality of gender experiences and the ways in which gendered binary frameworks contribute to the assumption that women are *a priori* assumed to naturally embody feminine identities that are ingrained since birth.

<sup>22</sup> Mahmood argues that it is more effective to understand these practices by using an Aristotelian model of habitus as acquired excellence in a learned craft through repetition, rather than the unconscious power

for example), that are learned and repeated and work to position the Sikh widow here as a pious, de-sexed, more religious being. Mahmood argues that it is difficult for Western feminists to understand this willing docility and compliance with gender norms as a form of agency, which represent gendered performativities vastly different from Western liberal values.<sup>23</sup> My thoughts below regarding Sikh widows' behaviours also seek to illustrate that forms of gendered agency can be non-liberatory, challenging the idea that agency must always be tied to complete personal freedom. I do so by examining the ways in which the widows I worked with in Delhi carve out spaces of gender autonomy while also positioning themselves within societal constraints.<sup>24</sup>

Affects which play out in Tilak Vihar are entwined with and webbed to far-reaching political discourses affecting the everyday lives of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere. Affect theory allows us to more fully understand the relationship between bodies and their experiences in the colony. The 'affective turn' from the 1990s onward also provides opportunity for anthropology to pay attention to bodily matter and understand the relationship between violence and lived experience.<sup>25</sup> Emotions are the conscious rationalizations of affect, which are raw, visceral,

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of habitus through which social conditions become naturalized (Bourdieu 1977), which ignores the pedagogical process of habitus.

<sup>23</sup> Ong (1988) also comments on the crucial importance of recognizing different gender and cultural subjectivities as a response to the emancipatory framework of Western feminist thought.

<sup>24</sup> Gendered embodiment as social mediation has also been discussed by Ong (1988) and Boddy (1988), who discuss female spirit possession among young female workers in multinational factories in Malaysia and women in the Zar cult of Northern Sudan, respectively. Boddy and Ong point out how these affective experiences help recontextualize women's life experiences and act as a sort of embodied societal negotiation. Although the embodiment displayed by possessed women in both contexts is visceral, it also acts as a reflexive discourse that engages with morality, gender concerns and social boundaries. The outpouring of emotion in gendered religious practices of Sikh women around death and dying are of a similarly visceral quality, positioned within gendered constraints, and may aid in contextualizing and sharing loss and pain relationally with others.

<sup>25</sup> The study of emotions has burgeoned in the social sciences, encompassing diverse approaches (universal, relativist, materialist, romanticist, evolutionary, psychological, etc) (Lutz and White 1988). While the study of emotions, inner feelings, and experiences have held sway in social sciences such as psychology, this has resulted in a neglect of phenomenological aspects of emotionality. Affect theory was

bodily experiences (Beasley-Murray 2010). Affect is immanent; in other words, dependent upon relationships between things that happen in real time (Spinoza 1994). Baruch Spinoza's theory of immanent affect opens up notions of the subject from a bounded entity to one that is mediated and involved within a network of subjects and affectations. Deleuze (1988) elaborates on Spinoza's theory of affect to describe subjects as always in formation, multiply affected by a network of entities, and never complete. As such, emotions become fundamental to and entwined with political discourses and practices affecting everyday life, such as violence. Affects have political implications because they structure violent conflicts. Affect is an "index of power" and "feeling is a gateway to the immanence of politics (and to a politics of immanence)" (Beasley-Murray 2010, 127). Like the body, the concept of affect can also expose power relations in situations of violent conflict and illuminate how affective practices enable subjects to cope with death and violence (cf. Klima 2002). In the colony, we shall see how affect moves between bodies in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, a central site of prayer for widows and their families. This reveals the relational aspect of affect (the 'in-between') and immanence that has been picked up by Ahmed (2004), who argues that we must consider how emotions work towards mediating relationships between an individual and collective. Affect in its emphasis on the relational experiences of the unmediated, allow us to forge nodal links between subjects and experiences of violence in the colony. In the tight-knit space of Tilak Vihar, women's daily experiences and identity are socially bounded by the place they are in, and subjectivity is partly contingent upon and affected by other subjects in the same place.

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in part posited as a more feeling response to post-structuralism's and deconstruction's flat pronouncements of the 'death of the subject.' This is where affect, "webbed in its relations," is key (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 3).

With regards to the relationship between the body, embodiment and memory, social actors remember by, in, and through the body, for “there is no memory without body memory” (Casey 2000, 172). Bodily memory can be performative memory and indeed, in the colony, we see this in the women’s bodily memory of certain religious practices and bodily positions they take while in a religious place. These movements become habitual and have a certain consistency and repetitiveness, although they are by no means passive. In the space of the gurdwara, for example, we see Casey’s argument in action: that is, how habitual, enacted memory works on the whole body of the widows and provides them with an orientation to places.

Sikh women, their mourning practices, and religious practices can also enrich the discussion of religion and ritual and ritual practices (Tambiah 1979). For example, Sikh prayers, which often involve bodily movements (bowing, sitting cross-legged, standing with hands folded) complicates the older discourses that claim bodily prayers are not central forms of prayer (cf. Mauss 2003). Sikh women’s mourning in the context discussed above and in religious practices also allows us a richer understanding of Tambiah’s argument of ritual as a cultural elaboration of codes consisting of distancing oneself from spontaneous expressions of emotion (1979). While Sikh prayer, especially prayer corresponding to sacred text, often falls along prescribed lines of elaboration, the mourning practices of Sikh women exhibit both intentional and conventional behavior.<sup>26</sup> Sikh women’s affective experiences complicate the idea that ritual can help “control” experience (Durkheim 1915). Their experiences with mourning rituals also unsettle the notion that ritual can simply provide a tool for understanding the world (Douglas

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<sup>26</sup> A common earlier practice of mourning involved hiring a *siyaapa*: (“hired mourners” to attend funeral ceremonies): i.e. women who would wail, cry and exhibit exaggerated affects at funerals (cf. usage in Baldwin 2000). In a graduate student paper, Sunar has remarked that this performance of grief was often accompanied by a decrease in hygiene and appropriate clothing (Sunar, n.d.).



1966); indeed, such experiences show that rituals can provide a place where loss and grief perhaps cannot be understood but only enacted and sometimes circulated through raw bodily affects.

As this research discusses the legacy of events that have happened in the past, and how they are continuously born in and affect the present, the concept of memory is integral to my analysis. It is important to keep in mind the fluid nature of memory, and “how unreliable, how intermittent, how partial, how selective incorporated memory is, how incorporated memory lacks the kind of authority we want to invest in it” (Gilroy quoted in Bell 1999, 29). To remember something is not only to recall events or experiences; to remember allows us to bring meaningful narratives into our lives. The discourses of memory employed in this research are heavily influenced by the work of Edward Casey and his work on remembering (2000). We are determined in part by what we have experienced, and memory, Casey argues, is an important source of knowledge and allows us to know ourselves. Memory does not dissipate easily, and it is “co-extensive with world” (2000, 311) in that we are continually fashioned by “what we remember ourselves to be” (2000, 211), even if these memories call up a slightly different past every time. If this is the case, we can see how the social memory of Operation Blue Star and the 1984 massacre are embedded in the social worlds of Sikhs in India and transnationally. Sikh historical sites such as gurdwaras provide a means to materialize the Sikh past, and thus act as links between the past and the present (Murphy 2012). Within the “sacred geography” of Sikhism, for example, the place of Harimandir Sahib is seen as a spiritual and temporal center (Chopra 2010, 123). In the same way, the gurdwara in the Widow Colony acts as a physical site linking Sikh widow’s everyday lives to the massacre, thereby creating forms of social memory.

Memory involves various cognitive functions – recalling facts about the past, the

meaning of words, and spatiotemporal logics such as the layout of spaces in a particular time. Yet, it is not only a sole cognitive exercise done in isolation. Memory is also affected by those who are around the actors recounting memories. People always construct their memories in relation to others (Olick and Robbins 1998). In the same manner, many of the narratives of 1984 I collected in my fieldwork were told in relation to other bodies (myself, and at times my assistant and other family members) located in the room.

As noted by Paul Connerton (1989), commemorations differ from individual forms of memory in that they often call for a collective participation and provide an institutionalized version of history that has been given public sanction and fixes a particular ideological version of history. While commemorations can provide healing in that they create a collective channel to articulate painful experiences, what is remembered in commemorations are usually the product of sociopolitical and historical discourses of power.<sup>27</sup> Commemorations can bring about various configurations of meaning, and bring events in the past temporally forward (Connerton 1989). In the same way, forms of commemorations in the colony (whether the place of the colony itself or particular forms in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara) continue to bring forward the massacre so that it has a felt presence in the everyday lives of women and their families living there.

The theoretical orientations above informed my fieldwork methodologies in that they allowed me to consider how violence is constructed vis-à-vis bodily subjects, memory, affects and places in the Widow Colony.

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<sup>27</sup> As de Certeau argues, what gets determined as history is a particular version of how time has unfolded; history is a colonization of time determined by discourses of power (1988).

## **Clutching a Bottle of Pink Pepper Spray: Fieldwork Methodologies, Privilege, and Vulnerability**

My methodology primarily involved ethnographic fieldwork in Tilak Vihar, from December 2012 to March 2014. I did not live in Tilak Vihar but commuted daily from a well-off neighborhood in Central Delhi, known as Nizamuddin East. At times, I stayed in the neighbourhood of Ganga Ram Vatika with some family friends as it was a five-minute rickshaw ride to the colony. Since my research was strongly focused on issues of affects, bodily performativity, and movement within urban spaces, participant observation was a fundamental technique through which I observed Sikh women's bodily deportment, behaviours, clothing, mannerisms, gestures and movements by participating with them in their religious rituals and everyday practices. I gathered ten life histories of those living and working in the colony (nine women and one man) in order to situate the long-term life experiences of women who were affected by the 1984 massacre, with a particular focus on everyday life.<sup>28</sup> My fourteen-month fieldwork was interrupted by a roughly month-long break in the summer of 2013 due to typhoid I contracted in the field. In the initial phases of fieldwork, my status as a foreign researcher meant that there was an air of formality about my visits, and my interlocutors would refer to me as "*Madame-ji*," where the suffix *-ji* was used as a term of respect. Eventually, with a continued presence in the colony, people began to have more informal conversations with me in which they were clearly more comfortable about my presence.

Unstructured interviews were key to understanding how embodied practices are embedded

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<sup>28</sup> Two interviews taken with staff members of Nishkam were not audible in recordings due to interference from loud coolers which were situated nearby. I have not quoted these women directly, although their interviews inform this work.

in life trajectories and experiences. I conducted the interviews in Punjabi, Hindi and English. Some of the topics that I explored through open-ended questions included these women's upbringing, experiences of the massacre, religious beliefs, religious practices, social relationships, day-to-day experiences, kinship relations, community networks, experiences of widowhood and their overall experience of living in the colony. Audio recordings and handwritten notes were taken only with permission. All names and identifiable information of those residing in Tilak Vihar and elsewhere in Delhi have been changed to assure privacy and anonymity, and other measures were taken to ensure and safeguard the privacy of sensitive information. I held interviews in a mix of locations; most were in the informant's homes, with some carried out in the office setting of Nishkam. Some more controlled interviews were conducted with key persons who work in Tilak Vihar, whose names I have not changed as their work lies within the public arena (social workers, lawyers and various community advocates). I also employed the help of an assistant, a young woman who I will call Surjit, who lives in the colony and works for a scholarship fund housed in Nishkam. I also observed religious practices by maintaining a presence at the local gurdwara and partaking in religious holidays and events publically and privately.

In 2010, on my first visit, I first linked with the main organization in the Widow Colony, Nishkam, which as noted earlier is a large charity community organisation that provides a variety of social, medical, and employment services to the community. Nishkam agreed to aid my research by providing me access to their programs and community data, office space as needed and resources for facilitating interviews.

My methodology also included archival research which focused partly on 1984 and its immediate aftermath as well as on relationships in Delhi involving the Sikhs and other ethnic and

religious groups. Some research was taken at the Delhi State Archives, the Nehru Memorial Library, the Bhai<sup>29</sup> Vir Singh library, and National Archives of India, specifically on journalistic, legal, and governmental material related to Tilak Vihar and its inhabitants. However, access to archival material was a difficult, bureaucratically-heavy process bogged with administrative and technical issues and poor record-keeping. Some invaluable material has been gathered from Delhi-based scholars' personal libraries and collections of journalistic material. I also examined religious manuals, codes of conduct and other texts which specifically discuss gender and religious practice.

Oral history and the presence of Sikh women's narratives have been a key focal point around discussions of gender and religious practices. Oral history can be a methodological tool feminists find empowering, although this technique has been criticized for doing little to change the equations of power that underlie such work; while they continue to figure in the work of those that write about them, the subjects may recede in the background (Butalia 2000, p. 16). Women have been missing and marginalized, for example, in the canon of literature surrounding Partition, a key area of examination in South Asian studies because of its wide-ranging sociopolitical effects that heavily affected millions of Sikhs as well as other ethno-religious groups. Partition is entangled with gender relations not only because it affected women but also because of its situatedness as a reference point for violence in South Asia, and the gendered discussions of abduction, rape, and the-body-as-nation which have arisen from it (Butalia 2000; Das 2007; Menon and Bhasin 1998a; Menon and Bhasin 1998b; Misri 2014). Even when

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<sup>29</sup> The term *bhai* meaning brother in Punjabi and Hindi, is also often used to describe religious figures. Thus, many male religious custodians and men who perform hymns are referred to as "*Bhai*" as a form of respect.

narratives of Sikh women have been”“recovered” we cannot escape the problematic of representing another’s voice. Historiography however, can be feminist without being exclusively about women. Feminist historiography rethinks as a whole the framing of women; through such methods we can think of gender differences as both structuring of and structured by social relations (Sangari and Vaid 1989). The experiences of Sikh women in Partition and communal events in particular can shed light on anthropological understandings of how gender plays into the construction of nationhood and how notions of the nation are traditionally articulated through the body of the woman (Das 2007). Rather than imagining oral history and life narratives as reconstituting any one particular narrative of truth, we must view such narratives as one version of truth as it is witnessed by another subject in the present moment. The ethnographer is always already imparting a shape to narratives by their presence and their questioning. It was important for me to view narrative and the history of women’s lives not just as oral but embodied, and therefore narrative interviews constituted only one avenue of inquiry.

My fieldwork from 2012 – 2014 came at a critical juncture in the historical trajectory of violence against women in Delhi. I arrived in the city in the first week of December 2012, and, roughly a week later, a horrific incident, known as the Delhi Gang Rape, took place, which was to change the discourse on violence against women in the city.<sup>30</sup> After the gang rape, reports of violence against women in Delhi, ranging from street sexual harassment, known as “eve-teasing,” to killing, began to proliferate in the local and national media. The ensuing protests,

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<sup>30</sup> On December 16, 2012, 23-year old student Jyoti Singh Pandey left the Saket Cinema in South Delhi after watching the film *Life of Pi* with a male friend. Unable to find an auto-rickshaw outside of the cinema, the two boarded a private bus; her friend was beaten and knocked unconscious by seven men. While the driver continued to drive, in some cases past police checkpoints, Singh Pandey was gang-raped and beaten by the group of men. She sustained serious injuries. After numerous surgeries, she was flown to Singapore’s Mount Elizabeth Hospital for further treatment. She succumbed to her injuries and died on December 29th, and her body was cremated in New Delhi on December 30th.

news coverage, city-wide upheaval, and conversations around gender safety and India's "rape culture" were all my friends and I could talk about. Like many of my friends, I began to carry a bottle of pepper spray, which my hand clutched tightly inside of my bag, on my way home at night.

The Delhi Gang Rape and its resulting proliferation of discussions of violence against women in India made me particularly sensitive to my experiences as a single woman in living in Delhi,<sup>31</sup> and I navigated these experiences with much difficulty and distress. I eventually moved in with a flatmate, Tina, a professional dancer from Europe who had been living in India for the previous ten years or so. It was a beautiful three-bedroom flat in the posh, gated neighbourhood of Nizamuddin East in Central Delhi, of which I rented one bedroom. On the first and second floors, two elderly Sikh brothers, who co-owned the house, lived with their families. A couple rented out the third floor flat and lived with their toddler son, and Tina and I were on the fourth floor. Maids and domestic help used the rooftop above us to rest during the day or use the bathroom facilities.

Several episodes of violence unfolded throughout my fieldwork. There was the constant daily public sexual harassment<sup>32</sup> which I had come to expect after repeated visits to Delhi and Punjab throughout my childhood and my twenties. This came in the form of whistles, comments, songs, or being followed down the street for short periods of time, always subjected to the male gaze, on the street or on the metro. There was a young male colleague who began phoning me to

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<sup>31</sup> Whereas "Delhi," officially the National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCT Delhi) refers to the city and union territory of Delhi, including all 11 of its districts, New Delhi technically refers to one particular district in central Delhi which is the national capital of India. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, New Delhi is a smaller district of NCT Delhi. In this dissertation, I have used the terms much like many Delhiites use them – whereas New Delhi often refers to the more cosmopolitan areas of Delhi, Delhi refers to the city as a whole.

<sup>32</sup> This is often colloquially referred to as "eve-teasing."

ask me out for lunch, interrupting me at work, and one day loudly making a sexual joke in the corridor. There was the elderly, drunk cab driver who tried to grab me across the seat, or the museum curator of the International Museum of Toilets who sidled up to another PhD researcher from Michigan and I in the otherwise empty museum, put his arms around us, squeezed our shoulders and asked us to come to his office. There were my neighbours, the stylish young couple below Tina and I, who would incessantly spank and hit their three-year old boy throughout my time in the field, loud enough so that we could hear the dull thwack-thwack of him being hit and his subsequent wails.<sup>33</sup>

My experiences of violence overall in Delhi were of three dimensions— there was the violence the immediate circle of my friends and I experienced, there were the overall discourses of violence in the city, and there was the violence in my field site, Tilak Vihar. In addition, cities such as Delhi can be an unsafe place for women at night, due to unmarked roads, poor lighting, and police checkpoints (Phadke 2011). Due to these factors, and a previous experience of sexual assault in the city which had taken place many years ago, I felt that I was surrounded by violence, that it permeated the air everywhere I went. The Delhi Gang Rape particularly left me feeling vulnerable and more attentive to acts of everyday violence that previously, in my 20s, I would shrug off. In March 2013, for example, I was horrified to learn that a single woman in her 40s in the nearby neighbourhood of Lajpat Nagar was attacked by an Airtel bill collector, who was known to her, as he came by to collect monthly mobile phone payments. When the woman opened the door, he had forced his way inside and jammed an iron pipe in her throat to stop her

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<sup>33</sup> I remember writing my fieldnotes one evening and bursting into tears when I heard the child being beaten. After speaking to a few friends working on gender violence in Delhi, I tried to intervene in an innocuous way, which eventually led to the neighbour threatening to jeopardize the visa status of myself and my flatmate.



from screaming. The woman began throwing kitchen items in the hopes of alerting her neighbours. The man fled and was caught soon after. Among the many stories I heard after the Delhi Gang Rape, this paralyzed me the most, perhaps because the woman was only ten years or so older than me, and she was also single and lived nearby. The possibility of a similar attack felt very real. We decided to install a peephole in the door, and Tina suggested that we not open the door to any man when either of us was alone in the flat, even if we knew him.

Given the atmosphere in Delhi after the Delhi Gang Rape and continuing experiences of gender violence, much of my time in that city was spent learning how to cope with these factors and the difficulty women experienced in navigating the city. It was also initially difficult to get women in Tilak Vihar to feel comfortable speaking with me, and working with those who did required repeated visits and assurances of safety and confidentiality. Vicarious trauma was something I experienced after spending countless hours hearing about gruesome violence and witnessing the affective movements that came along with its retelling; these affects – the anxiety, stress, and a sense of panic – in some sense had also transferred into something I myself embodied at the time. For the duration of my fieldwork, I found myself less able to handle everyday gendered violence in Delhi and this affected my movements within the city and my research, where I would often retreat to the comfort of my apartment when overwhelmed by what I witnessed in the colony or the gender violence I experienced as a woman on her own.

The difficulties of life in Delhi, many of them structural issues around gender, often made me feel that I did not have adequate skills to navigate the city as a researcher on my own, that I was too thin-skinned and needed to “toughen up,” so to speak. I also felt like I needed a better framework than the oft-used insider/outsider framework (Mohanty 1991) that I had grown accustomed to inserting myself in as a budding anthropologist, one who shared many religious

and cultural affiliations with those around me in the field. On the flipside, I feared orientalizing violence in the way that so many had in the international arena after the Delhi Gang Rape (cf. Brown 2013; Cross 2013). After returning from fieldwork I would sometimes have dreams about the women in the colony and wake up with a heavy feeling in my chest. Back in Vancouver, I was forced to be more honest and upfront with myself about my experiences of violence in Delhi than I would have liked in order to move forward with writing. Thus, due to these factors, while I had initially imagined doing many more interviews, I chose to focus on working with a small group of women and therefore I cannot say that their experiences are completely representative of others in the colony. Those women who did speak with me, however, were eventually quite forthcoming and direct in articulating the violence they had experienced and the continuing violence and instability in their lives. Fieldwork tested many of my own presuppositions about women in the colony, the way they embodied widowhood, and their everyday lives. Their negotiations with widowhood status, the way they navigated through their kinship relations, and their resilience in the face of continuing structural violence continued to amaze me throughout my fieldwork. So too did their complicated, articulated relationship between memory, belief and religious practice.

Compared to my informants and other women in Delhi, I carried an inordinate amount of privilege while navigating the city. For example, I could easily go out at night because I could hire taxis or get rides in my friends' cars (Delhi's often chaotic roads made me avoid driving in the city). As a foreigner living without family I was not subject to the same gendered rules of comportment that other women in Delhi were, at least in the private sphere. Yet at the same time I was vulnerable in the way that other women were vulnerable, subject to similar forms of harassment, or the difficulty in getting things done as a single woman in the city. My friends and

colleagues in Delhi complied with the constraints placed upon them by their families because these constraints came with a tangible benefit: protection. As a single woman, without the immediate protection of family, my independence thus came at a cost. It is these experiences, set against the urban landscape of Delhi, that inform the topics I explore in this dissertation.

Finally, it is important to note that my own interest in the subject matter and therefore my fieldwork was strongly influenced by my own personal and family background as a young Sikh growing up in Vancouver in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the most vividly painful memories I have of my teenage years is when my *Chacha-ji*, or father's younger brother, was deported from Vancouver to India in the late 1990s. In the early 1980s, this uncle had been convicted of his involvement in violent militant activity and spent fourteen years in a jail in Lahore, Pakistan. I remember my family receiving a letter from him on blue paper, heavily censored and blacked out in places, where he had drawn stick figures of myself and my siblings, surrounded by flowers. It was his militant activity that contributed to my parents' silence around sociopolitical issues surrounding Sikhs while I was growing up, and my father especially wanted to keep distance from him and any and all associations with militant activity. Released in the early 1990s, my uncle came to Vancouver as a refugee and survivor of torture. Throughout this period, family members faced many difficulties as a result of his actions and the growing suppression of Sikhs in India and Canada. This was especially the case after the June 1985 bombing by Sikh militants of Air India Flight 182, where all 329 people aboard the flight were killed. In Canada, members of my extended family had their phones tapped and visas refused, and in India, some experienced harassment and torture by Indian police.

My uncle was eventually considered "a terrorist threat" by the Canadian government and, despite Amnesty International advocating on his behalf, was deported back to India. I remember

having to explain, embarrassed and confused, to one of my high school teachers that I needed to miss class because my uncle had been detained. A media frenzy ensued when he was taken away by two Vancouver policemen in the International Terminal of the Vancouver International Airport, while our family and his supporters watched.

Today, this uncle, my *Chacha-ji*, takes great interest in my work, and has a strong interest in human rights. It is partly through our conversations that my interest in Sikh women's experiences during the 1980s has grown, and he is the one who introduced me to women I interviewed in Amritsar for my earlier research project. In a sense, given my family's history of migration and experiences of sociopolitical upheaval, there have been trajectories of violence spanning between India and at home in Vancouver. Part of this ethnography then, is a slow journey to return to the experiences of my own family and women in the Sikh community. I remember my childhood and teenage years as a time of unrest and instability, and this instability was undoubtedly related to the experiences of my family, both nuclear and extended, as well as the political instability in Punjab and in Delhi during the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Overview of Chapters**

The first chapter, "Delhi: Life in the Widow Colony," is intended to immerse the reader in the fieldwork space - the city of Delhi and particularly the Widow Colony of Tilak Vihar, Tilak Nagar. I analyze the colony's buildings, layout, roads, and markets amid the space of the city. From its very inception it is clear that the colony is a marginalized place, highly gendered, poverty-stricken, and designated as a slum. I aim to move from a deep, thick description of the colony to a wider analysis of Delhi life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I call into attention how various temporal moments affect the movements, everyday health and rhythms of Delhiites, particularly those in the colony. I pay some attention to contemporary cleavages in Delhi along class lines.

In Chapter 2, “Ninety-Six Hours of Violence,” I discuss the sociopolitical events leading to the creation of the colony itself, and how women in the colony interrogate and remember the 1984 massacre. I bring forth particular informants’ experiences of 1984 as a way to provide a breakdown of more than four days of concentrated violence, the resulting displacement of Sikh families, and the designation of the Widow Colony. In Chapter 3, “Widowhood, Kinship, and Violence of Everyday Life” I analyze gender, violence, and urban space in the Widow Colony. I focus on contemporary lived and everyday systemic violence, thereby drawing a cyclical continuum between the 1984 massacre and contemporary everyday violence in the colony. I then move on to gendered violence pertaining to Sikh widows in the form of a historical stigma of widowhood and its present manifestations.

In Chapter 4, “‘I Get Peace:’ Religious Life in the Gurdwara,” I discuss affect and religious practice among women in the Widow Colony in detail. I provide a description of the space of the gurdwara, its history and relationship with the community and the gendered and affective religious practices there. I argue that the gurdwara is primarily a female place patrolled by males, a place that, through women’s practice and movements, becomes a sort of counterpublic, allowing women a place to socialize and heal in an area where there is no public space for women to gather. In Chapter 5, “Vessels of Remembrance: Gendered Commemorations in Delhi and Beyond.” I analyze the forms of commemoration that occur annually in the particular space of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, the “home of the martyrs.” This is a three-day *akhand path*, which is a continuous reading of the holy text, the Sri Guru Granth

Sahib,<sup>34</sup> from beginning to end, as a highly ritualized performance of gendered loss. Widows are called upon by the male establishment in the gurdwara to remember and commemorate. This chapter also analyzes the transnational commemorations of 1984, and how such experiences are also highly gendered and ritualized. I argue that the transnational Sikh diaspora has worked to place the women in the colony as “vessels of remembrance” or bodies that signify the 1984 massacre and its contemporary meanings. This emblemization of Sikh women, I show, is an effort to solidify a cohesive transnational Sikh identity that neglects the nuances of women’s everyday lives in the colony.

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<sup>34</sup> The word “Sri” is a respectful form of address often used in the Indian subcontinent. It is also widely used as an epithet to address holy entities, deities or revered persons. I have used this term throughout to refer to both the Sikh holy text as well as Sikh religious figures.

## Chapter 1: Delhi: Life in the Widow Colony

### A Tale of Two Cities

What has struck me most about Delhi over the years is the configuration of the city in relation to issues of caste, class, ethnicity, and the sharp demarcations between the poor and the rich. Although I have commented on this experience of class difference previously (Arora and Voegele 2013), it was not until my PhD fieldwork in Tilak Vihar that I really understood the depths of this difference. Although I worked in Tilak Vihar, where I was surrounded by families whose average monthly income was roughly Rs. 2500 (around \$37),<sup>35 36</sup> I lived in Nizamuddin East, a posh, leafy and gated neighborhood in central Delhi, surrounded by famous politicians, artists, lawyers and other white-collar professionals. Nizamuddin East is a neighbourhood where wealth and Western ‘expats’ flowed freely and security guards sat outside, guarding houses. Although there are middle-class communities in Delhi who neither live in precariousness or have elite lifestyles, I often felt that I lived in two cities at once: the gleaming neoliberal Delhi where men flashed expensive watches and women expensive handbags at megamalls, and its polar opposite – the Delhi of the disenfranchised, the Delhi of migrant labourers, the Delhi of “designated slums.” such as Tilak Vihar.

My daily journeys from Nizamuddin East to Tilak Vihar made me feel as if I witnessed all of Delhi and its contradictions during the long commute. The morning prayers from the Damdama Sahib gurdwara, the mosque in Nizamuddin West and the local *mandir* (Hindu

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<sup>35</sup> Families who make more than Rs. 500,000 (\$7470) per year are technically middle-class according to U.S. economic standards, but comprise less than ten percent of the population. I have reserved the term middle class, like Dasgupta (2014) does, to distinguish India’s middle class from the elite.

<sup>36</sup> All rupee amounts have been translated into their contemporary U.S. equivalents; see “Notes on Translation” above.

temple) would coalesce into a trifecta of sound, waking me up at dawn. I would switch on the water heater and have a quick breakfast of cereal, a protein shake or peanut butter on toast and fruit before getting dressed. I would usually wear Punjabi clothing in the field, such as a *salwar* (loose, tapered pants), or *churidar* (tight pants with folds at the ankle) and *kameez* (a long tunic), always accompanied with a long scarf, known as a *dupatta or chunni*. After ensuring that my valuables and notes were locked away in my bedroom closet, and leaving out some vegetables on the kitchen counter (a sign for Roshni, the maid, to make that particular dish), I would descend the steep, spiral marble staircase from our third floor flat. This usually entailed walking past my retired Sikh landlord, who would often already be fully dressed in turban, dress shirt and pants, leaning against the balcony railing watching the neighbourhood's movements. After slipping out of the house's gate and closing it behind me, I would walk to the nearest neighbourhood gate, past the many security guards sleepily standing outside impressive houses and the stray dogs sleeping under vehicles, and begin the sometimes arduous process of waving down and haggling with an auto rickshaw<sup>37</sup> to take me to the closest metro station, Pragati Maidan. If my intention was to leave early enough to catch morning prayers in the colony, my ride to the metro station was usually uneventful, except for the usual bumps and sudden, sharp twists and turns of the auto. If I left a bit later, around 9:00 a.m., the commute would be much more difficult, and I would often become stuck in Delhi's snarling morning traffic, which would feel even more unbearable because pollution permeated the atmosphere around the open air auto.<sup>38</sup> The auto

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<sup>37</sup> An auto-rickshaw is three-wheeled motorized version of a cycle-rickshaw, often usually referred to simply as an "auto."

<sup>38</sup> During winters especially, the pollution became unbearable for me, as someone who suffers from asthma, and so I had to hire a car for the day to avoid being exposed to the polluted air during the lengthy commute home.



would drive down the quiet, leafy green main avenue bounding Nizamuddin East, and I would catch sight of the impressive site of the Tomb of Khan-I-Khana<sup>39</sup> on the left.

There was a sudden shift of landscape when the auto would turn right and head down Mathura Road. Traffic in Delhi suffers from high congestion; daily vehicle passenger trips went from 1.98 million in 1966 to over 5 million in 2001 (Mishra 2000).<sup>40</sup> Given this congestion and the dense nature of Delhi's traffic, most cars turn off their engines when at an intersection and begin the agonizing wait for the light to turn green, which, in my experience, can be anywhere between 90 seconds to 15 minutes. When taking an auto, as I often did, waiting at an intersection would be a horrid experience on a hot day. Often exhaust from trucks and other vehicles made its way inside the auto, and one had to cover their mouth to avoid the belching vehicle exhaust and wait for the light to turn in order to have the wind hit and cool one off.

On the city's roads, Delhi's castes and classes encounter each other in a segregated way typical of daily interactions among its inhabitants. At every intersection Delhiites are immersed in a cacophony of people and events: haphazard traffic, wedding processions, whole families of sometimes four or more perched precariously on motorbikes, women, men and children demanding money, and others selling everything imaginable: magazines, balloons, children's toys, pirated novels, tissue boxes, cellphone chargers, cleaning cloths, and even seasonal goods such as Santa masks in December. Men clear their nasal passages, spitting on the street. Middle class and elite Delhiites may roll up the windows of their cars to avoid interacting with the homeless. Snippets of conversation between auto drivers and their customers and people on their

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<sup>39</sup> Khanzada Mirza Khan Abdul Rahim Khan-e-Khana (17 December 1556 – 1627) was a poet who lived during Emperor Akbar's reign.

<sup>40</sup> "If a city grows to be large enough so that it takes more than a couple of hours to commute to work, the productivity of such work activity is called into question" (Soni 2003, 4745).

cellphones can be heard. The light turns green and the bikes at the front of the intersection stall, and a crescendo of horns starts as the bikes and cars rev up and go on their way. Little allowance is made for walking in Delhi traffic although cars only account for roughly twenty percent of total transportation methods used in the city, which includes buses, auto rickshaws, cycle rickshaws, scooters, etc (Dasgupta 2014). Although the Delhi Metro sees an average of 2.3 million rides per day, the very poor and the very rich do not use it. Delhi's streets have many uses.

Labourers, religious pilgrims, and the homeless often sleep on the street, on road dividers (where there is less chance of being hit by a bike or car than the sidewalk), or under Delhi's many flyovers. Trees lining the sides of roads are used for hanging clothing, babies in hammocks, or personal possessions. I would often see this in both Tilak Nagar and Nizamuddin. Yet there is little allowance made for these uses, as Delhi is also a city of status on its roads, where "might is right." The middle and upper classes seem more concerned with who you are and what neighbourhood of Delhi you live in than your occupation or achievements. Hustling, bribes, status and privilege dominate the urban landscape, where smaller vehicles and foot traffic must give way to more expensive cars.<sup>41</sup>

I would arrive at the Pragati Maidan metro station, somewhat crumpled and sweaty from the heat and humidity, and go through the requisite security screening where officers would x-ray your bags, before generally entering the ladies compartment of the metro station. These compartments were instituted in October 2010 due to the high levels of gender violence and sexual harassment in the city. The east-west ride from Pragati Maidan station to the Tilak Nagar

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<sup>41</sup> Rana Das Gupta's *Capital* describes these issues at length (Dasgupta 2014).

metro station usually took around half an hour. I would fill the time by freshening up on the train,<sup>42</sup> reading the electronic signs, trying to memorize the names of the stations and the announcements, and observing the women around me. The women’s compartment to me always seemed to show the diversity of Delhi’s women – there would be a woman wearing a colourful sari, holding on to her children, eyes darkened with kohl, and a gleaming gold nosepin, and perhaps young college students taking selfies and women with briefcases and expertly pleated saris, Punjabi suits, or collared shirts and ironed pantsuits. After disembarking at the Tilak Nagar metro station, I would walk or find a cycle-rickshaw to take me to Tilak Vihar for the day.

### **The Widow Colony (Tilak Vihar, Tilak Nagar)**

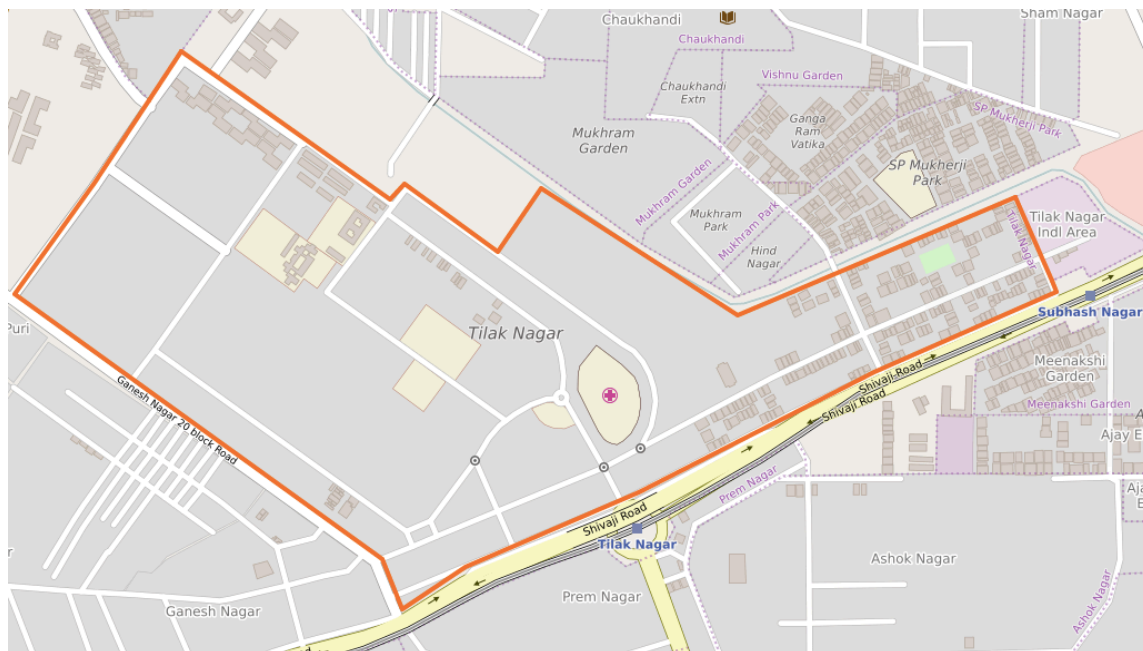


Figure 1.1 Boundary of Tilak Nagar<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> It is common after a day outdoors or a long commute in Delhi to wipe one’s face and neck with a handkerchief, a small towel, or a wet wipe, in order to remove soot and dirt. I would often be surprised at the streaks of black and grey dirt left behind on the wipes I used after doing so.

<sup>43</sup> Taken from (“OpenStreetMap” 2016). In this map, Tilak Vihar is the area showing buildings located northwest of the now defunct hospital. Ganga Ram Vatika, the neighbourhood where I stayed often as it was a short five-minute ride to the colony via cycle-rickshaw, is also visible on this map.

Tilak Vihar lies within the suburban boundary of Tilak Nagar, both named after Indian nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920). Tilak Nagar is known for its middle-class, business-oriented Sikh population although it is unclear if the location of the Widow Colony was chosen for this reason (Arif 2008). The market is a popular one in West Delhi and is well known for selling items used in Punjabi marriages. One gets to Tilak Vihar (*vihar* meaning dwelling in Hindi) from the main road leading from the Tilak Nagar Metro station. After passing the bustling Tilak Nagar market, its main roundabout, and going down Mangal Bazaar road, turning right at the intersection, and then veering left, one reaches the Tilak Vihar colony. The first block of the road is peppered with shops on the right hand side, including a mattress seller, a wedding card shop, and a butcher. Small oil manufacturing factories, mostly empty and in various states of ruin, line the left. Broken stones, rocks, and market rubble line the road. After passing the Tilak Vihar police station and a small school, which used to be the sight of the Nishkam Sewing Centre, the residential area of the colony starts. The colony is divided into seven blocks, and Blocks A, B and C, which fall under the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) slum wing, have been given as compensation to the survivors of the 1984 massacre, roughly 700 widows and their families, many of them Labana Sikhs originally from Rajasthan.<sup>44</sup> The buildings are four stories each, and the layouts of the flats originally contained a kitchen, bathroom, and a small front room. Extra rooms have been constructed by adding on rooms or creating wall divisions over the last three decades. The ground floor flats that face the street house small shops – a juice vendor, an art dealer, a property business, and others. There is a vast empty field behind Block C used for special events in the neighbourhood. B-Block also houses the large NGO “Nishkam,” and

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<sup>44</sup> The Labana community will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

directly behind Nishkam lies Shaheedganj Gurdwara, the Sikh congregational centre which was built in the mid-1990s to serve the Tilak Vihar colony. There are some makeshift slum homes here as well. During my walks to Tilak Vihar from Ganga Ram Vatika, the nearby colony where I stayed a few times with family friends, I would come across the same few slum houses, the families that lived in them, and the livestock they tended (a goat and some pigs).

Mornings in Tilak Vihar begin slowly, as in other parts of Delhi. In the early morning, around 5:30 a.m., the sounds of water filling buckets for the day can be heard in various bathrooms in homes throughout the colony (as in many parts of Delhi, water is only available sporadically). There are fewer cars here than in other parts of the city, and more scooters and bicycles, so by mid-morning the air becomes filled with the sharp buzz of scooter horns and the shrill ‘tring-tring!’ of cycle-rickshaw bells on the main thoroughfare as they take children, clad in their matching uniforms, to school. At this time of day, many residents, especially women, go to the Shaheedganj Gurdwara to *matha –thek*, or bow down to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib to pay their respects. While middle-aged and elderly women sit and stay for the entirety of the prayer service, many youth stop by briefly on the way to school, their packs jostling around on their backs as they bow down. Some women then leave for their daily chores, while others head to work via the metro or public transit.

The widows who have jobs outside of their domestic duties are mostly employed in menial, low-paid positions, known in Delhi as peon jobs, in offices and schools around the city. Some of their sons work as rickshaw drivers or factory workers in Shahdara. The main road, populated throughout the day by the many unemployed male youths in the colony, becomes busier as the shops open. A steady stream of visitors come in and out of Nishkam, perhaps to fulfill a prescription, visit the small library or obtain sewing supplies, sometimes stopping at the

little snack stand on the corner. Children play outside on the balconies, darting to and fro through the narrow hallways, and spill out onto the street. Snatches of television dialogue or music waft over the air, adding to the din of the street, and mixing with the smell of cooking. Some elders sit on chairs outside on the street level and chat over tea. Nearby the Tilak Nagar market becomes crowded, bustling with activity from shoppers and those travelling to and from the Tilak Nagar metro station. By mid-afternoon, the main street of the colony is filled with children travelling back from school, their maroon uniforms bobbing up and down as the rickshaws weave through traffic. During cooler months one may catch a glimpse of a wedding procession making their way through the streets, with the groom riding astride a horse. The evening is heralded by the shouts and swoops of children playing in the lanes, with Dalit children playing in the Harijan<sup>45</sup> colony close to Block A and Punjabi children playing across the street in Blocks B and C. Some parents and their children may head to the market to window-shop and people-watch. In the evenings, some residents, mostly women, walk once again to the gurdwara after work or their daily chores and childcare, before retiring back to their homes to make dinner, feed their families and perhaps catch up on a ‘drama’ (a serial television show) before bed.

It seemed to me during my stay that many women in the colony did not travel out of Tilak Nagar very often, at least compared to the relative mobility of other women in Delhi of similar caste/class background, other than to go to work or school, attend family functions or to shop with family or friends in a nearby market such as the Tilak Nagar or nearby Rajouri Garden markets. Although the large Pacific Mall is a mere ten minutes away by rickshaw, this place did not seem to be a popular destination for locals. It was rare for me to hear of local women

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<sup>45</sup> “Harijan” is another word for Dalit, meaning the untouchable caste. For more on caste divisions, see Chapter 3.

travelling farther than West Delhi in their typical daily life other than for work or schooling or perhaps visiting Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in Central Delhi. For example, when my assistant Surjit wasn't working or taking evening classes, she was generally at home with her family, with brief trips to the local market. She was not allowed to travel farther afield on her own, for her father accompanied her on the metro when she had to travel to other parts of Delhi, such as writing exams.

On an average day, I would arrive in Tilak Vihar sometime during the morning prayers in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara. After the end of prayers, I would head next door to Nishkam and spend some time researching in their library downstairs until my assistant, Surjit, arrived. On some days, we would head out to interview someone in the colony or I would follow up on previous visits on my own. Sometimes during the day, between appointments, I would have lunch, run errands or kill some time at the large Pacific Mall, just off the nearby Subhash Nagar metro station. At other times I'd have lunch with some of the Nishkam staff members. Most days I would spend time observing people coming in and out of Nishkam, noting why they came. I would at times use a desk in an empty doctor's office to write up notes.

Although I was interested in areas of the neighbourhood not inhabited by Sikhs affected by the 1984 massacre, I was hesitant to show up unannounced without any previous introduction to residents there, something I deemed to be too invasive at the time. Block A, for example, was an area where primarily Dalits, or those classified as the "untouchable" caste lived, I was told. Spatial segregation based on class and caste are a central dimension of life in Delhi. Caste divisions became clear early on in my fieldwork in my interactions with my assistant, Surjit, a young woman of about 23 years who led a fairly conservative lifestyle. Surjit was always dressed brightly and modestly, opting for blue jeans, long tunics (known as *kurtis*), and *salwar-kameez*,

her hair expertly oiled and fashioned into a long braid. Her mother had worked in Nishkam from its inception. Surjit’s movements around the neighbourhood were indicative of the spatial segregation of caste. On a sunny day in March of 2013, Surjit and I had hired a rickshaw for an hour to take us around the Tilak Vihar neighbourhood so we could devise a rough map of the main streets and buildings. After circling around the main market and Tilak Vihar’s Blocks B and C, I indicated to Surjit that we should cross the street and circle around Block A, adjacent to Nishkam. “No... we can’t go there,” she said. “Why not?” I asked, “It’s just across the street.” “Backward people live there.” “What do you mean?” I was surprised by her answer. “You know, backward people,” she said dismissively, with a wave of her hand. “I’ve never gone there.” The term *backward log*, or backward people, is often used by upper and middle-class Indians to describe India’s lower castes, particularly Dalits. In addition to this spatial segregation, it seemed to me that much of the administrative staff and board members of Nishkam were all from middle and higher castes.



Figure 1.2 The flats of Tilak Vihar as seen from the main thoroughfare



I commented in the introduction on the emotional difficulties of fieldwork and the vicarious trauma I experienced by interviewing women and listening to their life histories and their survival of the 1984 massacre. This made me avoid travelling to the field on days when I felt overwhelmed and decided to take refuge at home in the relatively luxurious comforts of Nizamuddin East, where I would work on my notes, read, write, catch up on correspondence, and perhaps visit Khan Market in the evenings to run errands, go to the salon, or meet friends for coffee or dinner. The sharp difference between life in my fieldsite in the Widow Colony and life in Nizamuddin East illustrates how Delhi contains multiplicities, and how class and caste intersect with urban space to affect the experience of daily life as one moves about the city.

Whereas the streets of Tilak Vihar are uneven and flanked by rubble, the front streets of Nizamuddin are more solid and concrete rather than raw, or unfinished. Tilak Vihar has no parks and little greenery or main thoroughfares. Residents in the Widow Colony generally do not employ servants, as they are unaffordable (some young women there actually work as servants or cleaners in other homes), whereas residents in Nizamuddin East, as elsewhere in urban areas in Delhi, take servants for granted. The middle and upper classes in Delhi have a naturalized manner of giving out orders and expect servants to respond in a manner reflective of their lower caste.<sup>46</sup> The deindustrialization that has defined the city in the past twenty years, and the rise of a service economy (Chatterjee 2004), was also clear in Tilak Vihar, where I noticed that the small factories that were once operating in the area were now abandoned.

In West Delhi, where Tilak Vihar is located, the population density varies from 64-145

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<sup>46</sup> There is a mutual dependence between household workers and their employers in middle and upper class Delhi, tinged with caste relations. Ideal workers should complete their work efficiently but remain subservient and distant; employers should be somewhat removed from their lives (I was chastised by friends many times for being “too close” to Roshni, especially when I told them she began to take things like salt and oil from the kitchen without asking).

percent higher than Delhi as a whole (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India 2016). In the colony, one can feel the congestion due to the large housing complexes and the presence of so many people. Delhi was ranked the most polluted city in the world in 2014, although this designation varies based on how particulate matter is measured (“WHO | WHO Global Urban Ambient Air Pollution Database (Update 2016)” 2016). The city is engulfed in a blanket of pollution from industrial and human waste, sewage, and vehicle pollution. In Tilak Vihar, the pollution is exacerbated by a nearby cremation ground as well as some auto-repair shops that often sent sparks and clouds of smoke flying into the air. The colony too, has much less greenery than other parts of Delhi; the large open air-dirt ground behind Blocks B and C seems like a wasted opportunity for a park. Indeed, travelling around the colony and the rest of the city (except Central Delhi and more elite neighbourhoods), one is faced with the ubiquitous presence of garbage everywhere blowing about the streets, or stacked up in small clearings on patches of land or along fences bordering main roads.

In Tilak Vihar, the housing provided as compensation to widows and families of those killed in the 1984 massacre are classified as “designated slums” by the DDA, although the neighborhood is comprised of concrete housing. No one I spoke to seemed certain about what the place looked like before 1984, only claiming that they were DDA flats (often designed to be used by lower-level civil servants) that had remained empty and were put to use as compensation. Visits to the Delhi Slum Wing office and the local tax office were of little benefit; I was unable to gather any pertinent information from any staff there, and my questions about the planning for the flats, blueprints, and ownership were left unanswered.

The housing in the colony continues to face contentious issues relating to regional and national politics. During the Delhi State Elections in 2013, for example, I had heard from my

family friends in Ganga Ram Vatika that a certain politician had hired vans to drive around Tilak Nagar and the vicinity and give out plates of food that had five hundred rupee notes slipped inside them. Politicians from one of India's national political parties had also sent construction workers to the colony. Without any prior discussion with the community, the construction workers began mixing cement and patching up holes in the infrastructure. When asked by locals about what they were doing there, the workers stated that the party had sent them to repair the colony, and that those in the area should make sure they vote for them. As the outdoor hallways in the colony were too small for storing construction materials, the workers were throwing heavy bags of cement into people's living rooms, raising thick clouds of powdered cement dust in people's homes. Trickling water, scaffolding and wet cement seemed to be everywhere. It came as little surprise that the construction workers left the repairs as is on election day and never returned. It was clear that this had been another political tactic employed to garner votes within the colony.

### **The Annual Rhythms of the City**

Delhi is also a city of extreme weather patterns, with temperatures swinging between zero and forty degrees Celsius in a few short months. This means that everyday life and movement in the Widow Colony, and in the whole of the city, is profoundly affected by the climate's annual rhythm. Due to its position between the Thar Desert and the Himalayas, Delhi experiences both extreme cold and extreme heat, coalescing in a chilly winter, a short, relatively pleasant spring, and long summers subdivided into unbearable heat waves and muggy monsoons.

Delhi's winter comes as a welcome respite from the soggy heat of the monsoons, and lasts from November to March. Temperatures average around twenty-nine degrees Celsius and drop to a bone-chilling zero degrees at night due to cold winds from the Himalayas - a cold made

worse by the fact that almost no one, other than hotels, has centralized indoor heating. Residents in Tilak Vihar make do with wearing layers of wool clothing or the use of small radiant or oil heaters – some place hot water bottles in their beds to keep warm. In the dead of winter, heavy fog envelops the sunlight, causing a reduction in temperature, and greatly reduces visibility. The fog becomes so dense that, from early dawn until about nine in the morning, one could step outside and put their hand in front of their face and watch it slowly disappear in a milky grey haze. Flights are cancelled, and people are late to work as public transportation is often halted. Finding autos at that time was very difficult during fieldwork - they simply did not come into the Nizamuddin East main road until the fog lifted - and I could not leave for the field until about 9:30 AM as visibility was almost non-existent and travelling to the metro station became difficult. As it became dark very early, I often had to leave Tilak Vihar early too, so the time I spent in Tilak Vihar during the winter months was cut significantly - from about eleven in the morning until four in the afternoon. In addition, the low cloud cover causes heavy smog, and there is an increase in pollution and pollution-related ailments, which peak during the popular Diwali<sup>47</sup> holiday when the city erupts in fireworks. I would often hear of these ailments affecting Tilak Vihar residents when women engaged in conversation with each other at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara. It is not uncommon for some Delhiites and foreigners to wear masks at this time to cut pollution exposure or cover the lower half of their faces with handkerchiefs or shawls. I had a package of N-95 masks for this purpose that I used during heavy pollution days or when my asthma flared, which I would take off before getting to Tilak Vihar to avoid bringing more

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<sup>47</sup> Diwali is a Hindu festival celebrated during Autumn. At the same time, Sikhs celebrate *Bandi Chhor Divas* (Prisoner's Release Day), some Buddhists celebrate Ashoka's conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, while Jains celebrate the liberation of the soul of Mahavira. For these reasons, Diwali has taken on a broader meaning and the time of Diwali is arguably the largest holiday period in North India.

attention to myself. Clothing takes days to dry, and clothing normally removed from Tilak Vihar balconies within a couple of hours in the summer may remain for a day or more in the winter, given the cool, damp weather. The feeling and smell of dampness never leaves from bedding and towels. Summer's starched cottons are replaced by wool blends and polyester for Delhi's middle and lower classes, and wool and silk for Delhi's elite. One wakes up half an hour earlier to turn on the water heater, locally referred to as a geyser, to ensure hot water for bathing. If one doesn't have access to a geyser, one fills a bucket with water and precariously dangles a lightbulb near it to heat it, or boils water. Shawls come out of winter closets and people begin wearing toques or stuffing bits of cotton in their ears to keep the cold out. Women begin wearing toe socks with their sandals. Winter is when Delhi's cultural life truly comes alive, and there are many festivals (Diwali, Dusshera, Christmas, New Years, Gurpurab), cultural events (literary fairs, theatre, musical shows) and winter bazaars and craft fairs. Sunny winter weekends in the colony are a time for visiting the local Tilak Nagar market, the heavily Punjabi neighbourhood of Rajouri Garden, or perhaps heading into Central Delhi and taking a trip to the historical Bangla Sahib Gurdwara. In posher areas, these weekends are time for friends to get together over tea and roasted peanuts in gardens, on or in courtyards or café and restaurant patios throughout the city. Influenza, viral illnesses, pneumonia and asthma-related complaints rise, explained by residents to be a result of "weather change." Delhi's spring is short-lived, from mid-February to March. In Tilak Vihar this is heralded by children shedding their acrylic and woolen sweaters while playing outside, by laundry once again hung to dry outdoors and by some residents on the ground floor and their visitors sitting on plastic chairs in the street, drinking tea. In posher areas of Delhi, residents flock to gardens and parks for picnics, games of cards with friends and lunch breaks outside.

The vibrancy of Delhi's cultural life begins to fade as the temperature rises. Summer lands in Delhi from April to June, and it is an assault on the body, an "annual subjugation of the spirit" (Gokhale 2001, 144). Temperatures peak at 48 degrees Celsius and average about 40 degrees Celsius in the summer months. You are sweating the moment you step out of the shower, and your clothes remain sweaty and damp all day. Your only reprieve is that everyone else is overheated and grumpy, and everyone complains irritably about the heat. Incidences of road rage, water disputes, and street arguments all increase in the summer. One's irritation at the heat is increased by the constant whirl of ceiling fans and air conditioners, and of noisy inverters and power generators during almost-nightly power outages. The power cuts, particularly in the colony, are frequent due to an inadequate electrical system and overloading in the summer months. When the power goes out, often one steps outside to confirm that it is not just them, that the rest of the power on the street has gone out too; "the light is gone" is a common phrase. As the residents of Tilak Vihar cannot afford backup generators, the ceiling fans often remained motionless throughout the day. The midday heat at times feels unbearable, especially after the heat of cooking on a gas stove, and, for the widows and their families who are home for the day, a mid-day nap is one option to pass the time. During warmer months people in the colony would often leave their doors open to get some cross-breeze. Given the narrow layout of the hallways, one can often catch a glimpse of life inside the flats while passing through.

Delhi is buffeted by what is called "loo," or hot winds due to the proximity of the Thar Desert, which create intense dust storms that make the air appear yellow and cause a flurry of activity as people take shelter and shut all windows and doors. These dust storms are then often followed by quick, sudden thunderstorms. Taking an auto-rickshaw can feel torturous at this time. It feels like a hot blow-dryer is blowing on your skin as the auto goes along, and one tries

in vain to cover exposed skin with a scarf or other belongings. Shawls and toe socks are replaced with cool, starched or flowy cotton and soft cotton muslin clothing in light colours. For those families in Tilak Vihar that had them, evenings found people in their bedrooms under the damp air of the cooler. I was considered a more formal guest, so interviews would generally take place in the front drawing room except with Harnoor Kaur,<sup>48</sup> a widow living in the colony, where many of our talks took place in the open area between her kitchen and bedroom as well. I observed that large beds in colony bedrooms often become impromptu sofas, work desks and dining tables, as families often eat their meals together, study, have tea, or watch TV on the bed in order to remain in the one room that may have a water cooler in it.<sup>49</sup> In Tilak Vihar, there is no escaping the heat unless one heads to the closest air-conditioned mall (Pacific Mall), and one must learn how to cope until the beginning of the monsoon brings with it a promise of cooler temperatures.<sup>50</sup>

The monsoons arrive with force around the end of June until early October, driving up the humidity, with heat hovering at just below forty degrees Celsius, although immediately post-monsoon there is a certain level of cool breeze. The sudden, heavy rainfall stops Delhi in its tracks; plans are put on hold, traffic slows to a crawl and many taxis and autos await the end of the rain before braving the streets - and charging two to three times the price to do so. Auto rickshaw drivers unfold their tarps and those on motor bikes cover themselves up with garbage

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<sup>48</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to women and men as either Kaur or Singh, respectively, in place of their surnames. Kaur and Singh are commonly used as middle names or surnames among Sikhs. I use these terms for two reasons: firstly, it is how most in the colony identified themselves, and secondly, it allows for greater confidentiality than using any surnames given.

<sup>49</sup> For middle and upper class Delhiites who can afford air conditioning, families often gather in a single bedroom under the cool of one air conditioner, which is more cost efficient than installing ACs in larger areas of the house. I have experienced this during repeated stays with family in Delhi and Punjab as well.

<sup>50</sup> However, Delhi's elite seem to desert the city for cooler temperatures elsewhere - Europe, America, or Canada perhaps, leaving affluent markets such as Khan Market relatively empty.

bags or whatever material they have handy; seeing Sikh men on their bikes whizz by with colorful plastic bags covering their turbans is a common sight. Puddles are everywhere, and motorists create showers of water that splash pedestrians passing by. The monsoon clogs traffic and clogs drains too, flooding streets and wearing away at roads. In the colony, the flooding on the sides of the road hides the rubble beneath, making walking along the main road treacherous as one is never exactly sure what lies underfoot. The rain falls in continuous sheets around colony homes. Due to the layout of the flats, stairs and entrances of the open-air hallways may be affected by the rain, making it difficult to cross these areas without getting wet. Often the wetness from outdoors will seep its way into the front rooms of the colony, either through rain or the wet imprints of its residents. The increase in water intensifies monsoon-related diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and mosquito-related illnesses such as dengue; often these illnesses would be a topic of discussion by women visiting the Shaheedganj Gurdwara. By late October, the temperature gradually drops to less than 30 degrees Celsius on average, and winter begins again.

After a day of fieldwork, I would often leave Tilak Vihar around four in the afternoon due to the lengthy commute home and concerns over safety after dark. Taking a cycle rickshaw back to the metro station, I would then take the train from Tilak Nagar metro station back to Pragati Maidan before finding an auto to Nizamuddin East. It was at this time that traffic was at its worst. At one particular intersection in Pragati Maidan, I remember waiting an agonizing fourteen minutes for the light to change green. During the long traffic light, I sat sweating in the heat, the back of my shirt sticking to the warm faux-leather seat bench, while horns blared around me and hot, gritty black exhaust from a bus and the surrounding cars blew into the open air of the auto and into my face. Back home, I would sometimes go to Café Turtle, the local café frequented by Nizamuddin residents, for a drink or a bite to eat and catch up on work. As the



café filled with French expats, it became once again very apparent how segregated the city was. This segregation was not natural to the city but the product of a particular history, in which the massacre of 1984 was a major force in the spatial reordering of Delhi.

### The Making and Unmaking of Modern Delhi



Figure 1.3 Current administration divisions of Delhi (Government of India 2013)

The landscape of contemporary Delhi in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has come about through a few key factors: the British attempt to tame the perceived chaos and disorderly nature of the city through caste and class segregation, Partition’s effect on religious segregation in the city, and more recent attempts to destroy slum housing and displace poor Delhiites in the name of neoliberal modernization and beautification. The British view of Delhi at the turn of the century outlined the city as too dangerous, too unruly; it was a space that needed to be controlled, especially during incidences of rioting or communal or religious processions. Thus, Delhi was planned as an ideal imperial capital and a symbolic showcase for modernity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

(Legg 2007).<sup>51</sup> The planning of Delhi attempted to turn the city into a secure, orderly capital, and its residents into politically docile bodies.<sup>52</sup> The new capital, with its wide boulevards, paved roads, greenery, and modern spatial order, would be a showpiece for the rest of India, seeking to hide what was unaesthetic, i.e. brown bodies at work and unsightly modern industrial production (Sharan 2006). Today, central Delhi still embodies this imperial, orderly vision. Yet, the “unruliness” of the city and its outskirts as a whole has sprawled past New Delhi, so much so that the majority of Delhi bears little resemblance to the city’s core.

The Delhi of post-independence was one of partition socially, demographically and politically. New Delhi was officially declared the capital of India on Independence Day, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. In the decade after Partition, Delhi had been one of the most hastily built and chaotic refugee colonies. Partition drove many Muslims out of the city into Pakistan and Sikhs and Hindus refugees in, and there was a high influx of migration from rural areas, leading to an acute housing shortage.<sup>53</sup> The government had declared Muslim property evacuated; those Muslims

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<sup>51</sup> On December 12, 1911, the British colonial administration announced that the imperial capital would be shifted from Calcutta to Delhi under the planning of British architect Edward Lutyens. The vision of Delhi after being commissioned in 1911 to represent the British Raj took twenty years to complete, and remained the capital through the civil disobedience movement in the 1930s until 1947. The name “New Delhi,” also known as Lutyen’s Delhi, came into parlance in 1927, and the capital was inaugurated on February 13, 1931.

<sup>52</sup> Much like other Indian cities, the aim was to establish colonial order and contain indigenous rebellion through improvements in city planning and sanitization (Sharan 2006).<sup>52</sup> As Margo Huxley argues, governmentalities involve causal environmental and spatial logics, including logics of spatial arrangements, which can have effects on discipline and codes of conduct (2007).

<sup>53</sup> The 1941 census counted a population of 918 000. As a result of Indian Partition in 1947, six hundred sixty thousand remained while three hundred thirty thousand Muslims left the city to cross the border; at the same time, five hundred thousand non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan arrived in the city. The sudden increase of migrants after Partition, especially Punjabis, almost doubled the population of Delhi in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. A number of colonies around Delhi came up quickly, including Lajpat Nagar, Malivya Nagar, Kailash Colony, Moti Nagar, Kirti Nagar, Kingsway Camp, Gandhi Nagar (Shahdara), and Kalkaji. The Punjabi migrants were mostly middle class, urban, and more formally educated than the previous population of Delhi and settled quickly, whereas those who were poorer rural immigrants had difficulty finding adequate housing.

who tried to return to their homes in Delhi were often met with hostility by Hindu and Sikh refugees (Zamindar 2010). These movements strained Delhi's urban infrastructure and changed the structure from the historically Islamic city of Shahjahanabad, to a planned city rigidly ascribing race and rank segregation during the colonial period, and then, to a city with a high proportion of non-Muslim Punjabi migrants and peasants (cf. Pandey 1997; Waldrop 2004; Zamindar 2010).

The gradual restructuring of the Indian economy in the 1990s after Rajiv Gandhi came to power, followed by later governments, led to a liberalization of the Indian economy from a closed and centrally planned economy, partly due to an increased circulation of global images now received through cinema, travel, internet, television, and a global flow of capital and goods. International companies began establishing themselves in Delhi and nearby areas such as Gurgaon and Noida, affecting class and caste relations in industry. This liberalization of India's economy and shifts in class relations in cities led to a marked transformation of relationships between castes and classes, and increased forms of spatial segregation.

Coming back to the 1980s then, the events of 1984 are watershed moments that changed the fabric and atmosphere of Delhi, creating lasting political and social repercussions and facilitating this segregation. It is viewed by many contemporary Delhiites as the first sign of a general feeling of increased division and aggression in the city. In a study of Zakir Nagar, a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in South-East Delhi, Nida Kirmani shows that many Muslims living in Muslim areas hold the sentiment that it is safer for them to stick together (2008). In Kirmani's study, the 1984 violence was discussed as a major episodic event that contributed to a sense of fear among Muslims and left a lasting impression on people's memories. As all classes of Sikhs were affected by 1984 and lived in mixed neighbourhoods, the

persecution of Sikhs contributed to a sense of vulnerability for middle-class Muslims and acted as a warning for Muslims to live amongst themselves: if Sikhs as a minority could become a target when they generally maintained a somewhat positive reputation in the city, then it stood to reason that Muslims could easily become targets as well. The Sikhs I spoke with in Delhi throughout my fieldwork, regardless of caste and class, echoed these concerns; many who lived through the violence of 1984 had already experienced the violence of Partition first-hand or through their ancestors and relatives and carried that sense of fear and uncertainty with them. Religion-based insecurity is also dependent on one's social positioning and dictated by class, gender, age and other factors such as urbanization, neighbourhood development and migration. The 1984 massacre, in this regard, served as a turning point for the urban social organization of space in Delhi and communal relations, as well as a critical part of Delhi's collective memory.<sup>54</sup> Further, the extreme violence of 1984 was the force that furthered social tensions in Delhi and created the site of the Widow Colony in the first place. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the massacre unfolded.

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<sup>54</sup> As discussed above, a number of elite Delhi neighbourhoods put up gates patrolled by security guards during the 1980s and 1990s, a process referred to as gating or fortification (Waldrop 2004).

## Chapter 2: Ninety-Six Hours of Violence

Time has only its vagrant finger:  
Knowing no equal, it paused for massacres.  
(Ali 2011, Section IV: Qawwali at Nizamuddin Aulia's Dargah)

### October 31<sup>st</sup> – The Beginnings of a Massacre

How does a massacre take place out in the open, on urban streets?<sup>55</sup>

On October 31<sup>st</sup>, sometime between 9:15 a.m. and 9:20 a.m., Prime Minister Gandhi was shot by her two Sikh bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh, outside her residence at No. 1 Safdarjung Road while on her morning walk, and was taken to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi. At eleven o'clock, an announcement was made on All India Radio stating that she was in critical condition and that the guards who shot the Prime Minister were Sikhs. The shooting was also mentioned via BBC later that day around one thirty in the afternoon.<sup>56</sup> As the morning wore on into the afternoon, large crowds began to gather around AIIMS and some isolated incidents of Sikhs being attacked in that area were reported. A few violent incidents were committed that afternoon in South Delhi, particularly near AIIMS where

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<sup>55</sup> As the following chapter examines the violence in October and November of 1984, it is also prudent to mention how this violence was, according to one local resident, prophesied. Surjit's Kaur's mother Puneet Kaur remarked to me that the 1984 violence was prophesied in the eighteenth century text *Sau Sakhi* (cf. Attar Singh 1873). *Sau Sakhi* literally translates to "100 stories" – a book of anecdotes about the tenth Guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, although the authenticity and role of the text is in question. Puneet emphasized that one line in the *Sau Sakhi* was indicative of this prophecy: "one widow will come, and leave hundreds of widows in her wake" ("*Ek randi aayegi, sau banakhe jayegi*"). Note the double usage of the term *randi*, which in popular usage can refer to both widow and whore. I have not been able to find reference to this in the text. The sense of general calamity that is present in the *Sau Sakhi* is common to such texts in this period, although the exact dating of the text is unclear (Murphy, personal communication).

<sup>56</sup> There are some disagreements about the involvement of the media during the massacre. While official commission reports argue that there was no basis to allege that Doordarshan and AIR gave out information that Gandhi's assassins were Sikhs, others argue that the radio stations fueled violence by pointing out the religious identity of the killers.

Indira Gandhi's body was being treated. It was around this time that slogans against Sikhs began being heard, particularly "*khoon ka badla khoon* (blood in revenge for blood)."<sup>57</sup> This slogan was first heard being shouted by a Congress Party organizer in the trans Yamuna area during a speech he made around three o'clock in the afternoon, and was later picked up and made into a popular chant used by perpetrators over the span of the massacre (Kishwar 1984). Violence against Sikhs also began to be committed elsewhere in India, particularly Calcutta, Madras, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. At four o'clock in the afternoon, Gandhi's son, Rajiv Gandhi, arrived at AIIMS after travelling from West Bengal. By this time, shutters were down in most shops in the city and markets were closed. The cavalcade of President Zail Singh, a Sikh, was stoned on its way to AIIMS about an hour and a half later (P. Singh 2009).

I first interviewed Harnoor Kaur, a fifty-six-year-old woman who survived the massacre, in the autumn of 2013, after meeting her in the local gurdwara. It had taken me some time to introduce myself to women in the colony and create a sense of rapport, yet even after being in the field for more almost a year at that point, I was anxious about interviewing Harnoor Kaur. My nervousness rose the higher I climbed the narrow, steep steps to get to her flat. Harnoor Kaur greeted me warmly. We sat in the small front room, where the majority of my interviews later took place with women. Harnoor Kaur told me in a hushed tone that, on that fateful day, her husband had come home from working in Chandni Chownk, a bustling commercial area in Old Delhi. While we spoke, her attitude was as if she was telling me a big secret she had been keeping within – her voice was low, yet carried an air of revelation. He told her, she

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<sup>57</sup> One official commission report (Misra Commission 1986) states that this slogan did not come into effect until the 1<sup>st</sup>, and the Prime Minister attempted to stop them, but this has been contested (Citizens' Commission 1984).

remembered, that there seemed to be a lot of chaos in the area, and that he had overheard others saying that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been killed. Harnoor Kaur says she had no idea what would occur over the next few days. This surprise was mirrored by Harbhajan Singh, one of the board members of Nishkam. He remembered that earlier that morning he was on his way to his office in Kashmiri Gate from his residence in Tagore Garden. With an air of incredulity, he told me in English, “Actually on that particular day when Mrs. Gandhi was shot at, I was on my way to my office. And I went there, fully knowing that something has happened. But I was not knowing ... that Mrs. Gandhi is in a very critical condition, because it was not officially declared.” Later on, he came to know that Gandhi had already died earlier on that morning. “I decided that things may get wrong. I asked my friends, is it better that we should try to reach safely at home.”

Amar Kaur, another widow living in the colony, also discussed how her husband came home in a rush after he discovered that Gandhi had been shot:

You know on the 31<sup>st</sup>, when she was killed, when Indira Gandhi was killed, we closed the shop thinking some big officer had died [someone in a high position]. We were worried and didn't even make food.... we were here in Mangolpuri. She died on the 31<sup>st</sup> [and] on the 31<sup>st</sup> *Sardarji* [her husband] shut the shop and came. The poor man came home worrying that an officer had been shot. We didn't make food or anything that night. We just went to sleep hungry in respect for the deceased [Gandhi] and went to sleep.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, oral testimonies of the 1984 massacre and its aftermath are few and far between, particularly in anthropological literature. The narratives I present below overlap each other in that there are several common experiences that arose during and after the violence of the event. In this chapter I discuss in detail the four days of violence affecting the people who were subsequently confined to the Widow Colony in late October/early November 1984, which, up until that point, had been considered the worst instance of violence

since partition (Malik 1986) and the sociopolitical events leading to the creation of the colony itself. I provide a breakdown of ninety-six hours of concentrated violence in Delhi which resulted in the killing of roughly thirty-five hundred men, the displacement of Sikh families, the inculcation of feelings of terror and fear, and the eventual designation of the Widow Colony as a place for rehabilitation. Evidence shows that the Delhi administration, including Congress leaders and party members, as well as the police, were involved in organizing the massacre and allowing it to proliferate, resulting in grievous harm against Delhi Sikhs (Citizens' Commission 1984; PUCL-PUDR 1984; PUCL-PUDR 1987). I then aim to tease apart fraught discourses on "communal violence" and "riots" in South Asia particularly, paying close attention to theoretical debates regarding violence. The discourse of "communal violence" was employed by the British in the colonial era to describe violence between India's religious and ethnic groups, grounding explanations in group difference rather than larger, more pervasive sociopolitical factors. This discourse continues to be used widely in the post-colonial state of India, almost exclusively, to describe such violence.<sup>58</sup>

An understanding of the inevitably fraught and affectively charged nature of the memory of traumatic events is critical to the discussion of the massacre. Das describes "critical events" as those events that bring about "new modes of action," creating lasting changes and redefining traditional categories (Das 1995, 5–6). Although events bring about "new and unexpected terrains" in everyday life (Das 1995, 5), they themselves do not arise spontaneously. Watershed events such as Partition or the massacre of 1984 are predicated by a lengthy history of conflict and lead to long-lasting ramifications. As such, the violence of the event must be "de-eventified."

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<sup>58</sup> For example, the discourse on communal violence features heavily in discussions of recent violence in West Bengal between Hindus and Muslims (cf. A. Ali 2017; Firstpost 2016).



i.e., given the recognition that it institutes new modalities of historical action (Das 1995, 5). A recognition that violence and its aftermath reaches far into the future of the event enables us to escape the fixed temporality of how violence is discursively constructed in discussions of the 1984 massacre and similar events (see chapter 5). The catch-all phrase “1984” as a term to describe the totality of experiences in relation to the massacre and the following three-plus-decades lacks a recognition of the afterlife of a violent event and its temporal depth, which plays out in everyday life. As such, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, violence and its aftereffects continue long after the immediate grievous event has ended. The experiences of the widows in the years since the massacre pushes Das’s argument further in that they show how affect and memory also become “de-eventified” in certain configurations of places, creating legacies of violence.

As discussed in the introduction, there were some key elements leading up to the violence, including Partition, and factors known collectively as the “Punjab Crisis:” the vacillating attitude of the government in addressing socio-political demands, the rise of Sikh fundamentalism in response to this, spearheaded by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his supporters, and, as a result of these factors, the rising tensions between Sikhs as a minority and the Hindu majority. Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards four months after the attack on Harimandir Sahib known as Operation Blue Star. Following this, a retaliatory massacre was carried out against Sikhs in Delhi, abetted and in part organized by the Congress at that time.

During the duration of my fieldwork, I collected ten more formal interviews with Sikhs who lived and worked in the area, with some interviews spanning multiple days. In the past ten years, I have interviewed or spoken to widows, other Sikhs in Delhi and abroad, lawyers, academics, family members, and activists who were involved in relief camps after the violence. Early in my fieldwork I came to a realization that there were many common themes throughout my

interviews with widows in this area, such as how the neighbourhood came to hear about the violence on October 31<sup>st</sup>, police inaction, similar experiences of witnessing male loved ones get attacked and/or killed, and being taken to relief camps after the Indian army came in to stop the mobs. The time it took for the violence to stop is also something that recurs in these accounts. “Three days” was a refrain I had often heard or read to describe the duration of the violence, referring to October 31<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup>, although the violence spanned for longer than that. People emphasized that during the violence they were without proper clothing, often without food or drinking water, and talked about the experience of trying to protect and provide for their children during this violent time.

In the narratives and retellings of the violence, there is a strong presence attributed to the perpetrators of what Stanley Tambiah, in his work on crowd violence, has discussed as “levelling” – the reduction of the other to the same level as one’s self, the pleasure of causing fear in others and immersing one’s self in a crowd (1996). As Liisa Malkki argues, it is relevant to ask how accounts of atrocities assume common themes and formations (1995). These overlaps and commonalities are significant as they point towards a shared social history of the event and its aftermath, and gendered experiences of violence and loss, lending their weight and testimony in documenting the experiences of Sikhs in Delhi and the seeking of justice for survivors in the legal arena today.<sup>59</sup>

What follows is an in-depth discussion and a shared description of events as to what happened between October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1984. Few in-depth oral narratives by 1984 survivors have been published since Chakravarti and Haksar’s groundbreaking book, *The Delhi*

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<sup>59</sup> For a larger discussion on witness testimonies of experiences of torture in the South Asian context, see (Daniel 1996).

*Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation*, where a number of eye-witness accounts were collected by a team of researchers and volunteers shortly after the violence (1987). My ethnographic approach aims to look at these experiences more broadly, embedding narratives into larger discourses and experiences of urban space, gender, and religious practice, with an added temporal trajectory of urban life over the last three decades. My analysis differs from most accounts in that my questions focus on the whole of a woman's life, treating 1984 on the one hand, as a significant event, yet "de-eventifying" it on the other. In addition, by combining narratives of survivors and other witnessing parties, we obtain a broader picture of the trajectory and the aftermath of the violence, including how Sikh widows and the Widow Colony are viewed by others in the city. Although Das discusses the impact of trauma and memory regarding partition and the 1984 violence in depth in her book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2007), I have decided in addition to examine religious practice and how it can aid in coping with traumatic memory, a topic I discuss in Chapter 4.

I do not aim to create a coherent depiction of the event. Any attempt to do so would be impossible given the nature of the massacres and the nature of traumatic memory. As I have discovered, while in many circumstances experiences of violence during these few days overlap, there have been contestations – by witnesses and investigate reports alike - about *when* certain elements occurred, for example, when the army was called in to stop the violence.<sup>60</sup> These fissures, gaps, and shifting narratives point to a story tethered by common themes, but also to a violence that is perhaps anything but coherent and defies meaning.

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<sup>60</sup> Some reports state that the army was deployed on November 1<sup>st</sup> (PUCL-PUDR 1984), while others state the army arrived on the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Misra Commission 1986). There were around five thousand members of the army at that time but they were not deployed immediately (Mitta and Phoolka 2008).

## **The Violence Intensifies**

Various media outlets announced Gandhi's death around 5:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on October 31<sup>st</sup>, at this time making it clear that two Sikhs had assassinated her. The official announcement was made on All India Radio at 6:00 pm. Special editions of newspapers carried the news of Gandhi's death later that day. Indian Express carried a special supplement entitled, "Mrs. Gandhi Assassinated" and the Hindustan Times headline read, "Indira Gandhi is Dead" (Kaur 2006). Doordarshan (India's national broadcaster) began broadcasting scenes of Gandhi's body at Teen Murti and also scenes of crowds outside of it shouting, in Hindi, "blood in revenge for blood" (Jarnail Singh 2009; PUCL-PUDR 1984).

Indira Gandhi's son, Rajiv Gandhi was sworn in as Prime Minister. Shortly after, senior advocate and Opposition leader Ram Jethmalani met home minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and urged him to act quickly and save Sikhs from further attacks (P. Singh 2009). The public, prominent Delhiites, and some members of parliament began making pleas to the police in an effort to quell the violence. The police responded by stating that they did not have enough manpower to handle the proliferating violence. The massacre of Sikhs in the city continued.

It is important to point out the role that rumours about Sikhs played in contributing to the violence perpetrated by Hindus in Delhi. In my interviews, and other sources, I have come across several rumours regarding Sikhs that are alleged to have spread in part by state actors themselves as a part of the larger organized and calculated politics of terror against Sikhs in Delhi, which began soon after Gandhi's assassination on the 31<sup>st</sup>. For instance, Sikhs were rumoured to be

doing the following: lighting candles and distributing sweets to celebrate Gandhi's death,<sup>61</sup> poisoning Delhi's water supply,<sup>62</sup> killing children and abducting women, hoarding weapons in order to launch attacks on Delhi from gurdwaras, and seeking shelter in the houses of Hindu neighbours but then killing them, stealing their possessions, and raping women before running away. Other rumours circulated about Sikhs defecting from the army (which would lead to the collapse of the state), that trains loaded with dead Hindu bodies were arriving from Punjab, that gurdwaras were celebrating Gandhi's assassination by displays of lights, and that there was no police presence in the city of Delhi (Citizens' Commission 1984; Das 1998; Kishwar 1984; Misra Commission 1986; PUCL-PUDR 1984; Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985; Sethi and Kothari 1985). It was also alleged that Sikhs students were dancing bhangra to celebrate Gandhi's death. In actuality, college students were seen practicing bhangra as part of a college show the morning of Gandhi's death, and stopped their rehearsal once they found out about the assassination (Kishwar 1984; PUCL-PUDR 1984). These rumours polarized religious groups in Delhi even further, and neighbours began to see each other foremost by their religious identities. Many Hindus in Delhi believed these rumours about Sikhs, although when pressed by activist groups and journalists, inhabitants of the city stated that they had heard the rumour from someone else and had not seen the offending behaviour directly.

As Michael Taussig writes, "it is in the coils of rumor, gossip, story, and chit-chat where ideology and ideas become emotionally powerful and enter into active social circulation and

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<sup>61</sup> Some Sikh families were distributing sweets for a morning prayer ritual, known as *prabhat pheri*, for ten days before Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday celebrations on November 8.

<sup>62</sup> Policemen were seen in vans travelling around central areas of Delhi, announcing that Sikhs had poisoned the water and were killing Hindus on trains, which were officially repudiated later (PUCL-PUDR 1984).

meaningful existence” (1984, 464). Sikhs’ choices and actions taken immediately during the violence were affected due to these rumours, which are key to understanding the collective psychology of the murderers. Taussig argues that the terror of the other fuels terror on them; in his work on terror in the Colombian region of Putumayo, for example, white people’s terror of the Indians led to them to terrorize Indians in the Amazon. In other words, massacres are often felt by assailants as acts of self-defense or preempting further violence. As I discuss below, the rumors about Sikhs as evil murderers cheering the death of Gandhi began to circulate widely and therefore became a social force, making some in the city act violently. Memories of Partition, where Sikhs were killed in similar ways, and the circulating rumours may have shaped Sikhs’ thoughts as they tried to decide on the best course of action (Das 1998). Among my interviewees, it was clear that memories of past violence against Sikhs in particular informed their affect, or collectively shaped emotional registers, both during and after the 1984 massacre.

On the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup>, a meeting took place at Congress legislator Rampal Saroj’s house, where instructions were given that Sikhs had to be taught a lesson and suffer for what they did (Jarnail Singh 2009). It is reported that other meetings between several Congress Party leaders and their followers took place late that evening and into the morning of November 1<sup>st</sup>, where Congress members mobilized their supporters to commit violence against Sikhs on a mass scale (P. Singh 2009). Later that evening, mobs began to fan out across the city and crowds began violently attacking Sikhs in areas across Delhi. Pedestrians and passengers in cars and buses were assaulted, and property belonging to Sikhs, such as factories, houses, businesses, schools, and gurdwaras, were damaged, looted, and in many cases destroyed (Citizens’ Commission 1984; Kishwar 1984; P. Singh 2009).

Late night on October 31<sup>st</sup> and into November 1<sup>st</sup>, truckloads of men were brought in from the Delhi-Haryana border. Young men were often transported from outlying areas away from the city core and used to fill out an audience for Congress processions and rallies. As a result, the Congress were able to quickly mobilize thousands of men in a few hours. Scheduled caste, lower-caste and poorer men were recruited, as well as other Hindus and some Muslims (Kishwar 1984). While the mobs were largely Hindu, a small number of Muslims became involved in violence, in some cases because they did not want to go against the wishes of congressmen whom they feared (Vishwanathan 1985). Although few in number, some women were also involved in the massacre and incited mobs to kill their Sikh neighbours (Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985).<sup>63</sup> The young men who were brought in from surrounding areas began to burn Sikh shops which were identified by Congress leaders. Houses belonging to Sikhs were marked, and the mobs were provided with electoral lists and ration shop records. These mobs were seen being transported via Delhi Transit Corporation (DTC) buses in South Delhi, which implies that there was likely official support allowing the use of public services (PUCL-PUDR 1984).

As a response to the rising violence, the local government gave out orders under Section 144 under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), or “Power to issue order in urgent cases of nuisance of apprehended danger.”<sup>64</sup> These orders, as broadcast on Doordarshan Radio and All India Radio, made it illegal for five or more persons to assemble and for citizens to possess

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<sup>63</sup> I will make a larger argument in the next chapter around caste divisions, on how the poor are utilized to commit violence, and the problematic assumption that the 1984 violence was committed simply because the mobs were poor. This is true for the Delhi Gang Rape as well and discourse around violence against women in general in India.

<sup>64</sup> This section of the CrPC is typically used to discourage persons from holding meetings, forming assemblies or processions or participating in such activities. Such provisions in the CrPC impact the right to freely assemble (Choudhry, Khosla, and Mehta 2016, 836).

firearms (Citizens' Commission 1984). Police and army presence was largely absent at this time. There are varying arguments as to whether any Sikhs were killed on October 31<sup>st</sup> itself; at least two reports argue that specific killings began only after the meetings held on the evening of October 31<sup>st</sup>. The first official report of a Sikh being killed came in during the early hours of November 1<sup>st</sup>, from East Delhi (Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985; P. Singh 2009). As evident from witness reports, journalistic accounts, and investigations done by concerned groups at that time, the violence on October 31<sup>st</sup> was sporadic and isolated, while attacks involving armed mobs proliferated greatly on November 1<sup>st</sup>. Although poorer areas were most affected, Sikh men and women were killed and/or attacked and property was destroyed across class and caste (Kishwar 1984; Citizens' Commission 1984). Even more Sikhs died from beatings and stabbings and more women were raped in villages around the city and in poorer areas such as resettlement colonies than in the city itself. These fraught areas include Kalyanpuri, Shakarpur, Palam Village, Nand Nagri, Mangolpuri and Trilokpuri, with Trilokpuri as the area in Delhi most heavily hit by the violence.

### **November 1<sup>st</sup> – The Apex of the Massacre and Violence Against Women**

During the Emergency (1975-1977),<sup>65</sup> the resettlement colony of Trilokpuri was built when the Prime Minister's son, Sanjay Gandhi, initiated his slum clearances in the city.<sup>66</sup> Many

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<sup>65</sup> The emergency refers to a 21-month period between 1975-1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared a state of emergency across India. Issued by then President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the state of emergency entailed a rule by decree for Gandhi, a suspension of elections, imprisonment of political opponents, and the curtailing of civil liberties. During this time Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi, headed the well-known compulsory (sometimes forced) sterilization campaign which led to more than 10 million vasectomies (Haub and Sharma 2006, Gwatkin 1979).

<sup>66</sup> The poor in many areas in central Delhi were forcibly evicted from the city's pavement homes and slums where they lived, and were forcibly moved to peripheral areas (Kishwar 1984). Each family was to be given a small plot of land in some cases, and loans to build homes. As a result of these loans, many of the poor who were evicted moved to live in concrete housing rather than impermanent slum homes. The



Sikhs living in this area were Labana Sikhs who had migrated from the Sikligarh area in Sindh (now in present day Pakistan) and Rajasthan. Considered to be low-caste by other Punjabi Sikhs, Labana Sikhs are labourers, presently employed in occupations such as porters, mechanics, rickshaw pullers, etc. Many Labana Sikhs were traditionally Congress supporters before the 1984 violence due to the loans and land received during slum clearances. However, sentiments regarding Gandhi's actions varied at times. Amar Kaur's relative remarked angrily, "Indira Gandhi has done nothing for us. Even when she died, [there was] "blood in revenge for blood." Even before [she died], so much has happened to us, she took away all the unmarried men." Yet many others from the Trilokpuri and Mangolpuri resettlement colonies, at least in part, supported Gandhi's initiatives in the area and were surprised at the attacks for this reason. Jhansi Kaur told me she was grateful to Indira Gandhi for the resettlement colony. "The *sardar* colony, right? Gandhi gave 25 feet of land. Then she gave a loan. She put poor people in a tough situation by giving them loans, and then by putting them in this situation. But she didn't take advantage of us. Others took advantage of us." She felt a deep sense of betrayal about Gandhi's murder, especially as she was a fan of Gandhi's. "She wasn't our mother. She was everyone's mother."<sup>67</sup>

Jhansi Kaur, a woman who lived in Trilokpuri before the massacre, was the first woman I formally interviewed in the colony, accompanied by my assistant Surjit on a pleasant Sunday morning in February 2013. Many people came in and out of the room during our conversation that day, something I was to learn would be a common feature in my future visits.<sup>68</sup> Along with my assistant, a young man, who was introduced to me as the neighbour's son, was present, as

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residents in this area began to feel a higher sense of pride in their status as a result of their increase in living standards and became a new source of votes for Congress.

<sup>67</sup> After the violence, when questioned, other survivors made statements indicating their surprise at being attacked as they were traditional Congress voters (PUCL-PUDR 1984).

<sup>68</sup> The interview with Jhansi Kaur was conducted mostly in Hindi, with some Punjabi.

well as Jhansi's daughter-in-law, who would flit in and out of the kitchen, periodically leaning against the open entrance between the living room and the bedroom to listen to our conversation. Jhansi's granddaughter, a toddler, was present as well. Although our conversation was casual, Jhansi kept referring to me as "*Madame-ji*" as a term of formal respect despite my insistence for her not to. During our conversation, Jhansi's voice would crescendo periodically, until it was quite loud at times, almost shouting, as she became quite upset and agitated, particularly when she spoke of the inactions of the government. It was as if the words, often repeated, were tumbling out of her. There were a few times when Jhansi Kaur and her neighbour's son talked amongst themselves in their native tongue, a Rajasthani dialect of Hindi I was unfamiliar with. Jhansi Kaur states that she knew the violence had started when the electricity, water and cable television were cut off.

KA: So, when it started, on the 1st of November, where were you, in your flat? Where did you live?

JK: We were in our flat. My mother lived in Sultanpuri, we lived in Trilokpuri... [address redacted]. Trilokpuri. The police told us, "Go, go, nothing's going to happen." All the Sikhs hid in their houses and, all the Sikhs hid in the gurdwaras. They burned the gurdwara –

KA: You mean Trilokpuri's gurdwara?

JK: Yes it was Trilokpuri's gurdwara. All the Sikhs hid there. They said, the police said, nothing will happen to you. Then the police - we had no idea where they went - these men showed up and got drunk and fought - we had no idea who they were... some were Muslim, some were Hindu, [Surjit Kaur: Meaning, third class people.]<sup>69</sup> They covered their faces and - we had no idea who they were. Their faces were covered. [KA: So, people came in groups...]. And they were drunk. No one was sober and in their right mind... men were taking sticks and beating Sikh men. That's how they were hitting them. Some of them, the poor things, cut their beards and left if they could, if they couldn't, then they were killed. That's how it happened.

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<sup>69</sup> By "third class people" Surjit Kaur is referring to men from lower castes, who she viewed in this particular instance as being disorderly and drunk.

Some eyewitnesses report that the violence in the Trilokpuri area began on the evening of November 31<sup>st</sup>. The electricity was cut off, which further frightened the residents as the whole area became dark and offered little visibility. Jhansi Kaur told me that, in addition to electricity, the water supply was cut off as well, a fact that is corroborated in the Report of the Citizens' Commission (1984). Specific attacks on gurdwaras and houses began on November 1<sup>st</sup>, around nine to half past nine o'clock in the morning. According to eyewitnesses it is estimated that about four thousand people came to attack Trilokpuri (Kishwar 1984). The police directed mobs to Trilokpuri, particularly to places where Sikhs were hiding (Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985). Houses, schools, shops, gurdwaras and property papers were all burnt in this area, and there are some reports of children being killed (PUCL-PUDR 1984).

The 1984 violence, and the violence of everyday life, was experienced in markedly different ways according to gender, class, and caste. Some women were forcibly separated from their husbands, sons, male family members and friends while attempting to provide assistance to them in hiding, and these women were dragged out into the streets by attackers. It is possible that some women died when gangs burned down their houses while they were hiding inside. Many women witnessed the torture of their partners and loved ones.

On the evening of Friday, November 1<sup>st</sup>, when the police arrived in Trilokpuri to evacuate those who had survived in Block 32, the heaviest hit block of housing, they found Sikh women, children, and a few men - "numb and stupefied survivors" (Bedi and Malliakan 1984) - some of them hiding under dead bodies to escape being attacked. In this area alone, the estimates of those dead range from three hundred fifty (Bedi and Malliakan, 1984) to four hundred people within a forty-eight-hour period (PUCL-PUDR 1984). Yet, that afternoon, the police insisted to journalists who tried to enter that area that no one had been killed. Journalists themselves were

stoned and turned away by a mob of around 1000 people (cf. Bedi and Malliakan 1984). Women reported being herded together in Trilokpuri and being forcibly stripped of their clothing. Attackers urged each other to choose women they wanted to rape, and one woman recounted being raped by ten different men. Afterwards they were told to leave the room, and forced out into the street without clothing. When some women attempted to escape, they were taken to a nearby ditch and raped (Citizen's Commission 1985). Although Jhansi Kaur claimed she escaped being attacked by hiding in her own home, she discussed the unkempt, and undressed state women were in when picked up by the police: "We didn't even have enough clothes on our bodies," she said, leaning forward, her voice rounding to a crescendo before stating flatly, "They just left the ladies naked."

There have been several reports of rape during the 1984 massacre. Most discussions of rape in investigative and journalistic reports from that time are vague and incomplete.<sup>70</sup> Much of the literature on rape during times of violent conflict has been concerned with the difference between "wartime" rape and "peacetime" rape, particularly with regards to the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict and the Rwandan genocide (Engle 2005; Gottschall 2004; Koo 2002; Nordstrom 1994; Olujic 1998; Snyder et al. 2006).<sup>71</sup> Although the 1984 massacre was not "war"

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<sup>70</sup> The PUCL-PUDR report (1984) states that the authors came across reports of gang rapes, but does not elaborate. The Mishra Commission also provided a vague statement regarding attacks on women: "The Commission, in keeping in view the quality of people involved in the operations, would not have been surprised to come across a few incidents of this type" (1986, 19). Note that the Mishra Commission also vaguely points to the low "quality" of the perpetrators.

<sup>71</sup> See also (Cohen 2013; Farwell 2004; Gottschall 2004; Heath and Lynch 2012; Misri 2014; Wood 2009). The Rwandan genocide in particular holds characteristics uncannily similar to the 1984 massacre. Both involved violence after an attack on a figurehead (President Habyarimana and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, respectively) although a number of pre-existing factors including land rights, identity roles intersecting with colonial history, and economic issues also contributed to the violence (Rombouts 2006). Both episodes of violence involved a degree of coordination and planning, with some Hutu neighbours turning on Tutsi neighbours. In both instances, sexual violence against women and the use of rape as a

per se, the literature on wartime rape sheds light on how gender violence plays out during times and arenas of violent conflict. As just as critical events expose pre-existing sociopolitical dynamics, so too do gender crimes such as rape committed within these events. Rape in violent contexts is a method used to enforce political power; it attacks not only the body but a body politic – a collective group of citizens (Nordstrom 1994, 152). It can be used as both a tool for perpetrators to assert their power through the degradation of women, as well as a goal in itself.

Conceptions of the body during times of violence or war can shift between the body as individual, social bodies, or a body politic (see Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), and it is precisely within these shifting definitions where the power of rape as a tool lies. While rape during peacetime is meant to attack the individual, rape during times of violent conflict serves different sociopolitical functions. The latter is used to terrorize whole communities (Heath and Lynch 2012). By attacking women, perpetrators not only commit crimes against women but also society at large by participating in the goal of ethnic cleansing and humiliating, demoralizing and emasculating the victim group by violating female ‘honour’ and by illustrating that the men in the particular ethnic group cannot ‘protect’ their women or property (Olujic 1998; Heath and Lynch 2012; Misri 2014; Koo 2002). By symbolically defiling a woman’s body during ethnic violence, a rapist symbolically dishonours the whole ethnic community. Such rapes then can be seen as a tool of communication used to assault the whole community as well as their lineage

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weapon was common and the attacks led to a number of surviving widows who faced difficulty managing their now female-headed households. In both Rwanda and Delhi, the structural positions of women within patriarchal community structures creates difficulty for women to speak about sexual violence experienced or encountered. Women’s experiences during such times of immense conflict, due to cultural meanings of gender and pre-existing patriarchal structures, may vary significantly in harm than men’s’ experiences. It is this lack of recognition of gender differences which are often lacking in reparation measures (Moran 2010; Walker 2016; Rubio-Marín 2006). See footnote 95.

(Snyder et al. 2006).<sup>72</sup> In addition, women's experience of gender violence and rape is undercut by various factors, such as ethnicity caste, and class. As such, attacks on women become attacks on the cultures, groups, and religions with which they identify (Koo 2002).

Rape during times of conflict, such as the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, can tap into longstanding discourses of sexuality, shame and honour (Olujic 1998, 31). The hesitancy for the survivors of 1984 to speak about rape, whether experienced personally, witnessed, or heard of, speaks to the power behind these discourses that underpin sexual violence. The effects of rape reach far more forward temporally than the act itself; rape can shift a woman's reputation or place in society, and have long-lasting effects on one's sense of self and personal security. Rape committed publicly can bring about a deep sense of shame, a sentiment reflected in my interviews with 1984 survivors and their hesitancy to discuss particulars and their emphasis on self-respect and propriety.

In a special issue of the journal *Manushi* dedicated to the massacre the editor, Madhu Kishwar, provided a groundbreaking report that revolved around an affidavit of one woman, Gurdip Kaur, who had been raped; the issue featured Kaur's image on the cover (1984). There is no consensus or clear picture as to the number of women assaulted, harassed or raped. It is reported that Sikh girls as young as nine or ten years old were raped. One elderly woman was gang raped in front of her family. During the violence women were prevented from getting routine medical examinations after rape due to the inactions of government doctors; the doctors

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<sup>72</sup> It is important to note here that rape can also justify violence. For example, Urvashi Butalia remarks that communities justified violence against women during Partition by stating that another ethnic or religious group had raped their women (Butalia 2000). In a related vein, anxieties surrounding purity and women's sexuality create an arena for which the violated woman becomes a figure for reinstating a nation as a space that is pure and masculine (Das 2007, 18) .

were supposed to refer women to hospitals for medical and legal purposes. Women were intimidated by some doctors and told that they should not get a medical examination as they were too invasive; thus, young women in particular were fearful and did not go through with examinations at the local hospitals (Kishwar 1984).

In an interview with me, Amar Kaur described being assaulted by a man: “In the morning at 4:00 AM a man came and grabbed my hand like this,” she said, forcefully grabbing her own hand and pulling it down with a jerk.

The way he grabbed my hand - I slapped him as to question *why* he grabbed my hand like that. He had brought down seven people that night and killed them. I was hiding those seven people that night, even picking up their excrement, I hid those seven people that night, thinking that anyone that could be saved should be. But they weren't saved... that godforsaken man, he forcefully yanked them out [from where they were hiding] like this.”

She described the killing, pulling her arm across her body in one quick, fluid, cutting motion.

“There was blood everywhere. I cleaned it like this, with buckets” she continued, making a manic scrubbing motion with her hands that was so vivid I almost pictured a sponge in them.

“No blood of our *Sardars* should just go in this manner.” Amar Kaur was silent on the issue of what happened to her and whether or not she was able to fend off further attacks on her person.

Just as the transgression of women's bodies symbolically violated the Sikh community's honour, so too did male blood spilling on the streets. Amar Kaur's scrubbing the streets in an attempt to keep male Sikh blood from flowing, wasted, in the streets, is illustrative of this.

The discourse of the violation of honour and self-respect during times of violence, as discussed above, revealed itself in my conversation with Jhansi Kaur, who described violence against women in Trilokpuri:

KA: Did any women in your family get hurt?

JK: No. It didn't happen to us... It didn't happen over here, and not in the Mangolpuri area. But what happened in Trilokpuri was awful. In Trilokpuri, there was this one woman who didn't have legs, even with her they did that [refers to rape.]

KA: So....[pause] it happened more in Trilokpuri. [JK: More there.] What do you think the reason was for this?

SK: Meaning - why did it happen in that area?

At this point, it became clear that explanations of violence against women during the massacre were linked to mobs consisting of lower-class/caste men (which Surjit Kaur, as quoted above and below, refers to often as “backwards/lower people”).”

JK: Madame-ji, those people that live in that area are backwards people [*neech log*].

SK: Very backward class people live there.

Young Man: Sikh families were less there.

KA: In Trilokpuri. Sikh families were less and Hindu Muslims were more?

JK: Yes, more. [YM: There were villages nearby too]... There were a lot of girls who were having their self-respect [*izzat*] robbed from them. They were saving them. If they didn't come on the 3rd, all the women would have lost their *izzat*. They didn't spare mothers or daughters. There were so many of them, poor things, here they're cutting men apart, and to the ladies they're... on the ground. And their families are watching. This happened a lot.<sup>73</sup>

In my interviews and other informal discussions with women in Delhi, they were willing to discuss, very briefly, that other women they know had been raped or abducted but were not forthcoming regarding whether or not they had gone through similar experiences (nor did I press them to do so). The social stigma around discussing rape prevented those reporting on the violence from obtaining more information on sexual assaults that had occurred. While the immense trauma and stigma surrounding rape are factors of concern, the downplaying of rape as

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<sup>73</sup> It is unclear if Jhansi Kaur had seen this first-hand or learned of this through rumour. As with other interviews, I did not press women on experiences or witnessing of sexual violence.



a tool used to terrorize the Sikhs in Delhi has had repercussions. No woman to date has been paid any compensation for rape specifically, and no one has been tried for rape during the massacre (Mitta and Phoolka 2008).

The violence across Delhi increased in its intensity on November 1<sup>st</sup>. By about nine o'clock in the morning, armed mobs, in some cases escorted by the police and officials and supporters from Congress, had taken over the streets of Delhi and launched a full-scale massacre.<sup>74</sup> Many Delhi citizens who were not the target of the attacks knew something was amiss when they saw smoke rising in plumes around the city, and smelled both flesh and buildings burning – arson was a key element of the violence. Sikh property continued to be destroyed. Priya Jain, an activist who became involved in relief camps afterwards, discussed with me how she felt something was wrong when the streets had suddenly become much emptier than normal, lending them an eerie atmosphere.

Any man who visibly looked like a Sikh was a target. This led many Sikh men and boys to cut their long hair and shave their beards in order to pass as Hindu. In some cases, young Sikh boys were dressed up in girls' clothing and their hair tied in plaits to hide their gender. Indeed, a family member of mine living in the United Kingdom once told me how her mother cut off her brother's hair to protect him from a possible mob attack during this time. Amar Kaur discussed with me the methods in which she hid her eldest son, Gurinder, now in his 40s, from further harm.<sup>75</sup>

They beat him and then I hid him in someone's bathroom outside. I picked him up from there three days later. I would go over there and secretly feed him. They were killing boys and killing gents. So I hid my son, as he looked like an older boy. I dressed him in

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<sup>74</sup> The PM made a broadcast that evening in an appeal to stop the violence, according to one report (Citizens' Commission 1984)

<sup>75</sup> Gurinder's experiences will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

girls' clothes and hid him in someone's bathroom. I fed him over there, he got a fever there. I didn't even have a *chunni* [scarf] on my head or anything.

Amar Kaur, like some of the other women, emphasizes that she was not able to present herself in a manner befitting her gender and propriety. Given the importance of the *chunni*, or scarf used to cover the shoulders, chest, and sometimes the head in religious spaces, the lack of one provokes a sense of nakedness and vulnerability. More reports began to circulate of Sikhs being murdered, abducted and raped, and of trains coming to Delhi being forcibly stopped to kill and attack Sikh passengers. Sikhs in trains were burned alive or thrown into the Yamuna river running along the train tracks; some escaped by cutting their hair before the mobs boarded the trains. Sikh bodies were found on trains coming from the Yamuna area (Express News Service 1984b). There was an eerie uniformity in the methods used for traveling and hunting male Sikhs down and killing them. Stones, *lathis* (sticks), swords, and iron rods were some of the weapons used in the attacks. The nature of the killings indicates there was a plan set in place. Kerosene and petrol, for example, were provided to men as gas station attendants had been ordered by Congress organizers to allow men to use their supply. Truck and car tires were placed on the necks of Sikh men and set on fire with torches, a technique known as necklacing.<sup>76</sup> Sikh men were beaten and their turbans were stripped off and their long hair was burnt or cut. In almost all cases, after being beaten, Sikh men were doused with kerosene and burnt to leave no possibility of identification, and no possibility of their bodies surviving such attacks (Kishwar 1984;

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<sup>76</sup> This technique of torture and execution has been used widely in various contexts, such as during South African apartheid (cf. Human Rights Watch 1991a). In the South Asian context, necklacing was used extensively in the Sri Lankan conflict in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Subramanian 2015).

Citizens' Commission 1984; Das 1990a; Chakravarti and Haksar 1987; SGPC 1996; Mehta and Chatterji 2001; Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985).

These various methods of attack were described in the accounts of women in the colony, such as Kirat Kaur, an elderly widow in her eighties. During our interview, Kirat Kaur sat in her living room, her head covered with her *chunni*, methodically peeling and cutting potatoes with her withered hands and letting them drop with a thud on a tin plate. Kirat Kaur's husband, a man she described as a religious figure having a cult-like following in Panipat, Haryana, died in the neighbourhood of Uttam Nagar along with two other men. Her husband was killed by being burned alive by a flaming powder-like substance that ignited when it was thrown at him.<sup>77</sup> As his dead body was being carted away, Kirat Kaur was only able to see his arms clearly. According to her daughter, at the time he was attacked her father was protecting a Sri Guru Granth Sahib he held in his hands.

Jhansi Kaur also described the actions of the mob when they arrived at her house on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

When it started in Delhi, *Madame*, on the 1<sup>st</sup>, we were immobile with fear. They were stealing from Sikhs. So we were thinking, why are they doing this? Then when - after two or three hours - when the commotion started in Delhi, on the 1<sup>st</sup>, when they began to beat people up, when they started to burn everybody, they were yelling, "Kill the *Sardars*!"<sup>78</sup>

KA: ...So what happened to your husband?

JK: He too madam, was killed. KA: [Pause.] So, were you present when...?]

JK: [Quietly] Yes.

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<sup>77</sup> This powder has been mentioned elsewhere. Survivors were not exactly sure of what the white powder was made of, but it was highly flammable (Jarnail Singh 2009). It is possible that this powder was phosphorus, a white powder which can ignite easily in mid-air (cf. Jaspreet Singh 2013).

<sup>78</sup> "Sardar" means "chief" and, prior to Partition, was used widely across religious boundaries to address men with social status and particularly control over land. Given the association of Sikhs with landed power in post-Partition Punjab, it has come to mean a Sikh man wearing a turban, and, often, more generally a Sikh man.

KA: Can I ask you...how he was killed? So, with uncle, they burned the house.... [JK: They burned him].

KA: So he suffocated?

JK: No, he ran out of the house and then they hit him with swords. They cut him up. We didn't even know what was happening *Madame*. We had to take care of the kids, so we ran from here to there. We had no idea, no idea what was happening to ourselves. Then at that time the military came, put the bodies in their trucks and took them away.... [KA: So, uncleji too. In a truck -] That's it. They put everyone in trucks and took them away and burned the corpses. I saw his face...

SK: So, it happened in front of you? Meaning, uncle - like, with some people they didn't even know what happened. Like if the men were there or not. Because - so it happened right in front of you?

JK: Yes. Everyone was running away. I had a child, a child in my belly. So I couldn't see much. When I ran out, I saw my husband lying there. I saw that much - after that, I didn't see anything, the poor man didn't even see my face, nor did I see his. We were separated, from that moment until this day [sniffs].... *Madame-ji*... first they forced him into the house and locked it. Then, they lit it on fire. Like how fire and smoke...like how smoke rises...he began to suffocate. Everyone started running outside. When they started running - the culprits had all these weapons. They would take out the eyes of one man.<sup>79</sup> They slit the throat of another. They split the head of someone else.

Geeta Devi also lived in Trilokpuri at the time of the massacre, in a makeshift home. Her husband was pulled out of the house while the rest of the family fled. Geeta Devi's husband was burned alive by the necklacing method. Although she was not there at the time, a child from the neighbourhood came to tell her that her husband had passed away. Amar Kaur, too, found out from others on November 3<sup>rd</sup> that her husband had died via necklacing. The husband of Heema Bai (Geeta Devi's relative), was also severely beaten and killed in the same way. He died on November 1<sup>st</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> Jhansi Kaur mentioned repeatedly that men's eyes were cut and destroyed. She told me that one doctor, whom she said the neighbourhood had named "*lamboo doctor*" (tall doctor,) was doing this. I have not yet found a reference for this elsewhere.

Sikhs felt hunted and trapped in their houses and many sought safety and refuge in non-Sikh houses. Neighbours of Sikhs acted in three ways: they helped Sikhs by providing them with shelter and/or places to hide within their homes, pointed out Sikh homes to mobs in the area, especially in congested areas of the city, or refused to provide shelter out of fear for their own security. It was reported that neighbours by and large joined in the attacks in some areas of the city (Citizens' Commission 1984, 38). Some non-Sikh families had their property damaged as well.

#### **November 2<sup>nd</sup> to November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1984**

On Friday November 2<sup>nd</sup>, Sikh men were heavily attacked in areas such as Sultanpuri, Gamri Bajhanpura, Nand Nagri and again in Trilokpuri. The army stood by idly with no official orders. The police were still not visible and there were no fire engines attempting to put out the many fires around the city (Sethi and Kothari 1985). Newspapers stated that there was an indefinite curfew with shoot-on-sight orders and that the army had been deployed since two o'clock in the afternoon on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. However, in some areas mobs retreated to side lanes to allow army convoys to pass through, only to come back and reassemble on main streets again (PUCL-PUDR 1984).

On Saturday November 3<sup>rd</sup>, the army and police were further deployed in connection with Gandhi's funeral which took place that day, particularly as foreign officials would be visiting Delhi for the event. Her funeral was broadcast on television, and her supporters mourned the loss of "Mother India" – a figure seen as sexless due to her widowhood, often wearing white saris,

and devoted to the nation. The cremation itself was a contentious issue, with some political discussion around which world leaders attended and which did not.<sup>80</sup>

On the same day mobs returned to areas they had attacked earlier to burn what was left and again attack Sikh men if they were spotted. The curfew was relaxed during the day across Delhi from 9 am to 9 pm, and re-imposed around 9 pm. Well over 48 hours after the station's first announcement on November 1<sup>st</sup> All India Radio announced the curfew and that those seen out after curfew would be shot on sight. By the morning of November 4<sup>th</sup>, a stricter enforcement of the curfew and the presence of the Indian army had quelled the majority of the violence, and general law and order returned to the city. The last round of killings took place on the border between Haryana and Delhi, in a Sindhi colony near Badli village (Citizens' Commission 1984).

Bystanders and witnesses state that in some cases the mob didn't seem 'frenzied' or spontaneous, but acted in a deliberate, slow and calm manner, as if they were unafraid of police or military or state intervention or retribution. It has been argued that there was a pattern to the violence, in that the mobs first attacked gurdwaras, then houses and shops, and then, Sikh men (Kishwar 1984; PUCL-PUDR 1984). Opposition leaders also avoided being involved in any attempt to stop the massacre; some stated that they did not want to tarnish their own image by disrespecting Gandhi's death or her funeral procession (PUCL-PUDR 1984).

By November 4<sup>th</sup>, the military had come and taken survivors to police stations and government-administered official relief camps set up in school buildings. After the violence a large outpouring of support was provided by volunteers, ad hoc relief agencies, journalists, the

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<sup>80</sup> While former U.S. President Reagan did not attend, many leaders of countries in the global South did. Yasser Arafat, former President of the Palestinian National Authority, is reported to have commented to mourners in Arabic, "My sister is dead" (Gupte 2012).

Sikh community and their neighbours, and others. Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others joined together to create so-called “peace and defense” groups in their neighbourhoods. These groups provided men who patrolled neighbourhoods at night and kept guard, although this was more effective in wealthier areas that had more resources to work with. Many hundreds of charred bodies were found that were impossible to identify. The bodies were dumped and cremated en masse (Kothari 1985). Priya Jain, who volunteered in relief efforts afterwards, recalled a horrifying story of how she had heard of a widow who identified her husband from his head/scalp and part of his back, found lying in a ditch. Trucks took away the many corpses, including the body of Jhansi Kaur’s husband, whose murder is discussed above. After this, she and her family were taken to a relief camp by the military.

Harnoor Kaur describes how they were called out of their homes by the military in order to be taken to relief camps. “They would bark, “Get out, let’s go, come on!”” she said, emulating the military. “They would speak in Punjabi, saying “*Waheguru Khalsa*” [a form of common greeting, *Waheguru* meaning “god is great, and “*Khalsa*” referring to the Sikh religious community], so that women would come out as well. ... They were okay, but...I didn’t even have a *chunni* on my head, no slippers on my feet.” Harnoor Kaur, similar to Amar Kaur above, emphasized the lack of *chunni*, or scarf, giving a sense of incompleteness and embodied vulnerability. The official relief camps offered little respite to survivors. Many people went hungry and were forced to urinate and defecate in the hallways of the schools due to a lack of adequate bathroom facilities. There was no medical treatment offered, and there were there no officials or trained relief workers asking the widows and other Sikhs about what had happened (PUCL-PUDR 1984). The officials did not assist in medical care, mobilize the army to aid in sanitation efforts, or aid in administration. For example, there was a shortage of compensation

forms, which had to be filled out by survivors, so volunteer agencies and gurdwaras had to print out thousands to hand out. Forms were not available for more than half of the 50,000 displaced people (PUCL-PUDR 1984) . A number of more organized and helpful relief camps were also created by volunteers from various NGOs, universities, colleges and charity groups, who brought together supplies for sleeping, food, etc. There was little interaction between volunteer-run camps and official government camps. The latter were closed down early, and in Priya Jain's view, this was due to the fact that the Delhi government wanted to show that Delhi had returned to normal (Jain, personal communication). Many in official camps left to stay at other camps run by gurdwaras and volunteers (some volunteer camps, such as the one in Rani Bagh, were forcibly closed by the government). Some women were evicted from camps, particularly those who refused to return to their neighbourhoods to avoid reliving traumatic violence, especially as many perpetrators of the violence continued to roam in the same neighbourhoods without consequence (Citizens' Commission 1984; Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985).

Many women refused to go back to their houses or claim their land at that time and wanted to be settled and rehabilitated elsewhere. Those women who had lost multiple members of their family were particularly afraid of returning to what was left of the homes they once lived in. Government officials forcibly tried to send people back to their homes, initially by providing each family with some bedding and fifty rupees<sup>81</sup> without any assurances of attempts to safeguard their security. Jhansi Kaur remarked,

After we were dropped home, we got out of our houses. We started walking the streets. They [perpetrators still living in the area] said, "Bitches, we'll cut you too. This is what's happening in Punjab, bad things, and we're going to do the same to you."

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<sup>81</sup> Rs. 50 amounts to 0.75 USD, currently.



Jhansi Kaur's statement illustrates the anger felt by perpetrators against the Sikh community in the wake of Gandhi's assassination and, before this, the continuing clashes between various religious groups in Punjab. This further harassment women experienced after returning to their homes has been documented elsewhere (Kishwar 1984). Many perpetrators would revisit an area they had earlier attacked, and thus, in some instances, women faced further trauma after those who had perpetrated violence were seen in these heavily hit areas offering "help" and "rehabilitation" through charity work to those who had survived the massacre. For example, Rampal Saroj, the Congress member who was accused of killing Sikh men and raping Sikh women during the violence, and who held a meeting aiding the organization of the massacre on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup>, was seen in Trilokpuri shortly after the violence with the Magistrate, denying that the violence was as intense as people had claimed (PUCL-PUDR 1984). A Congress politician, Hari Krishan Lal Bhagat (known commonly as H.K.L. Bhagat), attempted to give out blankets in a relief camp at Shakarpur, but people at the camp refused his offer. Women also faced their attackers in court. A woman who was raped and lost some male members of her family had to come face to face with Bhagat in the close confines of a judge's chambers (Jarnail Singh 2009).

As one organization has written (Citizens' Commission 1984, 29–30), the massacre was an "incredible and abysmal failure of the administration and the police" and arose from an "inertia, apathy and indifference of the official machinery". Key signatories in Delhi, including former politicians and Supreme Court advocates, made a joint statement, writing:

In the capital city of Delhi the administration appeared to have been totally paralyzed for three critical days while hordes of hooligans bent on loot, rapine [sic], murder and arson held free sway. Allegations are widely prevalent that some riotous mobs were instigated, organized and often provided with transport (Citizens' Commission 1984, 7).

Estimates of the total number of Sikhs murdered in the massacre perpetrated between October 31<sup>st</sup> to November 4<sup>th</sup> vary greatly. The Lieutenant Governor reported at first that only 485 people had been killed. First Information Reports, known as FIRs, collectively reported 1,419 dead. In Parliament the initial number of stated was 2,146. This number was soon after revised to 2,307. Estimates of the number of deaths range from roughly two thousand up to ten thousand or even twenty thousand (Chakravarti 1994; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Mitta and Phoolka 2008; SGPC 1996; Citizens' Commission 1984; Kishwar 1984). The general consensus seems to be somewhere around thirty-five hundred persons. In conjunction with the massacre, 1,089 persons were arrested on charges of theft, rioting, curfew violation, and arson, although none were arrested for murder. Out of roughly three hundred fifty gurdwaras in Delhi, approximately seventy-five percent were destroyed or damaged by theft and arson. In addition to property damage, jewelry and cash were also stolen. It was estimated that the massacre resulted in fourteen hundred women becoming widows, and roughly four thousand children becoming orphans. More than fifty thousand Sikhs were uprooted from their homes and displaced in refugee camps (Citizens' Commission 1984; PUCL-PUDR 1984; Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985). In effect, Sikhs in Delhi became homeless, internal refugees in their own state.

### **The Police as “Fire Tenders” and Politicians as “Conversion Specialists”**

But authorities were nowhere in the picture at all. You see, any riots, wherever it is, cannot happen without a silent approval of the administration. It's not possible. Because government means *gaur-ment*. In other words, if you talk in Hindi "*jo minute minute pe gaur [ignore] karte hain uska naam hai government* (whosoever ignores you from minute to minute is called the government). – Harbhajan Singh

As discussed in the introduction, there has been much debate regarding what to call the violence that occurred after Gandhi's assassination in 1984, with various parties identifying it as

a pogrom,<sup>82</sup> genocide,<sup>83</sup> or a massacre. There are clearly methodological and ideological differences in studies of violence that lead to diverse terminology being employed. It is critical to understand the discursive ideologies underpinning particular terms, but it is perhaps more important to focus on the dynamics of violence in communities. No clear distinction can be made between pogroms, genocides, and riots, as one form of violence often “masquerades” as the other (Brass 2006, 3). This is particularly true in the Indian context, where such forms of violence are common. Within discourse circulating in South Asia, the term “riot” - with its relationships to communal violence and its so-called spontaneous nature – is much more common, and indeed many Delhiites refer to this period of violence as “riots.” In diasporic discourse, as I discuss in Chapter 5, the massacre is often compared to a genocide, and tellingly, the word *ghallughara* (meaning, “great attack” but often translated to mean “holocaust”) is used to describe the violence. To debate whether particular forms of violence are as devastating as other grievous forms of violence, such as the Holocaust for example, detracts from the importance of understanding the alarming regularity of such violent acts in contemporary times. To debate

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<sup>82</sup> The word “pogrom” comes from the Russian word, meaning “storm or devastation” (Heitmeyer and Hagan 2005, 351), or, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “an organized massacre aimed at the destruction or annihilation of a body or class of people, esp. one conducted against Jewish people” and “An organized, officially tolerated, attack on any community or group” (“Pogrom, N.” 2015). These terms have popular usage among diasporic groups (see chapter 5); some discourse from India itself at the time of the violence used the terms pogrom, genocide or holocaust (Sethi 1985; PUCL-PUDR 1984).

<sup>83</sup> The term “genocide” is also used by diasporic Sikhs to emphasize the importance of anti-Sikh violence in the transnational arena. Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG, also known as the “Genocide Convention”), which passed in December 1948 and came into effect in 1951, defines genocide as: “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (United Nations 1951, 280).

issues of quantity (whether large-scale violences are more devastating than smaller-scale ones) too, brings about a focus on dead body counts, ignoring the very real and embodied, long-term suffering, grief, and loss brought about by violent acts, something that cannot be quantified. In my view, it is more important to reveal those responsible for such acts of violence (both individually, locally, and nationally) with an eye to transnational patterns of violence across time and space, and to reveal both comparative patterns of violence and individual, local involvement in such violence. Although it is necessary to describe violence, debating what qualifies as a genocide constitutes a political “struggle for territory,” a struggle to claim the highest level of suffering in the arena of world opinion, in which scholars and commentators themselves become involved in (Brass 1996). It is critical to identify the roles of those involved: those who instigated an act of violence, and those who survived it. In one sense blaming is important because, while it affixes responsibility towards particular individuals, it could also free individuals not directly involved in the violence (bystanders, for example) from blame (Brass 1996). From one perspective, however, bystanders, participate in violence by allowing the violence as they have not engaged in acts of civil disobedience to stop it from happening (Scheper-Hughes 2002). As genocides and small or large-scale acts of violence take place within a transnational arena of power relations, it is also critical to examine the role of national and transnational bystanders, such as state governments, and multilateral organizations.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Scheper-Hughes has argued for the term “genocide continuum” which is comprised of ‘small wars’ in public spaces and at the same time illustrates human capacity for everyday acts of violence which genocidal acts and mass scale violence possible (Scheper-Hughes 2002). She argues that this term captures demographic control (reducing fertility, forcing migration, killings of a particular sex) to life threatening conditions and mass killings. This is not a trivialization of the term but rather makes us sensitive to deadly effects of violence. Although some argue that “genocide” should be associated with the Holocaust and the Holocaust alone, she argues that we must not make comparisons between violence in normal and abnormal times. In other words, the moral leap implied by such a move – the move to apply

Riots are thought of as something uncontrolled, as spontaneous events with no predecessors. Official narratives emphasize that it is almost futile or impossible to prevent or control such events. Indeed, Rahul Gandhi, son of then Prime Minister Gandhi, stated shortly after the violence, “When a big tree falls, the earth will shake.”<sup>85</sup> As such, a culture of terror which involved the overt, deliberate actions of the state contributed to the violence of 1984 as well as the felt after-effects and affects of Sikhs who lived through it. As I discuss in more detail below, Paul Brass’s discussion of institutionalized riot systems, which carry distinct phases of preparation, activation, and explanation by perpetrators, and wherein the police act as “fire tenders” (fanning the flames of violence) and politicians serve as “conversion specialists” (instigating others to commit violent acts) is pertinent here (Brass 1996).

In his work on riots in South Asia, Brass has put forward a model of three phases of riots in areas where riots are common: 1) preparation/rehearsal, where activities take place leading to riots, 2) activation/enhancement, where the riots take place and there is a mobilization to use riots as a device to attack rival groups, and 3) explanation/interpretation, where stakeholders – social scientists, politicians, journalists, the public – attempt to offer an explanation as to what occurred. In this model, these “institutionalized riot systems” under the sway of Hindu nationalism point towards the idea that what have been labeled riots (the Gujarat riots of 2002, for example, which occurred after the publication of Brass’s book) are really pogroms, or massacres (Brass 1996). Brass’s model aptly illustrates the progression of the 1984 massacre. Within these types of riots, Brass has identified “fire tenders” as those actors who perform

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or extend the idea of genocide into other places and space - is better than the risk of desensitizing ourselves by such violence (Scheper-Hughes 2002).

<sup>85</sup> Although such events arise due to conflicting political and economic interests, and the emergence of Hindutva politics rather than religious animosity (Rajeshwari 2004), the specific targeting of religious bodies cannot be overlooked.

inflammatory acts to further fuel violence, and “conversion specialists” as those who lead or address mobs to instigate violence (ibid 1996, 4). Both “fire tenders” and “conversion specialists” served to further propel the violence of the 1984 massacre forward.

The inactivity and in some cases the overt involvement of police in the violence has been reported by journalists, scholars, and other investigative reports alike. Police were absent on the streets during the violence and little concern was shown by senior police officials for victims (cf. Citizens’ Commission 1984). The “police watched while Delhi burned” (Jerath and Suri 1984b) and were witnessed by some to only come in on Saturday, November 3rd (The Statesman 1984). Police, then, were simultaneously silent spectators. In some cases they were absent from scenes of violence entirely (Express News Service 1984a). At the same time, they acted as “fire tenders,” in that their inflammatory actions, and inaction, aided and abetted violence against Sikhs. The police in some cases deliberately misled army units as to where to go, and, in Tilak Nagar, where the Widow Colony is now placed, police members themselves beat a Sikh army officer and placed him in jail for more than a week (Citizens’ Commission 1984, 22). In Trilokpuri, two police officers left when the violence started (Misra Commission 1986). Police either instigated killings, ignored Sikhs’ pleas for assistance, or told people to stay indoors out of a desire to ensure they were not labeled as unhelpful or idle after the violence (Citizens’ Commission 1984). Typical police reports would claim the violence was instigated by Sikhs. For example, one report read that a small group began attacking Sikhs only after they felt threatened by a large number of Sikhs wielding *kirpans*, or small daggers that orthodox Sikhs wear (Citizens’ Commission 1984, 26).

After the massacre, the Delhi administration did not make a strong effort to recover stolen property, other than asking people to surrender stolen goods. It is estimated that less than

ten percent of property was returned in this manner (Citizens' Commission 1984). Congress Party men were hampering recovery of looted property and threatening the few police who tried to carry out the return of property (Express News Service 1984c). Many of the women I spoke to emphasized the inaction of the Delhi police and military during the massacre. Jhansi Kaur said to me,

The police didn't do anything! They didn't do anything until the 3rd when everyone had been killed [KA: You mean for two or three days they...] They didn't do anything! Three days! In three days, tell me, how many Sikhs died and how many didn't? ... No, the police told us that nothing will happen to you. You should just go home. The police themselves said, you should all go home. No one will hurt you now. Then, we all went home. Out of fear, we kept our doors closed. We were afraid if we left the house and went outside we'd get hurt. We had no idea where the police went. At night, on the night of the 1st, that night - the chaos that happened that night - whoever they were going to finish, they finished. They spun their swords around like this [makes a circular motion with her arm] and killed the Sardars. [SK: A hundred people were coming together at a time from place to place]. Yes. Hundreds. They'd light a house on fire and sit in front of it. You know what they used to say? "No one will come here, no one will kill the Sikhs" - but they themselves were the culprits! The ones who were lighting fires, the culprits were the very same people, the bastards. They were the ones who hurt us.

Harbhajan Singh also discussed the inactions of the police, the involvement of politicians and the importance of providing justice to families by taking action against them, during our conversation.

These inquiries, they happen on some grounds. Where are the witnesses? Where is the proof? The police report is different. Any widow comes forward, her story will be different. [Unclear] so this is one point. Second point is this, so many inquiry commissions have given their verdict.... until we don't take action at the state department or with politicians - not even politicians, but state actors, I mean government employees, like the police officers who were in the area - action needs to be taken against them. Then the government will be scared....

He also pointed out the difference between how events construed as communally violent (the 1984 massacre or the bomb blasts in Bombay in 1993) are treated differently by the state depending on who is at the receiving end of the violence:

Riots happened in the middle of Delhi. On open roads. In open residential colonies. In front of families. Witnesses are there. The cases are not registered! Whereas, if a bomb blast happens

in Delhi, like if people put things on buses, suitcases or toys, and create bomb blasts, the police were able to nab those people. Riots are a different thing. Same thing happened in Bombay [in 1993]. Bombay riots happened. Whatever happened, no one was caught. But when blasts happen in taxis, when someone forgot a bag or briefcase at the railway station, you locate them right away. The same happened in Ahmedabad. This means, always, the minority communities suffer. Riots happen in daylight. Right? In front of your own family you have been killed, someone body has been killed. What do you need for that? The widow has given her name; they don't even record it. They just write it down as murders; [like] “there was a fight here and seven men were killed, unknown.”<sup>86</sup>

Through Harbhajan Singh’s words, we see clearly how violence against minority communities such as Muslims and Sikhs are treated by the state and the police as less critical than violence against the population at large. With regards to the 1984 massacre, politicians, including MPs, local political functionaries, members of the municipal corporation and metropolitan council and local leaders were all named by witnesses and survivors of the events as responsible for instigating violence by addressing and leading mobs and committing more direct violent acts themselves.<sup>87</sup> It is clear that Congress Party leaders provided Hindu men with voting lists and ration records to identify Sikh houses as well as free access to petrol pumps; such methods would later be repeated by Hindus who attacked Muslims after the Gujarat violence in 2002 (Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002). As discussed above, young men were brought from adjoining villages in droves to commit violence against Sikhs in retaliation for Gandhi’s assassination. Many survivors have identified Congress politicians leading and urging Congress workers in their colonies to steal material goods, kill men, rape women and burn property; they assuring them that no official would stop them from doing so (Kishwar 1984). Survivors have

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<sup>86</sup> Harbhajan Singh is outlining how FIRS filed by the police can be incomplete or omit key details, such as names of those deceased. Omitting names may also obscure the religion of the victim.

<sup>87</sup> Other popular figures have also been named. For example, it is alleged that Amitabh Bachchan, one of India’s best known actors, was involved in instigating the massacre. Jhansi Kaur stated, “Amitabh Bachchan was in cahoots with him [Rajiv Gandhi] – it was Amitabh Bachchan who started the fire.”



been forthcoming with the names of municipal counselors and other state actors they have seen with the mobs (Jerath and Suri 1984a). Witnesses have reported that HKL Bhagat, Sajjan Kumar, and Lali Maken paid men to perpetrate violence with a bottle of liquor and one hundred rupees each.<sup>88</sup> The Citizens' Commission has documented other instigators named in the massacre as leading mobs and instigating men to kill and commit arson, such as Jagdish Tytler (Congress MP), Kamal Nath (former Minister of Urban Development), Dr. Ashok Kumar (Municipal Corporation Member of Kalyanpuri), Faiz Mohammed (Youth Congress leader) and many others (Citizens' Commission 1984). One youth Congress Party officer was seen standing in front of Sikh businesses, urging people to steal the contents within (Kishwar 1984). In Trilokpuri, a Congress leader identified Sikh houses and urged mobs to steal, burn houses and kill Sikhs (Citizens' Commission 1984).

The women in the colony clearly viewed violence as one demarcated among religious lines. Indeed, all of the women framed the mob's actions by describing it as "The Hindus did ---- (*Hinduaan ne --*)." Although the responsibility of state actors is clear, we cannot overlook the responsibility of the public and the hostility and suspicion that the Hindu majority had against the Sikhs due to the ongoing violence in Punjab. Although the massacre was not "communal violence" in the popular sense of the term as it is used in South Asia, ethnic divisions certainly existed prior to the event and they contributed to fostering violence. The violence was a spectacle, which had both accompanying spectators (silent or otherwise) and witnesses, and it was a violence in which the mob treated it as a "gleeful sport" (Vishwanathan 1985). Recently, with the introduction of the "Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence (Access to Justice

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<sup>88</sup> Some argue that ring leaders were paid one thousand rupees (Rao, Ghose, and Pancholi 1985).

and Reparations Act, 2011) the then-ruling Congress Party did make strides to bring reparations into focus again after the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013, but this was tabled in 2014 after the BJP came to power.

### **Destructions of Meaning, Constructions of Memory**

Michael Taussig's influential work on a "culture of terror" is relevant to thinking about how terror and fear as emotions and affects have been inculcated and are experienced by Sikhs who have survived state violence (1984). A culture of terror, and cultures of violence, can destroy and obfuscate meaning – not only of violence but of life itself, while at the same time heightening affect, "both sense and sensation" (Taussig quoted in Beasley-Murray 2010, 160). As Beasley-Murray writes, "terror constructs sense and depends on it, but ultimately also undoes it." It is both "scarcely imaginable" and felt (Beasley-Murray 2010, 160). Yet Jane Margold (1999) has argued that the term "culture of terror" is reductive as it obscures the political agency of the state, for state aggression is "neither equivalent to culture nor a characteristic of a cultural group, but a historically specific means and rationale for disciplining particular categories of people" (63). In this context, however, I would argue that it is precisely the role and actions of state actors, politicians and police in the 1984 massacre that have given rise to a culture of terror where minority groups in India become targets for violence. In other words, culturally constructed discourses of terror do not exclude the political agency of state actors, and in fact can include them as is evident here. The culture of terror created by the historical discourse around Sikhs and the overt workings of the state coalesced into a certain formation that brought about the events of October/November 1984. The crystallized expression of the culture of violence, which centralized over the span of those ninety-six hours, has had long-term effects on the

everyday life of Sikh women and their families affected by the massacre, and for Sikhs in Delhi in general.

Taussig writes, “What distinguishes cultures of terror is that the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise purely philosophical problem of reality-and-illusion, certainty-and-doubt, becomes infinitely more than a “merely” philosophical problem. It becomes a high-powered tool for domination and a principal medium of political practice” (1984, 492). A state can destroy meaning in its very effort to create it. In a similar reversal and double-move, the very nation which provided aestheticizing promises of sanctuary and protection for Sikhs after Partition twisted itself in such a manner that it achieved the very opposite. In such events, the nation becomes “aestheticised by the nationalization of its past, which is projected onto the future – by which act the present is appeased” (Daniel 1996, 310).

Violent events are embedded and rearticulated in social memory. Its subjects react in the long-term to lived experiences of violence in different ways, such as by embodying experienced violence through how they use language (Das 1996, Das 1997), employ silence (Daniel 1996), commemorate historical events (Connerton 1989), perform emotion and memory (Shaw 2007; Nijhawan and Arora 2013), or meditate and partake in ritual economies (Klima 2002). These embodied practices take place in places and ruins (Gordillo 2004; 2014), long after the immediacy of a violent past has faded and the violence of everyday life resumes. There is a methodological challenge in recreating a violent event and understanding its aftermath by using the memories of survivors and other sources. Any exploration of a traumatic event is then socially constructed and necessarily partial and ambiguous in nature.

Veena Das’s work surrounding violence in South Asia provides a foundation for exploring the way in which Sikh women remember the violence of the 1984 massacre.

According to Das, the way that Sikh women experienced the massacre in Delhi and the manner in which grief and loss manifests itself are similar to the way women experienced the violence of the 1947 Partition (Das 1996; Das 2007). Similar tropes of grief and appropriate mourning surround the two events. Scholars have noted how the grief of women in Partition is shrouded in silence – drinking up the pain to cope with loss. Women’s narratives, Das shows, are rife with metaphors and nonspecific language so it is often impossible to capture certain details. I discovered the same bodily attitude with the women in Delhi, who would often obscure or skip certain experiences or events, leading to fractured retellings. Das describes the women using evocative metaphors for Partition like “rivers of blood” or the “earth covered in white shrouds reaching up to the horizon” (Das 1996, 84). The grief that women experience does not pass; it is assumed that they will carry it with them, embodied and bundled up within them forever.

Das maintains that the women affected by Partition must become witnesses to death, and as such their bodies must bear witness to the violence of the communal enemy; the violation of a nation is encapsulated by the violation of the nation’s women (ibid 1996, 85). She writes at length about India and Pakistan’s struggle to “rehabilitate” women affected by Partition. As I have hinted at above, and will discuss in Chapter 5, in a similar manner the desire for nationhood inscribes itself on Sikh women in the colony, whose bodies become appropriated, by both the Indian state and the Sikh diaspora, as territories become appropriated.

The experiences of my interlocutors point towards the incomprehensibility that the events preceding 1984, the massacre itself, and its afterlife have brought into their lives. Due to the nature of the massacre, few corpses or material remains of the dead were received by the families, and families were unable to mourn their loved ones through cremation ceremonies and last rites in accordance with Sikh customs. When Sikh women who lost family members in the

Delhi massacre grieve today, they do not engage in overtly expressive mourning in its most expected forms of affect that can be witnessed elsewhere in South Asia, such as wailing or beating of the chest (although performative expressions of violence do occur in particular arenas, particularly on demand for media cameras and anniversaries). What remains are barbed words, repetitions, capitulations, perhaps the knotting of one's *chunni* in one's tightly gripped hands while speaking, and a feeling of incomprehensibility, as if saying, "How could this happen? To us?" Gordillo (2004) argues that terror, and the memory of terror, can leave marks on the habitus, an idea that I explore further in this dissertation. In upcoming chapters, I continue to discuss the affective relationship between memory and terror by exploring how embodied rituals such as prayer enable women to cope with trauma, and how their bodies, as a totality, become commemorative markers and key vessels of remembrance which act as intermediaries in the relationship between memory and terror both in India and transnationally.

### **Chapter 3: Widowhood, Kinship, and the Violence of Everyday Life**

As discussed in the introduction, feminist historians in South Asia have long pushed for the inclusion of gendered voices in historical discourses (cf. Butalia 2000; Menon and Bhasin 1998, Murphy 2009). These gendered insights and experiences are thrown in sharp relief against dominant state discourses around historical events, serving as reminders of the consequences of violence long after the event is over (Kirmani 2008, 58). This chapter will discuss the traumatic consequences of the 1984 massacre, the historical stigma of widowhood and its present manifestations in the space of the colony, and violence in kinship relations and everyday life. Gendered killings in the 1984 violence, as discussed in the previous chapter, led to a community of widows in the highly gendered space of Tilak Vihar. In this chapter, I argue that the widowed survivors of the 1984 massacre are traumatized four-fold: as subjects who have witnessed and survived grievous violence, as mothers within tenuous kinship networks, as widows, and as women who are continually and spatially confronted with the past. I will discuss here the aftermath of the violence of 1984, beginning with the particulars of compensation, rehabilitation, and the current status of criminal cases against the perpetrators of the massacre. I then discuss briefly the role of the NGO Nishkam and health and illness in the colony. Given the place in which they live and the particulars of their socio-economic status, residents in the colony are susceptible to particular illnesses and addictions. I move on to discuss women's experiences of widowhood in the neighbourhood, embedding these experiences in the literature on lives of widows in North India before elaborating on the interplay between structural violence and kinship, domestic and everyday life for widows in Tilak Vihar. I argue that the landscape of the colony makes gender relations even more fraught, with women imposing patriarchal restrictions connected to widowhood and mobility on other women; these restrictions are tinged with the

residual fear of the massacre. Over the past thirty-two years, violence has led to several issues such as caste conflict, rioting, killings, and gendered conflicts in daily domestic life. I focus on contemporary lived and everyday systemic violence, thereby drawing a cyclical continuum between the 1984 massacre and everyday life in the colony, rather than envisioning them as isolated events. I then move on to discuss how the urban landscape and life of the colony affects experiences of trauma, arguing that the particular relationship between women and violence in this neighbourhood is grounded in space. It is also important to call attention to how the 1984 massacre and state compensation contributed to the specific spatiotemporal qualities of the Widow Colony and continues to do so, as these neighbourhood qualities continue to have an impact on everyday life.

### **The Aftermath of the 1984 Massacre**

In the days immediately following the massacre, it was difficult for Sikh women to distinguish between those who were there to aid them during this time of immense loss and those who were perpetrating the violence. For example, some of the killers had established a camp in Sultanpuri colony; they were ostensibly involved in relief work, when in actuality they wished to impress organizations that were reporting on the carnage, thus receiving media attention for their volunteer work and avoiding prosecution. Women affected by the violence were unsure if the reconciliatory response from perpetrators was genuine or a veiled attempt to redeem their reputations. In her work among the survivors of the massacre shortly after it occurred, historian Uma Chakravarti discusses women's emotional lives after the violence. It was difficult for women survivors to understand how the private, sacrosanct sphere of their homes was attacked; they spoke of homes being shattered metaphorically and materially. The women were betrayed both by the institutions meant to protect them, as well as by their neighbours, as many of the

perpetrators were known to the women. Women felt insecure as they were often taunted by the perpetrators in public about their situation, while the aggressor communities now found themselves better integrated with the state (Chakravarti 1994).

As discussed earlier, in the days after the event, women were collected in trucks by the government, various NGOs, gurdwaras and relief organizations and led to relief camps. Media coverage of the relief camps was made difficult by the actions of the Indian army, which had strict instructions not to allow photographs of the camps and attacked journalists if they attempted to take any document the camps (PUCL-PUDR 1984). Their homes largely destroyed, some women were refused shelter by their neighbours when they made attempts to return home (Chakravarti 1994; PUCL-PUDR 1984).

At the relief camps, families who were unable to give birth for whatever reason approached the widows in an effort to unofficially adopt their children. Taking advantage of their vulnerability, these families claimed that the survivors were unfit mothers due to their widow status. Jhansi Kaur said, "Some ladies came [to the camps] and were asking for our kids. We said "If we give you our kids, then who do we belong to?" They said, "How will you raise them? You're a widow, your husband's gone.""

Immediately after the massacre, many women were disheveled, partially clothed or in tattered clothing, unwashed, with their hair matted and messy.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, many of the women I spoke to during my fieldwork stressed how they were in various stages of undress after the apex of the violence, saying things like "I had no *chunni*

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<sup>89</sup> Scholars focusing on Indic traditions have commented on the meaning of hair as a marker of purity or pollution (Chakravarti, Gill, and Kali for Women (Organization) 2001; Obeyesekere 1981; Hershman 1974).



(scarf) on my head” or “no shoes on my feet.” The lack of a *chunni* is often a way of describing vulnerability to sexual violence. Living in a social milieu where it is common for women to adorn themselves with makeup, colorful clothing and jewelry, the women’s bodies were the opposite of “put together.” They were becoming undone.<sup>90</sup> The widow’s unkempt bodies were viewed as impure, and, as Mary Douglas has argued, dirt and impurity universally disrupt our ways of establishing patterns (Douglas 2005). The bodies of the women, in this sense, were overly transgressive and defied social and cognitive interpretation. The *chunni* (long scarf), in particular for women wearing *salwar kameez* (loose, tapered pants and long tunic), is associated with respect, sexual prudence and propriety.<sup>91</sup> Jhansi Kaur mentioned to me that, soon after a short stay in the gurdwara, when women were dropped back home in Trilokpuri, they “started walking the streets” despite continuing threats by mobs of men who remained patrolling the area. In his work on violence and the aesthetics of terror, Feldman argues that the male gaze “both rigidifies and informs the feminized body as the bearer of sociopolitical values and imaginary and symbolic networks” (Feldman 1991, 43). Taking up this work, I want to suggest the undoneness of the women immediately after the violence as both an effect of traumatic shock and a performative form of political agency. The policing of the women’s bodies then during the immediate aftermath prescribed a visibility that the women continued to defy. Thus, borrowing from Feldman (1991) and Arextaga’s (1995) work I read these bodies, so often highlighted in national and international media coverage, as opportunities to create political meanings of

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<sup>90</sup> See Chapter 5 for further discussion of the iconicity of women’s’ bodies during the massacre.

<sup>91</sup> Although the women I interviewed did not mention this specifically, some women after the massacre were asked to clean up their houses, themselves and comb their neglected hair as politicians and relief agencies were passing through, but they refused (Das 1990a).

violence and its aftermath, and as weapons of retaliation that refuse to conform to Indian ideals of respectability and comportment for women.<sup>92</sup>

Some Indian politicians and academics, who feared a backlash by the Sikh community once the widows' plight became publicly known, attempted to silence these women. The failure of the institutions meant to protect and safeguard minority communities legitimized for some the need for an independent Khalistan at the time (Chakravarti 1994). This legitimization has also been reflected in diasporic interest, as I will discuss later.

### **Compensation, Housing, and the Current Status of Criminal Cases**

In the aftermath of the massacre, approximately 700 Sikh widows were eventually relocated from the camps to Tilak Vihar by the Indian state, which became the location for the cluster of government-allocated apartments referred to by the general public as the “*Vidva/Vidvawaan di* (Widow/Widows’) Colony” or simply “Widow Colony” in English. I was told by staff at Nishkam that the housing had been built by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) some years earlier and that it was vacant until the families were relocated.

The manner in which the state gave out compensation affected how the Widow Colony was formed. Working from the principle of the nuclear family, the symbolic survivor of the violence of the massacre became neither the parents of the dead male, nor the children – it was the widow. In this manner, the widow became the gendered representative of the 1984 survivor (see Chapter 5, where I argue that the widows are positioned as “vessels of remembrance”). The recipient of state compensation was constructed as the wife of the dead Sikh man, who had lost

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<sup>92</sup> Feldman writes, “The body becomes the medium, the origin, and the telos for the graphic of violence. Violence flows out of the body or enters it in order to create political value. Transactions of the body encode social institutions with signs of power, or social institutions bear down upon the body with violence and invest it with political value.” (Feldman 1991, 144).

not only their husband but the male breadwinner in the home. Yet, other family members suffered greatly because of the massacre. During an interview, Heema Bai told me that she had an intense disagreement with her brother-in-law, who had taken 2 compensation installments of Rs. 10,000 (\$147 each) from her, and who wanted to take the Rs. 330,000 (\$4857) compensation from her as well. Parents, who had lost an earning member of the family, also experienced economic loss along with their grief (Phoolka, personal communication). The state system had gendered the survivor in this manner. In one conversation, historian Uma Chakravarti remarked to me that,

the widow's agency and the widow's identity was being circumscribed and fixed in certain kinds of ways by everybody around – by the state, by the community.... In a sense their identity had been constructed by the way in which the state was looking at them now and the way in which society was looking at them.

She stated that in one of the interviews for Chakravarti and Haksar's book (1987), a man who had survived remarked, "I did not see anything. What has been seen – that has been seen by the women."<sup>93</sup>

The widows felt re-victimized by the government's initial form of compensation, which involved paying them Rs. 10,000 (\$150). In November 1984, the government announced that it would provide immediate compensation in the following amounts: Rs. 10,000 (\$150) for a death or a completely destroyed home, Rs. 5,000 (\$75) if the house was mostly destroyed, Rs. 2,000 (\$30) for injury, and Rs. 1,000 (\$15) for minor damage to the home (Citizens' Commission 1984, 37; PUCL-PUDR 1984). These measures illustrate how the state was involved primarily in governance and administration related to compensation and housing rather than the suffering of the survivors, thus normalizing the lived experiences of violence. Arguments about legal heirs

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<sup>93</sup> The line in Hindi was: *Humne tho kuch nahin dekha, jho dekha voh auraton ney dekha hai.*

ensued, and many women were often beaten and abused by their husband's families, who felt that they should have received the compensation instead (Banerjee 1990; Das 1990b; Das 1990a; Chakravarti, personal communication). This was particularly the case for women in areas such as Sultanpuri (a residential colony in North-West Delhi) who had recently married and had no children. Remarriages were common for many of the surviving women, with the expectation that women would marry brothers or cousins of their deceased husbands (see below).

Until 1999 some compensation was provided by the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) until (Arif 2008), although the amount is as of now still unclear. Since 1984, several governments and political parties have announced compensation initiatives to survivors of the massacre. However, these announcements have not translated into families actually receiving promised funds. The BJP central government announced a further Rs. 500,000 (\$7359) for each family in October 2014; however as of February 2015 only 143 families were given this extra compensation. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which came to power in the Delhi cabinet in 2015, pledged to expedite the process and provide each family the same amount out of their own funds and seek monetary returns from the central government later (Times of India 2016a; Daily News and Analysis 2015b).<sup>94</sup> However, AAP's own inaction on the compensatory payouts have been criticized by Sikh groups such as the DSGMC (Hindustan Times 2016).

The status of criminal court cases and legal issues surrounding the massacre have been fraught with complications in the three-plus decades since it occurred. Since that time at least ten official committees have been tasked with inquiring into the violence (the Marwah Commission, the Mishra Commission, the Kapur Mittal Committee, and the Nanavati Commission are the

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<sup>94</sup> "*Aam aadmi*" is a popular expression meaning "common man."

most well-known). A few civic rights organizations published their own inquiries into the violence, notably the PUDR-PUCL report published in 1984. The PUDR-PUCL authors also criticize the Mishra Commission report (which was published in August 1986) for making many factual errors and omissions, including of the names of Congress leaders named in the attack, a criticism also made by Human Rights Watch (PUCL-PUDR 1987; Human Rights Watch 1991b).

Approximately six Delhi police officers and 442 perpetrators have been convicted for participating in the massacre, with forty-nine convictions leading to life imprisonment, and three convictions of imprisonment over ten years. Of the rest, five were sentenced to five to ten years in jail, 156 persons to three to five years in jail, sixty-seven persons less than three years in jail, and 117 persons received a fine and a warning (Tribune News Service 2015; The Indian Express 2015; The Indian Express 2014b).<sup>95</sup> It is beyond the scope of this work to provide fine detail on the legal particulars surrounding the civic cases against those allegedly involved in the massacre, yet it is important to recognize that there is a sense of incomplete justice surrounding it, both in India and abroad (see Chapter 5). In 1994, based on the recommendations of the various committees and inquiries mentioned above, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) charged Jagdish Tytler, Sajjan Kumar and H.K.L Bhagat, all Congress politicians alleged to have been involved in “conversion specialist” roles (see Chapter 2) where they incited others to engage in violence. Citing lack of evidence and witnesses, all cases against Jagdish Tytler were closed in November 2007 by the CBI. However, several witnesses came forward and stated they were never contacted by the CBI. Tytler and Kumar were given “clean chits” in November 2009, an action met with much protest by Sikh groups transnationally. The Delhi court ordered the cases

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<sup>95</sup> I am unclear as to the length of sentencing of the other forty-five perpetrators.

against Tytler to be reopened in 2013 for the involvement in three deaths, a crime for which he was, again, ultimately exonerated; Kumar was also exonerated again the same year. Many of the widows are still fighting court cases involving compensation and navigating through judicial and bureaucratic channels.<sup>96</sup>

In addition to memories of the massacre, fear has been a constant feeling for many Sikhs in Delhi since 1984. From my conversations among Sikhs who survived the massacre and did not live in the colony, it seems that most have an awareness that the state was complicit in the killing of Sikhs and in reinscribing their position as minorities; this awareness extends across class lines. As such, whenever an incident of terrorism in Delhi or Punjab in particular, or elsewhere in India, occurs there is a sense of generalized fear that Sikhs may become the target of attacks again. The sense of being overwhelmed, a perspective held by many women in the colony, has as much to do with a double betrayal: a betrayal committed by their neighbourhood communities when the violence took place, and by the state. The fear and anxiety among Sikhs, Chakravarti argues, has lessened somewhat now that Muslims have become the marked “other” in India (1994). The lives of some citizens have become more expendable than others. Chakravarti remarks that there is an increasing number of people who feel they must find an object of hatred in order to define themselves (Chakravarti, personal communication). In other words, while Sikhs who survived the 1984 violence and who did not lose any family members returned to their

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<sup>96</sup> As in Delhi, questions of reparations and reconciliations are pressing in several contexts transnationally. Although episodes of violence such as the Rwandan genocide or the violence in South Africa have led to efforts such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (which aim for reparations as well as restoring legal rights and dignity through public apologies (cf. Lightfoot 2015; Gibney 2008 on this topic), respectively, aside from court cases there have not been such efforts organized around the 1984 massacre. In addition, the gap between reparation measures following such violence and actual implementation can be wide (Rubio-Marín 2006).

everyday lives, some of that generalized fear was transferred to another minority community (see discussion of Kirmani (2013) in Chapter 2). The state is increasingly complicit in this definition of Muslim as “Other,” which has become increasingly common (Chakravarti 1994).

### **The Role of the Nishkam NGO**

The NGO Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council<sup>97</sup>, often called simply Nishkam, meaning loosely “altruism” or “dedication without reward,” was founded by eleven Sikhs in Delhi soon after the 1984 massacre as a Sikh rehabilitation and advocacy organization for survivors (cf. Arif 2008; Murphy 2004). Upon its inception, Nishkam helped repair some windows and doors in slum homes that were damaged in the violence. Once some of the families had moved in to Tilak Vihar, Nishkam began providing vocational help, securing jobs for some women in offices, factories and schools, installing ceiling fans in the flats and providing material goods such as kitchenware and basic rations. Jhansi Kaur mentioned to me how, when settling into Tilak Vihar, Nishkam had provided her family with a ceiling fan, dry foodstuffs, and pots and pans.

The group initially operated out of rooms in the widows’ flats until eventually the large office building, called Nishkam Bhawan (Nishkam House), was built. As the surviving widows had lost the male breadwinners of their families and were faced with little to no income, Nishkam assisted many women, such as Amar Kaur and Harnoor Kaur, in procuring employment, often as low-paid assistants in schools and offices, jobs which some women believed were beneath them. There was some discussion during my fieldwork about factory work that involved crushing and packaging spices. This work was made available to the women in an

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<sup>97</sup> The organization’s website is available at: <http://www.nishkam.in/>. Last accessed January 17, 2017.

area across the street from Nishkam (now generally used for parking) shortly after the massacre until other jobs were procured.



Figure 3.1 Inner entrance to Nishkam Bhawan

Currently, the administration of Nishkam is highly gendered, with the upper management work done solely by men, and only one woman out of seventeen on the Board of Directors; although the regular staff is made up of a mixture of women and men. When I pressed Harbhajan Singh about the gender disparity in the organization, he replied it was an issue but women were generally too busy with their domestic work to become involved on the board. Nishkam currently provides subsidized medical services, offered by general physicians and specialists such as ophthalmologists, dentists and gynecologists, as well as an in-house pharmacy, diagnostic testing, and a basic operation theatre for simple medical procedures. They also hold various educational initiatives in their Tilak Vihar site, such as shorthand and typing classes,



music classes, computer training, and tutoring. They also maintain a small, well-kept general interest library in the basement that houses books in Punjabi and English; I spent much of my free time working in this library. Nishkam also provides scholarships for high school and college students and works in areas of disaster relief and poverty alleviation (the latter most notably in their Sikligar Sikhs project, a project providing housing for lower-caste Sikhs in Karnataka). As I discussed in the introduction, the initial aim of this dissertation was to conduct research in the Nishkam Sewing Centre, located a block away from the main office building, which has since been closed and turned into a private primary school. Women were given space to work and materials to sew items such as handkerchiefs, head-coverings used by Sikh boys, underwear, handkerchiefs and *salwars* (loose drawstring pants worn by women), which they could then sell in the market. The sewing materials were kept in a couple of small rooms in the Nishkam building and were handled by Jasminder Kaur, a staff member. The sewing had been outsourced with the closing of the centre; thus, during my research women are able to pick up materials from the Nishkam office and sew in their own homes. The closing of the centre is one example of how few social spaces are available for women in the neighbourhood.

Nishkam's motto is "Serving Humanity Selflessly" and indeed, the Sikh concept of *seva* or selfless service (cf. Murphy 2004), which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, is at the centre of their work. Initially targeting only 1984 massacre survivors, they have now branched out to provide services in the area to whoever requires them (during my first visit in 2010, in fact, I came across a young Pakistani couple who had recently come to Delhi and were looking to enroll in computer classes). They have set up registered charitable tax organizations in Canada and the US for diasporic Sikhs to donate. The workings of the organization put a particular emphasis on self-reliance, such that they aim to help make those who access their services self-supporting

rather than provide charity only. As such, medical services are subsidized for those who access them and are generally not provided free-of-cost. This has been met by a fair amount of animosity by some in the colony, and there's a degree of tension in the relationship between Nishkam and the surrounding community. The management of the gurdwara behind Nishkam made it clear to me that they believed foreign donations were not being utilized in the best manner possible. As Nishkam has such a strong presence and association with the 1984 massacre's relief efforts, the gurdwara caretakers believed that they had in a sense been "left out" – financially and otherwise, as they had little interaction with the somewhat frequent visiting Sikh politicians from Canada and elsewhere, who would often visit Nishkam but not the gurdwara. While some supported Nishkam and were grateful for their work, others in the neighbourhood viewed the organization as greedy and believed that services should be provided free of cost. During a neighbourhood stroll one day where Surjit Kaur and I were walking around taking photographs, we were stopped by a few men on the corner of the main road. When we told them we were doing work with Nishkam, they began to angrily criticize the organization. Still others, like Jhansi Kaur, have found Nishkam to be a great help, with both early aid shortly after the violence and the wide variety of services they currently offer.

### **Health and Illness**

One day in the Spring of 2013, close to the end of my fieldwork in Delhi, the head doctor of the Nishkam medical wing, Dr. Gulati, sat down to talk to me and Harbhajan Singh in the Nishkam offices about some of the common health issues in the colony. He identified stomach problems such as gastroenteritis, viral and bacterial stomach infections and accompanying diarrhea to be the largest and most common issues, blaming them on low sanitation in the area

and a lack of fresh water (as water supply comes through tanker trucks).<sup>98</sup> Although Nishkam offers free services for card holders, and low cost services for others (I was told it was ten rupees for diagnosis and prescription, and fifteen rupees for prescription pad refill), many cannot afford the latter or the cost of the prescription itself, which may be one hundred or two hundred rupees. Other issues he identified were psychiatric problems, high blood pressure which is “normally not in the lower income group” in this area, chest infections, type 2 diabetes, epilepsy, malaria (although decreasing), dengue fever, and typhoid (the latter two which I experienced during fieldwork in Delhi).

Dr. Gulati also pointed out liver problems due to high rates of alcoholism, and substance use. When I asked what kind of drug was most common (prescription drug abuse and glue sniffing were the ones that I had heard were most common among male youth), he said most of the youth in this area avoid treatment and do not discuss the actual drug use with him. He generally becomes aware of substance use when youth contract tuberculosis and are brought by their mothers to see him. He strongly emphasized the importance of a de-addiction (detox) centre in the neighbourhood. “From a medical point, I...I do *ardas* [prayer] from everyone. We need a de-addiction centre, please. We need to think about their future. And we need a de-addiction hospital or a mini hospital...it can do a lot of good here. No one listens...all the politicians don't care.” Harbhajan Singh pointed to the abundance of drug suppliers in the area, and told me he urged mothers of men who have died of drug overdoses to come forward and speak openly about this issue. Indeed, these issues were common conversations among Sikh widows and the families in the area as well. Harnoor Kaur herself discussed with me her son's drug use (see below).

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<sup>98</sup> I am not aware as to how often the water is delivered, and at what cost.

I became acutely aware of the intersection between poverty and health during a follow-up visit with Jhansi Kaur. Upon arriving at the flat one day, Jhansi Kaur's daughter-in-law brought me two glasses of some kind of orange juice/Frooti type beverage. I drank some from one glass to avoid giving the appearance of a rude guest. Jhansi Kaur told me she hadn't been feeling well and asked her daughter-in-law to bring her medical reports which she gave to me to look at. She had at first gone to a government hospital as she had been having intense lumbar pain on the left side as well as nausea and a fever. She received some medication from the hospital but hadn't been feeling better, so she went to a private hospital to get bloodwork done. I read the results; there were issues with her blood chemistry and it seemed like she was anemic. We discussed which foods were beneficial for an iron deficiency. I flipped to the second page and saw that she had had a typhoid test. I asked her if she had typhoid and she said yes, but she didn't seem to know much about it. Her tests for typhoid were all positive, with a diagnosis of "moderate hypochromic with anisopoikilocytosis" (a type of anemia). She was prescribed a mix of various vitamins. I sat with her in silence for a bit, shocked and uncomfortable at the raw reality of her poor health, and the fact that she had no clear idea what typhoid was. I found myself trying to recall how typhoid was spread and whether I was at any risk. I wrote down her abnormal test results and promised her that I would ask my brother (a family physician) about it. Jhansi Kaur said she would be going back to the doctor that day but that her medicines had run out and were very expensive, one hundred rupees for six tablets. Thus, she could not afford a full course of her antibiotics nor her supplements prescribed for her anemia.

As transpired with Jhansi Kaur, it is common for doctors and centres like Nishkam in Delhi to dispense medicine for one or two days with the instructions to return if the condition had not improved. Individuals with a sickness such as typhoid like Jhansi Kaur are often not

diagnosed correctly and thus a single sickness may manifest itself in diagnosis as multiple diseases. In their work on the circulation of pharmaceuticals among the urban poor, Das and Das (2006) argue that self-medicating is often seen as non-compliance, and the poor and marginalized are often stigmatized for this. Incorrect use of antibiotics, such as using them for the wrong amount of time, as Jhansi Kaur does, is common. In their study the authors point out that discourse on the poor facilitates their pathologization, something I found to be true in the way that some Nishkam staff members spoke about their patients. Thus, Das and Das argue, short-term therapeutic patterns arise from the intersection of poverty, poor state regulation, and “mutation of both biomedicine and traditional medicine to create a specific local ecology of care” (Das and Das 2006, 78). Symptoms can be “signs of fraught social relations” within an individual’s kinship network (ibid. 2006, 81), in that symptoms of various illnesses can be related to kinship relations.<sup>99</sup> It is the kinship universe of widows, particularly remarriage and relationships with children, which I would like to turn to next.

### **Widowhood and Kinship**

After the massacre, many women in the colony were married, some to brothers-in-law or distant relatives. While some women were open about their second marriages in the colony, others seemed ashamed to discuss this. Heema Bai, a Labana widow from Alwar, Rajasthan, was widowed in the massacre when her husband was beaten and burned with a tire on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984. She entered a levirate marriage in 1986 and gave birth to three sons (in her first marriage, she had given birth to a still-born baby girl). Geeta Devi, a relative and friend of Heema Bai’s

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<sup>99</sup> In the study, Das and Das discuss how one woman suspected that her medications were not working because they were not given in the proper spirit of *seva* or service by her daughter-in-law (ibid. 2006, 81).

who lived in the same building, had also remarried after her first husband was killed in 1984, although her second husband was also killed in a DTC bus accident in October 2000.

Levirate marriages, also known as “widow inheritance” marriages, where a widow will marry and live with the (generally younger) brother of the deceased, ensuring that property is retained within a particular joint family and that a productive worker (whether domestic or in the private or public labour force) is kept in the home.<sup>100</sup> It also provides a legitimizing space for widows, in some ways restoring social status, tied to gender, as a married woman. Remarriage is generally more common among lower castes than upper castes across India (Chen 2000).

Remarriages, including levirate marriages, are more common in North India than South India because more castes in the North allow remarriage (Chen and Dreze 1992). In South India, however, there are scattered instances of levirate marriages among lower-caste groups (Chen 2000). Across India, roughly ten to twenty-five percent of widows remarry (Chen and Dreze 1995; Chen 2000), with younger women of childbearing age more likely to do so than older women, and some remarriages taking place between distant relatives rather than levirate.

Although on the one hand the same social circles continue for women within levirate marriages, levirate and secondary marriages can bring a great deal of conflict. Remarriage, although widely accepted today, remains stigmatizing for women and normalized for men. Some women may choose to stay with their natal family, if possible, or with a married son (Grover 2011, 135).<sup>101</sup>

Although Heema Bai and Geeta Devi asked me not to videotape them or take any handwritten notes, both women were open about their remarriages when talking to me, treating

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<sup>100</sup> This is termed ‘full marriage levirate’ by Radcliffe-Brown (1950) and Evans-Pritchard (1951) in contrast to ‘true levirate’ marriages in which a man has children with a deceased brother’s widow but does not live with her.

<sup>101</sup> Children too can be stigmatized, having difficulty establishing legitimacy socially and as heirs in a new home, particularly when a widow gives birth to children with her second husband (Grover 2011).

them as a matter-of-fact reality after surviving the massacre. Jhansi Kaur, however, never mentioned her second marriage to me outright. During our interview, it became clear that she had given birth to children after 1984. When I asked for details, she would mumble incoherently and did not provide a clear response as to who the father was. Surjit Kaur told me afterwards that Jhansi Kaur had remarried, like many of the other women who had married their brothers-in-law, but that she perhaps didn't want to speak publicly about it. After speaking to her mother, Surjit Kaur estimated that roughly three-quarters of the women affected by the massacre had entered into levirate marriages (some in their teens and twenties), and that these marriages, and remarriages in general, was more common among Labana than Punjabi Sikhs. Punjabi women in the neighbourhood articulated their caste privilege by openly discussing remarriage among Labana women, whereas Labana women themselves were less likely to speak about remarriage.

Women I interviewed in Tilak Vihar who had remarried through levirate marriage considered themselves “widows” regardless of their marital status, for several reasons. At the outset, women constructed themselves as widows in order to give justice to their experiences of loss and the long-term structural ramifications of losing their husbands in such a violent manner. It was an identity, at least among the women I worked with, that they claimed, one that taps into larger discourses surrounding widows in northern India (see below). The state's construction of the central 1984 survivor as the widow of the dead Sikh man, for compensation purposes, as well as the diasporic framing of the 1984 violence, also reiterated this subjectivity. In Martha Chen's study on widows, there is a widespread belief among widows that remarriage leads to a forfeit of rights, although forfeited property ownership varies, especially among women remarried to relatives of their late husbands (Chen 2000).

As is underlined throughout this dissertation, widowhood can confront women with a loss of status, disputes over inheritance, and patriarchal religious and secular legalities.

Transnationally, widow abuse and exploitation is common, and women outnumber men in widowhood.<sup>102</sup> In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mortality rate for remarried women and widows over the age of forty-five in India was eighty-six percent higher than for married women (Chen and Dreze 1995). In the global South widowhood is experienced by a higher proportion of young and middle aged women (Chen 2000). Some demographers attribute the increase of widows solely to the increase of life expectancy in India, particularly of women (Sivakumar 2015). However, age disparities between women and men in marriage are also a factor. Male mortality is also higher and widow remarriage is relatively infrequent. There are more than 43.3 million widows in India; more than twenty-two million widows are heads of households according to the most recent census data, roughly nine percent of total households.

Approximately four hundred fifty-seven thousand widows were counted in the census in Delhi alone (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India 2016).<sup>103</sup> Widows, however, may be excluded from census data due to moving around different relatives' households or homelessness. Structural poverty may be hidden, and census data surrounding distribution of material goods and cash within and between households can be obscure (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2001).

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<sup>102</sup> Widows comprise seven to sixteen percent of all women around the world (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2001).

<sup>103</sup> The same census data counts roughly 730 000 Sikh widows in total across India.



Given these transnational and national trends, what, then, are some of the gendered dimensions in the sphere of everyday life for Sikh widows, and what historical underpinnings have led to these experiences of widowhood? In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, reform movements in India reshaped the articulation of gender identities (Jakobsh 2003; Malhotra 2002; N. Mandair 2005; Mohan 2006; Sangari and Vaid 1989). The Singh Sabha, a reform movement that began in the late 1800's and focused on literacy, the revival of Sikh teachings and the Punjabi language, endorsed the idea of "competent domesticity" (with an emphasis on family life) to define the Sikh community (Mohan 2006). The Singh Sabha reforms utilized Victorian assumptions combined with traditional Sikh values (Jakobsh 2003; Mohan 2006). Patriarchy was reconstituted through reformist notions of feminine spirituality and morality, and conduct was outlined in textual form. Within this new form of patriarchy, the "new woman" held bourgeois moral virtues and her freedom was qualified by her femininity; she was the reverse of the common, agriculturally-inclined *Jat* (a particular caste) women of Punjab who ostensibly lacked refined morals. The creation of this new Sikh woman necessitated removing traditional ritual barriers such as dowry and stigma around widowhood remarriage and disassembling arenas of popular religious traditions which were previously accepted as women's domain (Mohan 2006).

There is a scarcity of literature that focuses on Sikh funerary rites, widowhood and gendered experiences of mourning relative to literatures focusing on other Indic religions, particularly Hindu widows. Current literatures on such practices of death, mourning and widowhood in North India are often based on discussions of Hindu women's experiences, particularly upper-class/caste women (Chakravarti, Gill, and Kali for Women (Organization) 2001; Chen 2000; Mukta 1999). Chen writes, "There are not enough existing studies on widows in non-Hindu communities to patch together an adequate picture of their lives without additional

empirical work” (Chen 2000, 5).<sup>104</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2000), a notable exception in the literature on funerary rights, calls attention to the ways in which women are barred from participating in certain roles in Sikh death rituals (for example, lighting the funeral pyre of a loved one) and arguing that patriarchy has prevailed in such Sikh rites of passage.

Given the paucity of data specific to Sikh women and Sikh widowhood in particular, we have to extrapolate from the larger cultural milieu that most Sikhs live in. It appears that many of the oppressions widows in North India face are also common for Sikh widows.<sup>105</sup> Widowhood in North India has been described as “social death” arising from a widow’s lowered status following the loss of her husband and exclusion as a functional member of the family unit (Chakravarti 1995). Prescriptive Brahminical texts generally outline two models of widowhood: the widow-turned-ascetic who remains celibate and in the home, or one who commits *sati*, or widow immolation, in devotion to her husband, thereby avoiding widowhood altogether. Widows, especially upper-class widows, are expected to be “life-long” mourners (Mukta 1999, 30). Much has been written about women’s place within the social structure of the North Indian family and son preference (Alaka Basu 1992; Aparna Basu, Taneja, and Indian Council of Historical Research 2002; S. Basu 1999; Belliappa 2013; Dyson and Moore 1983; Pache Huber 2000; Lamb 2000; Menon and Bhasin 1998a; Milazzo and Milazzo 2014; Saraswati Mishra

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<sup>104</sup> Anshu Malhotra has pointed out the difficulties in “culling out a Sikh identity as separate and distinct from a Hindu identity” in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Punjab (Malhotra 2012, 169).

<sup>105</sup> In Sikh scriptures and practice, *sati*, or the practice of widow immolation, is condemned (see for example, Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji in Raag Gauree on Pannaa 185) (“SikhiToTheMAX - Enabling Gurmat Knowledge” 2016; “Official Website of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Sri Amritsar – Sikh Rehat Maryada in English” 2016). There is no prohibition against widow or widower remarriage in Sikhism. Remarriage is done in accordance with Anand Karaj (Sikh marriage rites) marriage rites, although historically *chadar andaazi*, also known as *karewa*, was also conducted. This would often take place in a gurdwara, where a marriage would be solemnized by the groom placing a cloth on the widow’s head (Hershman 1981, 181). Although marriage to brothers-in-law is common, in some cases remarriage would take place to a distant relative.

2002; Misri 2014; Mohan 2006; Purewal 2010; G. G. Raheja and Gold 1994; Rege 2003; Sen 1992; Sudha 2000; Tambiah et al. 1989; P. Uberoi 1994; Vlassoff 2013). Although this text was never considered binding on most people in South Asia and represents an idealized Brahmanical model of social relations, the Manusmriti, a commentary on Hindu law and morality possibly dating as far back as 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., outlines that a woman's status and social standing after marriage rests on her marital lineage and her sons (Manu, Olivelle, and Olivelle 2005). Growing up she is policed by her family to safeguard her reputation (as Surjit Kaur is, below). She then becomes the "property" of her husband and then her son, the latter an "insurance policy" for when she is elderly. A widow, then, may be considered a burden by her surviving kin, particularly if she is not economically independent.

There are stigmas attached to widowhood that affected the women survivors of 1984 who lost their husbands in the massacre. In one conversation Harnoor Kaur mentioned with a shrug that her family had disowned her, saying "Who would keep you?" Heema Bai's family, too stressed how suddenly her presence had become a problem – after her husband was killed, her mother-in-law wanted her to return to her natal home, while her mother wanted to get her remarried as soon as possible. The bodies of widows, not tied sexually through marriage to any man, become dangerous, unclaimed (it is not surprising then, that the word "*randi*" has historically meant both whore or widow in both Punjabi and Hindi). Harbhajan Singh outlined this clearly when he mentioned that Nishkam had tried to fight back against the supposed inauspiciousness of widows by having five widows help lay the first stone of the Nishkam building. Due to such stigma surrounding widows, he said, "if my own cousin sister is a widow, I don't go alone there [to visit]." Remarriage then, can legitimize the bodies of the widows. Heema

Bai, who entered into a levirate marriage after the massacre, made a shrugging and twisting motion with her hand during our conversation, saying, “I remarried to save my *izzat*.”

Entrenched in this patriarchal family structure and a conservative cultural milieu, with little formal support available, women rely on kinship networks for crucial social support. Relationships between widows and friends and siblings are important; the latter are often entrusted with responsibilities such as legal matters and handling of finances, although this can sometimes be misused. Social support aside, widows have less claim over natal support structures than they did before or during marriage. In post-conflict situations, women not only have to survive themselves, but also deal with caring for children, the elderly, or other surviving relatives, the loss or destruction of their homes and possessions, as well as the loss of their partner, breadwinner, and male protector (see below, for example, for a discussion on Amar Kaur’s family responsibilities). This loss was expressed regardless of whether or not a widow had remarried. As such, remarriage was framed as an obligation among the Labana women I interviewed, and women continued to construct narratives of loss, as “widows,” after doing so.

Restrictive social norms limit movements within the public sphere; some communities may prescribe strict dress, behavioural and diet codes for widows. Some research has argued that upper castes are generally more concerned with a woman’s purity, prohibiting widows from remarrying and working outside the home, while lower castes in some ways abide by looser restrictions, with women having more autonomy as issues of livelihood take precedence (Chen 2000, Kapadia 1996, Searle Chatterjee 1981, Deliege 1997). However, in her study of the neighbourhood of Mohini Nagar in South Delhi, Shalini Grover has recently argued that waged labour among women in Delhi does not necessarily lead to a strong voice in the marital home nor household cooperation (2011). Thus, the definitions of feminine and masculine capabilities

within the household are constantly being reshaped, affected by the modern labour market and the demands of everyday life (Das 1994).

### **The Intersections between Violence and Kinship**

During the course of my fieldwork, the manifestations of subtle and more overt forms of violence, ranging from disagreements and ongoing conflict between family members to physical altercations, suicides, accidents, and murders, became quickly apparent. In the initial phase of my fieldwork I had a hard time understanding how such seemingly unrelated strings of negative events could happen to a particular individual or a particular family, finally coming to a realization later how this underscored the continuation of structural violence.

Many of the women interviewed had had children who passed away while young, due to either illness or accident. Heema Bai lost her baby girl in 1983 shortly after her first marriage. Then, one of her three sons from her second marriage died in an accident at the age of eleven; he was playing with his friends in the neighbourhood and a water tank fell over, crushing him. Geeta Devi had also lost one son during the massacre, and one son died afterwards from unrelated causes (I am unclear as to the exact details of his death). Harnoor Kaur also had one daughter die from an unspecified illness at the age of two while being raised in her maternal home. (In India, “other mothering,” or the practice of women rearing children not biologically related to them, is common, especially in situations where the biological parents are unable to care for the child financially (cf. O’Reilly 2010)).<sup>106</sup> Harnoor Kaur mentioned that her family did

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<sup>106</sup> During my MA research, one of the Khalistani women I discussed a similar experience. After her husband’s death, this woman was so committed to her work as a journalist exposing violence in Punjab that, in order for her son to have a more stable home life, she chose to have her sister care for him until he was an adolescent.

not tell her that her daughter had passed away, and she found out when “someone had come to visit and suddenly it came out of their mouth.”

Jhansi Kaur discussed with me how one of her sons, Gurjot, had passed away, saying “*bahar ke chakar mein chala gya*,” meaning, loosely, that he had died because of his wish to go abroad. When I pressed her about what that meant, she told me that he wasn’t successful in his attempts to leave India and had wasted a large sum of money in doing so. “He wasn’t able to go abroad, so he killed himself,” she said, matter-of-factly. He had married when he was about eighteen-years-old and was twenty-two-years-old when he had committed suicide (approximately 15 months prior to our discussion), leaving behind two toddlers, a girl and a boy, and his wife. Jhansi Kaur explained that Gurjot’s wife, Alka, stayed at home to take care of the children, and would possibly try to find a job when the children were a bit older.

The cycle of violence has continued on for surviving children of the massacre. Over the last three decades, it has been common for Sikh widows in the area to commute to their jobs in various parts of Delhi while many children remained at home, not enrolled in school and unattended to, with many young men turning to alcohol and other substances to cope with the trauma (The Indian Express 2016a). From my observations, it seemed the young women were less likely to engage in substance use because their movements and actions were generally more policed than those of their male siblings. The loss felt by children of Tilak Vihar was discussed when I interviewed Amar Kaur and, by extension, some of her family who were also in the room at the time. Amar Kaur’s older son (who had children of his own) spoke of this loss by saying:

We had such a beautiful family, but after ’84... we remember our father; if we had a father he would have seen our children and us when we were young too. Like we were in school, and when fathers would drop off their children at school, we would remember our father too. Meaning we feel the loss of our father... If ‘84 didn’t happen... this house wouldn’t have been like this.

One of Amar Kaur's grandchildren then piped up, "We think about if our grandpa had been alive...he would have taught us how to walk, we would have had that entire experience."

Amar Kaur agreed, saying:

When did these children get their father's love? Not their grandfather's nor their mother's. Their mother [her daughter-in-law] goes all day to work in people's houses, to clean, sweep, wash dishes..."

Amar Kaur's grandson: [My mom] doesn't get a chance to spend time with us... she comes back in the afternoon and spends a little time with us. [KA: But then she is tired?] Yes, she comes home tired, and then does housework, and then leaves for work early.

Amar Kaur emphasized how the lack of a father figure for her children led to serious mental health issues for her sons, leading her to remain as a main caregiver for her sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. These issues were mirrored by Jhansi Kaur, who discussed her two married daughters. "Both of them, the poor things, have bad husbands. [The husbands are] drinkers, both. They're just trying to get by, what can you do."

Amar Kaur's other son too, suffered even graver misfortunes. During my interview with Amar Kaur and her family, I noticed from the corner of my eye a man lying down on the bed in the next room. Although we talked for a couple of hours, the man remained absolutely motionless with his back to us and seemed completely impervious to the movements of adults and children throughout the flat and the noise of all of the voices in the next room. I learned that this was Amar Kaur's eldest son, Gurinder, who was about 40 years old. As mentioned in Chapter 2, during the massacre, she had hidden him in a neighbour's outhouse bathroom, and, over the next few days, would secretly travel there to feed him. She removed him from the outhouse after three days, when she felt it was safe. As the eldest son, she was afraid that her disguise for him (dressing him up in girls' clothing) was not adequate to keep him from being

targeted, as he had distinct male features. She mentioned that he had a fever afterwards and became somehow partially paralyzed on one side, that he was traumatized and unable to speak after the massacre and had, according to her, “lost his sanity.”

After he came of age, Amar Kaur’s son Gurinder married, had children, and was holding down a regular job at a steel factory. Gurinder’s eldest son (Amar Kaur’s grandson), suffered a grave injury in an accident when he was four years old. It was difficult to understand as everyone in the room was talking at once, but from what I could piece together, he had come between a motorcycle driver and a small schoolbus. The child was there in the flat, walking with a noticeable limp. During our interview, one of the relatives demanded of Gurinder’s son, “show her the leg!” but I said that that was unnecessary. Gurinder stopped working at the factory, and Amar Kaur explained this as a direct result of him becoming distressed after his son’s accident. “He [Gurinder] just stays sitting, sitting, sitting, he has mental tension,” she said. Other relatives said that he wouldn’t go outside the house. Gurinder had also recently met with his own accident, a bad fall inside the house where he too had injured his leg. At the time of this interview, Gurinder had been housebound and in this state for 11 years.

Looking at the experiences of widows and their kin in the colony, we see how violence, as theorized by Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes, can range from “direct physical assault, to symbolic violence and routinized everyday violence, including the chronic, historically embedded structural violence whose visibility is obscured” (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes quoted in Farmer 2004, 318).<sup>107</sup> In other words, structural violence, with its hidden nature, has

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<sup>107</sup> In *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (2012), Akhil Gupta argues that the relationship between the poor and the Indian state is one of structural violence, and that corruption, governmentality, and bureaucracy have created an arbitrary system of care that is produced by the very mechanisms that seek to address social suffering.



manifested itself in the colony through illness, accidents, suicides, health problems, and fraught kinship relations, among other issues. It is the 1984 massacre and its long-lasting effects that has led to these legacies of violence.

In contrast to the experiences of those in Tilak Vihar, those who were relatively better off (such as Sikhs from higher castes and classes) who survived the massacre led relatively more stable lives. Harbhajan Singh, for example, mentioned that his children were all married and “well-settled” in their lives and in their respective businesses; while one was in the business of diamond jewelry, the other had his own office and worked in the travel industry, while his daughter was married to a “nice chap” in Delhi.

The everyday lived violence by families in the colony extended even farther and in graver ways, beyond mental health issues and illness. Shortly after I had returned from fieldwork, I read a news report regarding the murder of two women, a mother and a daughter, in the colony. On May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, Jasbeer Kaur, a woman who ran a small beauty parlour from her house in C-block, and her daughter Prabhjot Kaur, were attacked by Jasbeer’s cousin Balvinder with a hammer and smothered to death.<sup>108</sup> Jasbeer’s 17-year-old son, Jaspal, who worked as an air conditioner repairman, was also attacked by Balvinder with a hammer and had his neck slashed. After the attack, Jaspal managed to crawl out the front door into one of the colony’s narrow hallways (as mentioned earlier, all of the hallways are open-air), his movements catching the attention of children in the colony playing one floor above. Balvinder told the police he had been unable to pay a large loan he owed to pay his wife’s tuberculosis bills and had recently heard that Jasbeer had come under a sizable inheritance by a property deal her mother had made (Jasbeer’s

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<sup>108</sup> Various publications describe Jasbeer/Jasveer as being 35, 40, or 45 years of age, and Prabhjot as being 15 or 16 years of age (Times of India 2014; The Indian Express 2014a; Shubomoy 2014).

husband had died a couple of years prior). The violence ensued when she refused to provide him with a loan. I recognized Jasbeer from the neighbourhood and felt that I had seen her on the main street and the gurdwara. Their deaths brought home to me the reality of ongoing violence in the community in a much more affective manner than before. I also felt a sense of the limits and failures of myself as an ethnographer – that, beyond the small material I could capture in that moment, violence in everyday life moved on. It existed far beyond the confines of my own body and work in that particular space, and it would continue to manifest itself with its own force, paying little heed to what was written about it.

The ongoing violence in the colony was further illustrated to me in my interactions with one widow living there, Harnoor Kaur, who I introduced in Chapter 2. These conversations allowed me to understand, in a more nuanced manner, how gendered kinship structures interact with particular forms of ongoing violence. I first met Harnoor Kaur on a Sunday afternoon. It was the last day of the 1984 memorial *akhand path* (three-day prayer, see chapter 5) being held at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara in Tilak Vihar. Harnoor Kaur, whose family hails from Amritsar and Rawalpindi, was eighteen when she was married, and she moved to Delhi in 1973. Her husband worked as a machine manager for the printing division of the Indian Express and ran a part time cycle spare parts shop at home. They had four children, two daughters and two sons. Her oldest son, Jaspreet, is about thirty-eight, lives in the UK and is married with one daughter. Her daughter, Amrita, was born in 1978, is married and lives in Delhi.<sup>109</sup> The death of her youngest son, Balbir, in April of 2010 in Shadarpur village, Rajpur, was a focus of our conversations. Her discussion of her son's death underscored the nature of violence in the colony

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<sup>109</sup> As mentioned above, Harnoor Kaur's fourth child and youngest daughter died due to illness in her maternal home at the age of 2.

as well as the nature of fraught, gendered kinship relations. This narrative, I feel, is a critical example of the various manifestations of violence in everyday life for women living here, and as such I will reproduce a snippet of her translated narrative in full. Of her son's life and his death in 2010, Harnoor Kaur says:

“He started using drugs. If a child's alone [i.e., without a father figure], he's going to get into bad habits. He took drugs. Smack. He would ask for two thousand rupees at a time from me and use it on drugs.... **The wife too. “I want this, I want to get my eyebrows done, I want sandals.” Now tell me – what does she need all that for? She didn't care that he did drugs. There was something fishy there. I think.... Whenever there's a newlywed couple there's going to be arguments, you have to endure it as a wife.** When my elders came to visit, he [it is unclear who] wanted to invite her over. I said, you can call her **but I can't keep her here. She still hasn't learned. Whenever she wants she puts on her sandals and heads out to the bazaar, her relatives, wherever.**

“There's not much I can tell you [about Balbir's death]. I don't know exactly what happened to him. From what I can put together, him and his wife had a fight.... and she brought her *chacha's* [younger paternal uncle's] sons to beat him up. I think someone hit him on the head from behind. God, you should have seen his face. They [the perpetrators] wanted to make sure he wouldn't regain consciousness, so they shut him up in a tubewell. Just threw him in there. They [Harnoor Kaur's daughter-in-law's family] told us that he jumped in the river and died, that he killed himself. We went to search for his body. We stayed there for ten days. Everyone kept saying, “we'll find the body today, we'll find the body today.” All of my brothers, sisters, nephews were looking for him near the dam where the river led to. People keep dying in dams, it's common there. We found other bodies [in the search] but not his.

“I was sitting there [at work] and a phone call came. The young man on the phone said, “Aunty, can you come here [to the village?].” I said, “Yes.” He said, “We've found Balbir's dead body, tell us should we take him out now or should we wait for you.”<sup>110</sup> Well, before me or my family had gotten there, they had taken out his body from the tubewell and laid it out in the village against my wishes. Why did they do this? I filled out forms, they did a post mortem. In the report, what were they going to say? He spent fourteen days in the tubewell, his body was all puffed up. I'd show you a photo but, you're a child, you don't need to see it. I recognized him right away though. He had a tattoo of his friend. I recognized him. After fourteen days I got his corpse. They [the police] didn't show me the post-mortem.

“So we had the funeral in Rajpur; where else would I do it?<sup>111</sup> Their family didn't even come up to us. They sat separately. **His wife didn't come; she didn't even come and touch the flowers.**

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<sup>110</sup> The line in Punjabi was: *Sanoo Balbir di dead body mil gaye hai te tussi dusso, twadey aayaan kad liye yaan pehli kadliye*. Note the English phrasing of the term.

<sup>111</sup> Sikhs are traditionally cremated.

**She didn't come to the *kriyakaram* [last rites] either, she didn't *matha thek* [bow to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib], she didn't ask for forgiveness. She used to rule like a queen here (emphasis mine).**

Harnoor Kaur's telling of her son's death is rife with gendered statements about her daughter-in-law. Throughout our conversations, in keeping with the undeniable importance given to sons in Punjabi culture, she continued to put Balbir up on a pedestal – painting him in a positive light and downplaying the negative effects of his drug use. For her, Balbir was still an outstanding son because he was a religious man and had often gone to Hemkunt Sahib, a popular historical pilgrimage site, and always walked rather than by horse (the harder trek signifying his attachment to God). She told me that if he were alive he would be a gracious host and take me all around the neighbourhood. Although it didn't seem that there had been a criminal court case regarding his death, she blamed her daughter-in-law's family intensely for it. Throughout our conversations her discussions of her daughter-in-law at times followed the pattern Das has argued about mother and daughter-in-law relationships: a subtle hostility (Das 1976). At other times it was more overtly hostile. Note, for example, that Jinder's demands for material goods and other services: "I want to get my eyebrows done, I want sandals" - seemed more grievous to Harnoor Kaur than Balbir asking for money to support his drug habit. "Now tell me – what does she need all that for? She didn't care that he did drugs," she said. "There was something fishy there. I think.... Whenever there's a newlywed couple there's going to be arguments, you have to endure it as a wife." Harnoor Kaur clearly thinks that Jinder has failed as a dutiful daughter-in-law as she was not able to put up with her husband's substance abuse, nor their fighting. Of Balbir's death, she says that Jinder "didn't even come and touch the flowers. She didn't come to the last rites either, she didn't *matha thek*, she didn't ask for forgiveness." Jinder then had failed in her ultimate final duty as a wife: to ensure that funeral rites were paid proper attention to help

ferry Balbir's soul to the afterlife. Perhaps Harnoor Kaur was particularly bitter about this point as she did not have the opportunity to do the same with her husband after the 1984 massacre. Jinder neither came close to Balbir's corpse nor attended the cremation. Harnoor Kaur felt that her daughter-in-law had transgressed her role within the family power dynamics ("She used to rule like a queen here"), and that she continued to be too brash and mobile: "She still hasn't learned. Whenever she wants she puts on her sandals and heads out to the bazaar, her relatives, wherever." As discussed elsewhere with Surjit, these restrictions surrounding the mobility of women were all too common.

In a sense, due to my presence as a younger, unmarried female, I too felt somewhat policed by Harnoor Kaur, and others, in the colony. Harnoor Kaur particularly took a strong interest in what I wore, my family background, that I was a vegetarian, and the fact that I was not married. On one occasion she told me that the scarf I had worn the first time she met me in the gurdwara was ugly and unbecoming; on another occasion, while I was saying goodbye to her and jumping up on a rickshaw after a visit, she yanked my hip-length shirt down hard and told me, "You shouldn't wear things like this, you should wear longer shirts." My clothing was a topic of conversation for Surjit as well, who, whenever I wore Western clothing such as jeans and a blouse instead of *salwar-kameez*, would declare that I looked much better and more stylish in the former. I had a strong sense that some of the staff at Nishkam and some of the women in the gurdwara took note of what I wore on any particular day. In the *gurdwara*, for example, I was the only woman who ever brought in a handbag or any possessions other than a mobile phone, something that I found unavoidable as I needed to carry around my wallet, mobile phone, and fieldwork materials. I began to wear brighter and cheaper clothes and old shoes in the field in an effort to fit in more. While some deemed it more appropriate that I should wear Punjabi clothing,

others were impressed by how Western or “foreign” I looked. Thus, in the interest of looking as Indian as possible, most of the time I opted for cotton Indian clothing, particularly in the summer, with occasional Western wear I was used to wearing at home. Another marker of my foreignness was the fact that I would sometimes use a car. In addition to the metro and rickshaws, I often used a private taxi, as in Delhi it is relatively cheap to book a taxi for four or eight hours and, as such, I had a regular driver, Bindra, whom I could book when needed. We drove into the Harijan Colony once to find parking and a large number of children came up to play with the car out of curiosity, while I was still in it. As far as I knew, no one in the neighbourhood owned a car other than some of the board members at Nishkam. On the days I booked the car, I would ensure that it be parked away from the neighbourhood to avoid attention. My vain efforts to hide my class privilege failed spectacularly when my driver began to come into the gurdwara in the mornings to pray, a fact not unnoticed by others in the congregation, who recognized an unfamiliar face right away. My sometimes white-passing skin privilege also drew notice. One day on a walk around the neighborhood, Surjit remarked to me that it didn’t matter what I wore, that anyone could spot that I was a foreigner right away. When I asked her why, she said “It’s your glasses. Or actually, your face and your fair skin.” To Surjit, my fairer skin marked me as *gori* [white, or, in this context, foreign]. Despite my status as a foreigner or NRI (Non-Resident Indian), however, given my presence as a Punjabi Sikh unmarried woman, I became, at least temporarily, a tenuous part of local kinship networks in the colony, particularly with Harnoor Kaur and Surjit.

There are few studies on Punjabi kinship, with most of the influential works on the topic published in the 1970s and early 1980s during kinship theory’s resurgence as a popular field of inquiry in anthropology (Das 1976; Leaf 1971; Channa and Channa 1976; Hershman 1981;

Hershman 1974). While there is a small body of literature on issues surrounding gender in Sikhism, contemporary work on Punjabi kinship and/or kinship among Sikhs, like literature on widowhood, is scarce. Given that this project seeks to tease apart everyday life vis-à-vis continuing violence, it is important to discuss kinship and familial relationships, particularly relations that are present in one's daily life. A particular focus on gender within kinship structures among the families affected by the 1984 massacre illustrate how gendered relationships are fraught with intensity and conflict in violent times. Given the paucity of material, and the fact that most kinship studies on Punjabi families are generalized, it is difficult to discuss kinship patterns without a good deal of inference, both from work on Punjabi kinship and work on North Indian kinship in general.<sup>112</sup> It becomes even more difficult to do so with regards to the urban, dynamic nature of Delhi.

Kinship is always cultural and socially mediated, but in Punjabi discourse around kinship structures, it is *seen* as heavily biological.<sup>113</sup> In Punjabi kinship structures, relationships that are

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<sup>112</sup> Das's research on Punjabi kinship, "Faces and Masks," published in 1976, is a key piece in this arena.

<sup>113</sup> Punjabi kinship terms are also highly gendered and naturalized by sex, with no non-gendered term for parent, sibling, or spouse (Hershman 1981, Brara 2015). Thus, understandings and differences between gender, and sometimes lines of descent, are reflected in the terminology and language itself (cf. Das 1976). Maternal and paternal relationships are defined (*bhoua* as paternal aunt, *masi* as maternal aunt) with some relationship bifurcated both by relationship and gendered address, and sometimes even by age (*thayya* for paternal uncle older than one's father, for example). Terms for children, too, can be gender-distinguishable by their suffixes (*baccha/bacchi*, *beta/beti*, *ladka/ladki*, *puttar/puttari*, with the added difference between grandsons and granddaughters by lines of descent (*dota/doti* as children of daughters, *pota/poti* as children of sons). These gendered variants apply to relationships through marriage as well (e.g.: *saala* for wife's sister's husband). However, despite kinship terms which at the outset are ostensibly overtly defined, there is a certain amount of flexibility in that some terms are tied to their particular social usages and not their correlated empirical terms. Thus, '*beta/beti*' (son/daughter) can be used widely to include the children of siblings, relatives, or close friends, particularly in gift-giving contexts, or to a sister if a man's father is deceased (ibid); '*daadi*' (paternal grandmother) or '*nani*' (maternal grandmother) can be applied to relatives of the original referent, in what Leaf refers to as "indefinitely self-generating terms" (Leaf 1971). I should note that Leaf has been criticized by Channa and Channa for a prescriptive structurally semantic approach. They argue, "We not only mean that different 'related definitions' of the same kinship terminology can exist, but also that no such absolute definitions exist"

considered biological (through blood) compete with those considered social (non-blood related) relations; the former denotes strong, unchangeable blood ties, while the latter does not. Das writes, “The character of Punjabi kinship is best described as a dialectic between the rules deriving from nature and the rules deriving from culture (1976, 1).” The relationship between mother and child, said to be formed by *ma da dudh* (mother’s milk), is particularly strong in Punjabi families, and distinctly different from the bond between father and child, formed through bloodlines. Breastmilk then becomes a life force tying mothers to their children and children to one another through milk kinship (Brara 2015, Das 1976). As such, these relationships come into conflict when children marry, particularly with sons who bring their wives into their natal homes. Punjabi men are then caught between these more “elemental” ties between themselves and their mothers and in the ties between themselves and their intimate relationships. With age, women can in some ways become more independent and have more power running the household, particularly in matters of daily affairs (Grover 189). Given the particularly honoured status of sons in Punjabi, and, to a large extent, in North Indian cultures (see above) the sacrifices a mother has made for her offspring allow the mother to stake great moral claims on them. In Punjabi kinship, sacrificing one’s emotions is required in daily life and this is seen as “honourable conduct” that maintains the social order (Das 1976, 14).

This preferential treatment toward biological sons in the universe of Punjabi kinship was evident in the way that Harnoor Kaur spoke of her daughter-in-law. When a daughter-in-law moves into her husband’s home, she becomes somewhat of an outsider both to her natal home and her married home, due to distance and bloodlines, respectively. The relationship between a

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(44). Most of the widows I spoke to would refer to me as *beti*, or daughter, while Nishkam members referred to me by my first name suffixed with the honourary *-ji*, as in *Kamal-ji*, or sometimes *Madame-ji*.



mother and her daughter-in-law has often been seen and treated as traditionally fraught, with both parties competing for the attentions of the son/husband; this relationship has been commented on widely in studies of North Indian families (Brara 2014; Das 1976; Narayan 1986; G. G. Raheja and Gold 1994). Indeed, the fixation on the *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law/daughter-in-law) relationship is so popular in the Indian imaginary that many primetime television soaps are dedicated to it. Das writes, “The relation between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law is treated as basically hostile, due to the conflict between the ties created by sexuality and procreation. However, this hostility is also not allowed a free expression” (1976, 14).

What was most surprising to me was the fact that Harnoor Kaur still kept up a relationship with Jinder despite their difficulties. Facing hardship at home as a widow with two young daughters, Jinder had recently moved into the Tilak Nagar area. Although I never met Jinder, I did meet her two daughters, since their grandmother looked after them from time to time. During one visit, I helped the girls with their homework (an alphabet primer with one daughter, and a report on Nelson Mandela with the other). Harnoor Kaur would at times sharply and angrily reprimand her granddaughters and at other times show them a great deal of affection. It was clear that she was interested in their wellbeing and education, yet she had no qualms criticizing their mother in front of them. Despite the tension between Harnoor Kaur and Jinder, it seemed that widowhood, brought about through wrongful deaths, had brought them together in a tenuous relationship.

The hostility between mothers and daughters-in-law can take subtle forms, as evidenced by Harnoor Kaur’s discussion of Jinder, above. Daughters-in-law are sometimes seen as too attached to their natal homes and relationships and viewed as being not grateful enough for what the family they have married into has given them. Brara points out a particularly fitting saying in

Punjabi – that a woman will be more thankful for a string that her mother gives her to tie a skirt, rather than the skirt itself given to her by her mother-in-law (2014).

### **The Persistence of Violence: Caste Riots in August 2013**

In addition to covert or open violence playing out in kinship networks within the colony, other ongoing forms of violence in the neighbourhood, particularly along caste lines, had a continual presence. In my casual discussions with those living and working in the colony there were few reports of daily harassment or violence committed by one caste community against the other. As such, the violence that took place in August 2013, in which a ludic scenario formed into a violent event, came as a surprise to some. Although relations between different castes, at the outset, point towards a harmonious picture of inter-caste cooperation between those in the Widow Colony and Dalits living in the surrounding areas, as the incident below shows, caste relations in the colony are much more complicated, and sporadic violence persists in the area today. The “to each her own” mentality I have come across amongst widows in the colony extends to the communities at large. In the gurdwara, for example, I noticed that, except for casual hellos, Labana women and Punjabi Sikh women somewhat tended to stick together in their conversations after prayers (see Chapter 4). Each community, whether Punjabi, Labana, Dalit, etc, generally observe and celebrate their own family and community functions with little crossover, except for larger religious or community events. At the same time, there is a concerted and blatant casteist effort by families in the Widow Colony to keep themselves and their children away from the “backward class” people of the Dalit areas.

The blocks in Tilak Vihar are somewhat divided along caste lines, with Block A behind the colony comprised of the Valmiki/Dalit and Harijan community, Block B comprised of mostly Punjabi Sikhs, and Block C of Labana Sikhs. A good number of the widows in the colony were

Labana Sikhs; originally migrants from Sikligarh in Sindh (now in Pakistan), most of their families in the area had roots in Rajasthan. Labana Sikhs' traditional occupations are weaving cots and pounding rice, although given the changing labour market, many now work as rickshaw pullers, porters, and mechanics, with some traveling to Gulf countries as skilled labourers. Due to their position as labourers, they are considered low-caste by other Sikh groups. Many Labanas are traditionally Congress supporters (as I discussed in the last chapter, some, like Jhansi Kaur, felt surprised and betrayed that the party they supported was responsible for the massacre).

In Tilak Vihar, as is elsewhere, national public holidays such as Independence Day are usually quiet affairs, for the city is always under high security due to the attendance of the Prime Minister and several dignitaries at special events. In July 2013, I left Delhi to visit London for two weeks as I had enrolled in a summer theory course at Birkbeck College. Unfortunately, upon my arrival I became ill and was hospitalized with typhoid fever, which necessitated a return trip to Vancouver to recuperate until September. Early in the morning on August 15<sup>th</sup>, Indian Independence Day, I checked my twitter feed and was shocked to find that violence had broken out back in Tilak Vihar. An altercation took place around 2:00 pm between two communities in the colony, the Sikhs living in the Widow Colony and the Valmiki Dalits living in the adjacent colony (80 Gaj Colony) in Tilak Vihar. There are conflicting versions of the events that took place on the 15<sup>th</sup>. What is clear is that there was an argument between some male youth that escalated until the police became involved. One media outlet reported that some locals stated the violence began after a young man from one group molested a girl from the other group (Mail Online 2013), although I have not been able to corroborate this; other media outlets, and a handful of locals, including a couple of staff members at Nishkam, stated that the violence began after an argument over flying kites, a common activity on Independence Day (NDTV 2016; The

Indian Express, n.d.). Still other media reports correspond loosely with what I was told by my assistant and a number of other locals in the neighbourhood: an argument began when some Sikh boys were doing motorcycle stunts in an alley and a boy from the neighbouring Dalit community somehow was knocked down. It is possible that some women and children sitting outside of their houses objected to the rash driving. The two groups of boys from the two communities began pelting each other with stones, and some Sikh boys claimed that their turbans were ripped off during the altercation. The violence continued to escalate, with more boys and young men from both communities becoming involved. The police from the Tilak Vihar station then arrived and began using water cannons, tear gas shells and sticks, and police batons to control the crowd. Somewhere around thirty people were injured, including five policemen, and three young men were shot by the police, although the police claimed they only shot in the air and not specifically at any persons. The three youth – one shot in the neck, and the other two in the abdomen – were then treated at Deen Dhayal Upadhyay hospital. In addition to the police station, a number of police vehicles, auto-rickshaws and motorcycles were damaged by being set on fire or hit with objects. Extra police personnel, reserve police, and paramilitary forces, numbering at least 1000, from neighbouring districts were brought in to control the violence, which lasted several hours, until about 7:30 p.m.<sup>114</sup> Outsiders and media personnel were stopped around two kilometres away from the area. Several people recorded the events on their mobile phones and some videos were posted on YouTube and various Sikh websites and discussion boards.<sup>115</sup> A curfew was set that evening, with police lining the main street in Tilak Vihar dividing the two areas, and

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<sup>114</sup> While most outlets state the number of police at around 1000, The Times of India put the number of police at around 2000 (Times of India 2016b).

<sup>115</sup> See (TilakNagar News 2016).

residents were told to stay in their homes. Section 144 of the CPC (discussed in Chapter 2) was brought into effect and the riot police were stationed in the area throughout the night. Residents from the two communities continued to sloganeer against each other from behind the police chain separating the two neighbourhoods. The next day, representatives of the two communities met and formed a “peace committee.” Some residents in the area complained as a few of the gates to the nearby Tilak Nagar, Subhash Nagar and Janakpuri East metro stations were closed due to the imposed curfew. The neighbourhood streets remained largely deserted until Sunday.

When I asked Harbhajan Singh later about the violence that broke out in August, he explained it as an anomaly of sorts – spreading in the manner it did due to “vested interests” rather than caste differences, blaming the violence on “drunkards” and “drug addicts.”<sup>116</sup>

Harbhajan Singh stated that “it was not a community fight” but rather a fight between a few young boys. He did mention that community violence broke out in 1986, and the police became involved, which resulted in two children of the neighbourhood being killed in Sabzi Mandi.<sup>117</sup>

My assistant Surjit had a different viewpoint on the violence – although she too thought of it is

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<sup>116</sup> Harbhajan Singh’s statement here is an example of Pandey’s argument that violence in the Indian context is explained away by attributing it to unruly crowds (Pandey 1990).

<sup>117</sup> Harbhajan Singh describes the incident thus: “Actually it was related to the issues going on in Punjab. There was a fight here. Actually the police killed some people in this area. I mean some people from the Hindu community exploited them. There was a fight. The police fired some shots. Two children from this neighbourhood were killed. Two children from outside this area were killed in Sabji Mandi. So I was requested by these two personalities, ex-Chief Justice Nirula Sahib and General Arora - they both gave my name to the police, that this man can help. So, I got the message from both the elders - please try to [unclear] the situation. So the problem was here, here people wanted that the dead bodies should come here. And if the dead body will come, what would happen? Tempers would flare. So with a lot of difficulty, we talked to the community through some others, and ultimately we are able to convince the people that the dead bodies should not come here. Why? If someone comes, a drunk or something, or a kid throws a rock, the police will start firing shots again. And another child will die. Then? So, they understood. And Nishkam did a wonderful thing in those days.”

more of a sporadic episode of violence, she did attribute it to caste differences. She also recognized that the incident had brought about a sudden resurgence of fear among the residents of the Widow Colony. Over the phone in August, and in person in September, she mentioned that, on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>, Sikhs in the neighbourhood were going door to door, passing on information and urging their neighbours to stockpile weapons and lock their doors should there be further attacks. Many of the residents felt frightened by the altercation. The police presence and resulting violence felt to them very anti-Sikh and a harbinger of the violence survived in 1984.

### **Violence and Trauma in Prescriptive Places**

Turning to the anthropology of violence allows us to better understand women's experiences of violent events as well as the violence of everyday life. There has been a considerable body of work discussing the ramifications of violence through an anthropology of suffering, by which scholars have argued that neither modern forms of redress nor cultural resources seem well-equipped to deal with the human suffering caused by violence, disease, torture, or war (Das 2000; Das 2001; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997).

With the death of husbands, North Indian women are expected to perform their grief loudly and publicly at the time of death and be clouded by silence after time has passed. In fact, women in Punjab were once hired to perform a *siyaapa*,<sup>118</sup> or publicly grieve, at funerals. Das asks how one "should inhabit such a world that has been made strange through the desolating experiences of violence and loss" (Das 1996, 67). What are the relationships between building a world where the dead can find a recognized home in memory and the living can live with their

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<sup>118</sup> The meaning of the word *siyaapa* in Punjabi today (problem or nuisance), derives its roots from this ritual.

loss? Conventionally, a Sikh woman reenacts her ties to her husband publicly. Their pain asks for acknowledgement which can be given or denied to those who live through it. Her body and her voice become both subject and object as she embodies her grief. Her suffering becomes social, present to the community, “her body becomes a metaphor for suffering” (Ramphela 1997, 99). Her public mourning rituals absolve the responsibility of death from the living, marking a painfully slow passage to release. This absolving of responsibility manifests itself when mourners claim that a death is God’s will. Whereas men are traditionally given the responsibility of funeral rights and disengaging women from the dead bodies of their loved ones, women’s grief in comparison is conventionally more theatrical: they sob, wail and beat at their chests. Women’s bodies in mourning become ritualized to a high degree to mask the conflict of the female body. The body of the widow becomes a channel to internalize the pollution of the corpse.

In my experience with women in the colony, weeping and embodied forms of grief do not completely get rid of the pain, which becomes etched onto the woman’s being as well as the psyche of the community. The mourning of the widow and the bereaved becomes public and allows the community to collectively mourn their loss. As such, the rituals surrounding a death are not only about helping the mourner overcome her loss, but the community’s loss as well. When pain is transformed by investing meaning into it, the pain transforms into social suffering (Ramphela 1997). Women’s pain in the colony is transformed into social suffering, at times not only for herself, but also for her loved ones and her community at large.

A particular focus on space in relation to violence allows a more nuanced understanding of violence, by examining how everyday lived spaces affect how people experience and recollect violence after trauma. The “everyday” provides us with a useful field for interrogating the

movement and tactility of life and how a subject navigates, consciously or unconsciously, through temporal spaces. Das (2007) and de Certeau (1998) examine the ways in which individuals navigate through space and time. Ordinary life is posited as a site of constant negotiation and struggle with larger institutions. In her work on the survivors of Partition and the 1984 massacre, Das describes a “descent into the ordinary,” when the grief accompanying loss partly forms the conditions of everyday life (2007). Drawing from her analysis and my experiences in the field, I believe Sikh widows inhabit the place of the Widow Colony partly through loss, becoming marked by these events. I do not view it solely as a space of destruction however. Although violence has descended into the everyday through witnessing, surviving, and living through it, we also must view the colony as a place of creation and meaning-making – of memories, families, relationships, and lives lived.

What does it mean to live in an urban space constituted through the violence of the past? As I have outlined above through an analysis of everyday life in Tilak Vihar, women and families in the colony live through continuing trauma due to the continuation of violence. This is evident in the level of poverty, the insecurity of levirate and secondary marriages, substance use and the improper usage of pharmaceuticals, suicides, murders, and physical and mental health problems. This is also apparent in the lack of educational opportunities, neighbourhood sanitation issues, exploitation by political parties, infrastructural problems, gender violence and tension between kinship and community and cast networks. The trauma of the 1984 massacre lives on through women’s lives in the colony and the colony itself. The relationship between the prescriptive place and the particular space of the colony and the widows’ lives is contradictory; on the one hand, it provides the ground for a social network of peer survivors, while on the other, one cannot escape the trauma as most residents in the neighbourhood have also lived it. The



space of the colony begets constant traumatic memories as it is a “widow space” and designated by the state as such, yet the women who were relocated to Tilak Vihar are also generally far removed from the houses and the original sites in which the violence took place.

This relationship between prescriptive space and trauma and memory is illustrated by women at times experiencing a felt presence of loved ones who had been killed (both directly as a result of the massacre and afterwards), which I label as “hauntings.” It is notable that haunting in the colony takes on both visual and aural forms. Kirat Kaur mentioned to me how, shortly after moving into the colony, she had had a vision of her husband in her flat. Walking into the flat one day, she became startled upon seeing him lying down, resting on a folding, woven bed, known as a *manji*, in the living room. The vision was crystal-clear enough to make her think that he was really lying there, that he had a material presence - and all of a sudden it was over and his form disappeared. Harnoor Kaur had similar experiences of seeing and hearing her dead son Balbir. One night while walking home from the gurdwara, she heard a voice cry out, “Mummy!! Mummy!” Whipping around to look behind her and peer through the darkness, she could have sworn it was her son, but nothing, or no one, was there. On another occasion, she spotted a young man on the colony’s main street one day, and for a second, she thought this was her deceased son. She looked at him and he asked, “What can I do for you, *mata-ji*?”<sup>119</sup> She smiled and said, “Oh nothing, you look just like my son, and it made me happy that you called me mother.” She recounted this brief encounter with a sense of serenity and it was clear that this was a happy recollection.

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<sup>119</sup> *Mata-ji* is a respectful term for mother, or an older or elderly woman.

The women who discussed these experiences with me didn't have a specific term for these experiences, other than expressing it visually or emotionally, ("I saw..." or "It made me happy") or stating it as an empirical experience ("I came inside and he was sitting..."). Other women in the colony who had heard of these experiences second-hand viewed them as ordinary, everyday experiences. I wondered at the time if these audible and visible experiences were hallucinations, visions, forms of haunting, or in the case of Kirat Kaur and her advanced age, a form of dementia. I wondered too about the difference between a vision and a hallucination. During a panel with Ganannath Obeyesekere I attended during fieldwork in Delhi, I asked this very question regarding how we categorize these two latter terms. Another panel member responded, "That's easy. Visions are positive experiences and hallucinations are negative!" This labelling of these experiences as "negative" or "positive" did not seem to me to capture the breadth of such experiences. Given the constraints of this dissertation, it is not possible to explore in-depth the nature of these experiences as symbolic, internal, imaginary, religious, spiritual, or secular, nor the cognitive mechanisms behind these experiences. What I would like to call attention to, however, is how these experiences are embodied. I choose to label these experiences as hauntings because I feel it captures the affectiveness of how they unfold in relation to the body and the sudden sense of presence, the feeling that someone is there with you. By haunting, I use Gordon's description of haunting by a ghost or an apparition as having three characteristic features: a "charged strangeness" in the place it occurs, "a symptom of what is missing" that represents "a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken," and that in some way it is alive, that we are in some kind of relation with it (Gordon 2008, 63-64). We see how these characteristics have unfolded in the colony. Both women emphasized the strange feelings they experienced – Kirat Kaur in her shock at seeing the form of her husband before her,

and with Harnoor Kaur, the charged atmosphere in which she thought she heard her son. In addition, Gordon's emphasis of hauntings as "a path not taken" brings to mind how the lives that the apparitions represent were tragically cut short.

In the colony, a haunting is all of these things and more. It is an evocative experience of visitation that strikes a sense of poignancy, bringing forward feelings of nostalgia, sadness and, in this context, a removal from everyday patterns given their sudden, unexpected nature. Contrary to traditional psychoanalytic models of mourning requiring an emotional distance from the dead in order to move forward (cf. Freud 1953), contemporary work on grief illustrates that those who grieve often remain connected to their loved ones (Becker and Knudson 2003). To be "haunted by the past" is, as Kirat Kaur and Harnoor Kaur's experiences show, to be continuously faced with the presence of someone or something from the past in the here and now. The relationship between the women and their loved ones appearing before them in some manner is inscribed partly by the place in which they live. These hauntings then are forms of visual, aural and affective memories that unfold, and are tethered to, the prescriptive space of the colony.

The structures of violence that pervade Tilak Vihar travel along a trajectory of gendered violence spanning between the past and the urban present. The violence lived and experienced by widows in this community spans space-time: violence spans space in that the very place around them, a place of rehabilitation, is a harbinger of the past, yet continually brings about a particular contemporary present among others who have lived experiences of the same trauma and are now in this place, and it spans time as survival of the massacre has translated into a number of different nodes of violence over the last three decades. Binary nodes of power and resistance do not adequately explain the relationship between violence and everyday life. Deleuze and Guattari's model of the rhizome can be useful here in describing the interconnectivity of violence

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The violence has no particular beginning or end, it holds no particular structure; lived and experienced by women and their families in the colony it plays out in multiplicities over space and time and continues to do so. In addition to the issues discussed above, Sikhs in Delhi, like other minorities, face countless microaggressions and are stigmatized, often the brunt of many popular jokes. (“*Sardar-ji* jokes,” which target Sikhs as being unintelligent and naïve are among the most widely-circulated jokes in India (Handoo 1990)). Yet, they also enjoy social prestige and themselves engage in othering those of lower caste and class backgrounds. Rather than viewing these issues in isolation, it is crucial to recognize violence experienced in the neighbourhood as interconnected – a violence that moves forward, sideways, and backwards through the particular place of the colony, and is multiple.

Anthropologists and others have long engaged with the concept of trauma and events that transform and shift our lives (Das 2003; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Maxwell 2014; Rosaldo 2013; Scarry 1985). Anthropological perspectives of trauma differ from psychological and psychiatric models in that they explicitly focus on cultural formations and social groups rather than the suffering of the individual (cf. Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000). The suffering of individuals is a place to begin this analysis however, as I have demonstrated above. The social life of trauma has, as an object of inquiry, been used as a category to understand culture and how it operates (Lester 2013). How then, do we define a traumatic event such as the 1984 massacre? “A traumatic event is traumatic precisely because it sheers us off from our expected connections with others, from our perceived social supports, from our basic sense of safety, however locally construed” (Lester 2013, 754). In other words, trauma takes us to the limit of understanding ourselves and our existence. A traumatic event may be locally or spatially defined, yet continues on in its own afterlife; it is an ongoing lived experience for women in Tilak Vihar. Long-term

impact on one's relationship to one's self, one's loved ones, and the world persist and evolve, long after the event may officially end. Popular discourses around trauma bracket it as a thing which can be seen against the backdrop of a person's life (Lester 2013, 755). I want to argue that, rather than bracket trauma against life, we need to view trauma as life itself.

Traumatic events are experienced and re-experienced and embedded in everyday life in the colony. Some of the women were suffering from various signs of depression, a negative world-view, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress, such as re-experiencing the trauma or avoiding places associated with the violence. Among my research participants, there was a palpable sense of despair, or the sense of being stuck in the past. My interview with Amar Kaur, for example, brought forward many complex feelings of trauma and grief that she tried to articulate, and that I tried to understand. When I asked if she remembered the massacre often or tried not to think about it, she said:

AK: No dear, these thoughts will never go, they cannot ever go away. These thoughts, can they ever go away...? What we have endured, at night sometimes... I wake up and I have difficulty breathing. I think oh my god, what has happened to us, I cannot bear it, sometimes I get up and I start walking, walking a little, hoping I might calm down. What has happened, what has not happened. I cannot forget, can't forget them, I cannot forget, only when I die. The children are in such a bad state, all of the kids are like this. All of my life has been like this; all of my life, my entire life has been full of suffering. My entire life has passed in worries and pain. Now what relief will I get, I will not get any relief now, I will die but I will not get any relief, my entire life I have suffered, my entire life, I have not had relief/happiness

KA: So you remember it daily...everyday?

AK: Daily it's not something you can forget, it is something that is daily, in the morning, evening, when you come in the house... when you go to work you become encompassed in your work, but when you come home, it's all of the worries that burden you, it's not the kind of thing you can forget. They aren't people you can forget, these small children I raised, if [my husband] had been here, then I wouldn't have had to endure so much pain, at least [he] was helping me with the children, but now all the worry and burden is upon me. Right now I have to endure the entire burden alone, I am so troubled. I want god to take me, I am very distressed. My heart does not even feel like living.

Amar Kaur particularly felt burdened by her situation – in addition to the loss of her husband and the continuing grief it engendered, her family had endured a string of tragedies and violent events. She was also the main breadwinner for her sons and their families, as discussed above. In our discussion, she was quite distraught and grief-stricken, her voice heavy with pain. For her, the trauma arising out of 1984 transcends the event itself and embeds itself into her everyday life. It has ongoing palpable and impactful emotional, psychological, social and economic effects; it has become a part of embodied life.

## Chapter 4: “I Get Peace:” Religious Life in the Gurdwara

### Affective Economies: A Day in the Life of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

The Shaheedganj Gurdwara lies just off the main road of Tilak Vihar.<sup>120</sup> No one I spoke to in the community could remember the exact date the gurdwara was built, although most say that it was erected in the early to mid-1990s to serve the colony and thus was named “Shaheedganj” (home of the martyrs) in memory of those who were killed during the 1984 violence. The gurdwara is run by a committee of Labana<sup>121</sup> Sikhs, although the congregation, which is roughly eight percent widows, daughters, daughters-in-law and grandchildren of the colony, is comprised of a mix of Labana and Punjabi Sikhs. Although the women have formed casual friendships crossing these barriers, they have remarked that each group is happy sticking to its own. After one morning prayer session, a Punjabi Sikh woman remarked to me in the gurdwara, “They [Labanas] do their thing, we do our thing.”

The gurdwara shares its right wall with the NGO Nishkam, in B-Block. Like Nishkam, it is a concrete and brick structure, with the left wall of the gurdwara slightly crumbling and facing a small empty lot which is overrun with weeds, garbage and mud. Directly across from the gurdwara are some flats and a small convenience store (a single, street-facing counter) run by an elderly woman selling sundries. Beside the gurdwaras, further down the road, lies A-Block, where mostly Dalit families live. Children often play cricket on this street. Once or twice throughout my fieldwork I spotted a woman with her small children sitting in front of the gurdwara’s gates, begging for change. Judging by the difference in her dress from other women

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<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, in distinct contrast to the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, the Trilokpuri Gurdwara, rebuilt after the 1984 massacre, is much larger and in better condition.

<sup>121</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Labana Sikhs are often seen as lower-caste by Punjabi Sikhs as they are often involved in labour-heavy professions.

in the community (skirts, known as *lehengas*, and silver jewellery as opposed to the loose pants and tunic known *salwar-kameez*), it did not seem she was Punjabi, or Sikh. Indoors there are a number of blue signs advertising messages related to the gurdwara. Like most other gurdwaras, one must cover their head and take off one's shoes and wash their hands and feet, although the small pool of water reserved for dipping one's feet is generally dry here.



Figure 4.1 Entrance to the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

It is in this gurdwara that most of the Sikh families in the Widow Colony congregate. On any given day, the congregation is comprised of roughly eighty percent women and twenty percent men. As I will discuss, the importance of the gurdwara to the Sikh tradition and community-building cannot be overstated. This is especially true for women in the colony. The gurdwara functions not only as a physical place for prayer but also a gathering space. Its very



presence exists as a memorial to the 1984 violence, yet it also holds memory palaces within it - a room filled with photographs, and another room with a lamp lit around the clock. Women who attend and perform prayers in the gurdwara obtain peace from doing so, and, as such, the gurdwara provides a place of healing through social forms of religious practice that other private areas (flats) and public areas in the colony do not. Thus, there is a tension between the gurdwara as healing place and the colony as a place that engenders continual forms of structural violence, and these places are constituted by this tension (cf. Gordillo 2004). Forms of memory and how they are tied to particular spaces are constitutive of experiences of locality, connecting places where memory is produced with past and contemporary landscapes (Gordillo, 2004). The material forms of remembrance in the gurdwara and embodied remembering that takes place there in this way connects the violence of the past with the contemporary landscape of the colony.

The word gurdwara literally means “door to the guru” in Punjabi. The distinguishing feature of a gurdwara is the presence of the holy text of the Sikhs, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib; in this way, a room inside one’s home, or a temporary space for an event such as a wedding, can be viewed as a gurdwara (Cole 2004). In contemporary usage, it is used to denote a space wherever the SGGS is placed but also where Sikhs gather to worship and discuss community happenings and world events. The establishment of gurdwaras also aid in commemorating the historical landscape of Sikh communities, including important objects and historical sites related to the Gurus (Murphy 2012, 189). Gurdwaras are, as Mandair argues, in “every sense community centres as much as they are places of worship” (A. S. Mandair 2013, 117). The importance of pairing the spiritual and temporal realms of life within a gurdwara is underscored by the emphasis Sikhism puts on both *miri* and *piri*, or the temporal and spiritual components of Sikh

life.<sup>122</sup>

In theory, if not completely in practice,<sup>123</sup> all are welcome in a gurdwara regardless of religious denomination or affiliation if they cover their heads, are not under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, take off their shoes and wash their hands. Visitors to the gurdwara are encouraged to have *langar*, or a free, communal meal, operated by the congregation's donations, charity, and *seva*, or acts of service (Lee and Nadeau 2011). Gurdwaras often run under management committees, who oversee the daily program, special events, *langar*, upkeep of the building, appointing *ragis* (those who musically perform scripture from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib), and other administrative tasks. Although, in theory, women can take on roles of *granthi* (a religious custodian, or someone who performs religious ceremonies (Cole 2004)), this is rare in practice. Sikh women, for example, are currently prohibited from performing scripture or *granthi* duties at Harimandir Sahib. Aside from volunteer service, the management of gurdwaras and services performed are mostly administered by men.<sup>124</sup> In Tilak Vihar, the management committee and the caretakers of the gurdwara are all male.

During fieldwork, I had been attending prayer at the gurdwara, particularly the morning program which starts around six o'clock in the morning and ends at around half past eight.

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<sup>122</sup> Gurdwaras have also been used as centres of resistance and social justice. For example, in 20<sup>th</sup> century North America, some gurdwaras on the West coast were used by anticolonial movement known as the Ghadar Party (Sohi 2014). Within diasporic communities, centres of worship for immigrants can provide valuable spaces for the assertion and preservation of identity (Hirvi 2010; Gallo 2012; G. Singh 2006).

<sup>123</sup> In recent years, some caretakers of a gurdwara in the UK have not allowed the elderly or disabled to sit with the main congregation (Daily News and Analysis 2015a; Express and Star 2016). I have also heard firsthand from a friend in Ontario that a GTA gurdwara refused his mother entry into a main prayer hall with her wheelchair. In many gurdwaras, however, benches or stools are provided for the elderly.

<sup>124</sup> This has been contested in recent years. Women have made a concerted effort to challenge the unwritten ban on women in Harimandir Sahib (Nibber 2011). In the diaspora, too, groups like the Sikh Feminist Research Institute (SAFAR) have in the past focused on women-led activities.

During the days I travelled from Nizamuddin East in a car, I would arrive there around seven or half past seven; if I took the metro, I would usually arrive around eight o'clock. When I stayed in nearby Ganga Ram Vatika with family friends, I would be able to leave the house earlier and attend the whole prayer service. It was difficult for me to attend the evening program throughout the year due to safety concerns. Anywhere between twenty to forty members of the community are present during the reciting of the morning prayers,<sup>125</sup> with a larger presence on the weekends.

When the women in the colony pass through the metal gates of the gurdwara, painted a creamy yellow, and ascend the white and grey marble steps, slightly yellowed by time and covered by green matting, they arrive at a landing. Immediately towards the right of the landing is a small room, roughly ten feet by fifteen feet, housing photographs of men who were killed during the 1984 violence in Delhi. The rows of portraits, in the form of headshots, are individually framed and spaced so that the edges are touching. Directly in front of the stairs lies the main hall, housing the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Like all gurdwaras, activity is entered around the holy text, placed gently in the center of the room in the early mornings, usually by the *granthi* – the religious custodian of the gurdwara, Bhai Chetan Singh - in a ceremony known as *prakash karna*. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib is generally laid out on cloth on a small raised platform under a canopy. The canopy and cloth surrounding the scriptures are often made of colorful silk with embroidered gold thread. The area is decorated often with *kirpans* and *khandas* (insignias of the Khalsa),<sup>126</sup> and festooned with vases of colorful artificial flowers. Women in the colony sit on the right-hand side, and men to the left, which came off as slightly unusual for me, as women generally sit on the left-hand side in gurdwaras I am accustomed to in North

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<sup>125</sup> These are the *Japji Sahib*, *kirtan*, *ardas*, and *a hukam* (see Glossary).

<sup>126</sup> See Glossary.

America. A passageway in the middle is left open for worshippers to walk up to the SGGS. A small room at the back of the main hall houses an oil lamp, lit around the clock, memorializing the victims who were killed in 1984. Beside this room is another small room with a Guru Granth Sahib, and the farthest chamber to the right is the Guru's resting place, which contains a canopied bed where the SGGS is laid to rest every evening after evening prayers, in a ceremony known as *sukhasan*. A small kitchen lies to the right of the central hall for making *parshad*, a semolina halva made of wheat, flour, butter and sugar, and a few rooms beyond it which the volunteers, or *sevadars*, use. A cavernous hall in the basement serves meals during special events, and also serves as a practice room for children learning Sikh hymns some evenings.

Prayers in the gurdwara begin in the morning by the male caretakers and the religious custodian, Bhai Chetan Singh.<sup>127</sup> Women comprise the majority of the congregation at any given time, and there is a marked difference in the way the women navigate the space in the gurdwara from the men. Women, for example, stop *to matha thek*,<sup>128</sup> or bow and touch their foreheads to the ground as a sign of reverence for the scripture, more spots in the gurdwaras than men do (at three or four spots), while men are much more likely to do *chaur seva*. *Chaur seva*, discussed also in chapter 5, is a form of *seva* in which one waves a fly whisk made out of yak hair (a *chaur*) over the scripture, as a sign of dedication and respect (Figure 4.2).

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<sup>127</sup> Although *granthis* are often translated to 'priest' in English, the Christian concept of priest does not apply here. Granthis are often married, have families and children, and live close by to the gurdwara they serve. Thinking of *granthis* more as "leaders" or "religious specialists" or textual specialists would be more a more accurate description of their role.

<sup>128</sup> To *matha thek* is to also acknowledge the wisdom of the SGGS (Lee and Nadeau 2011).

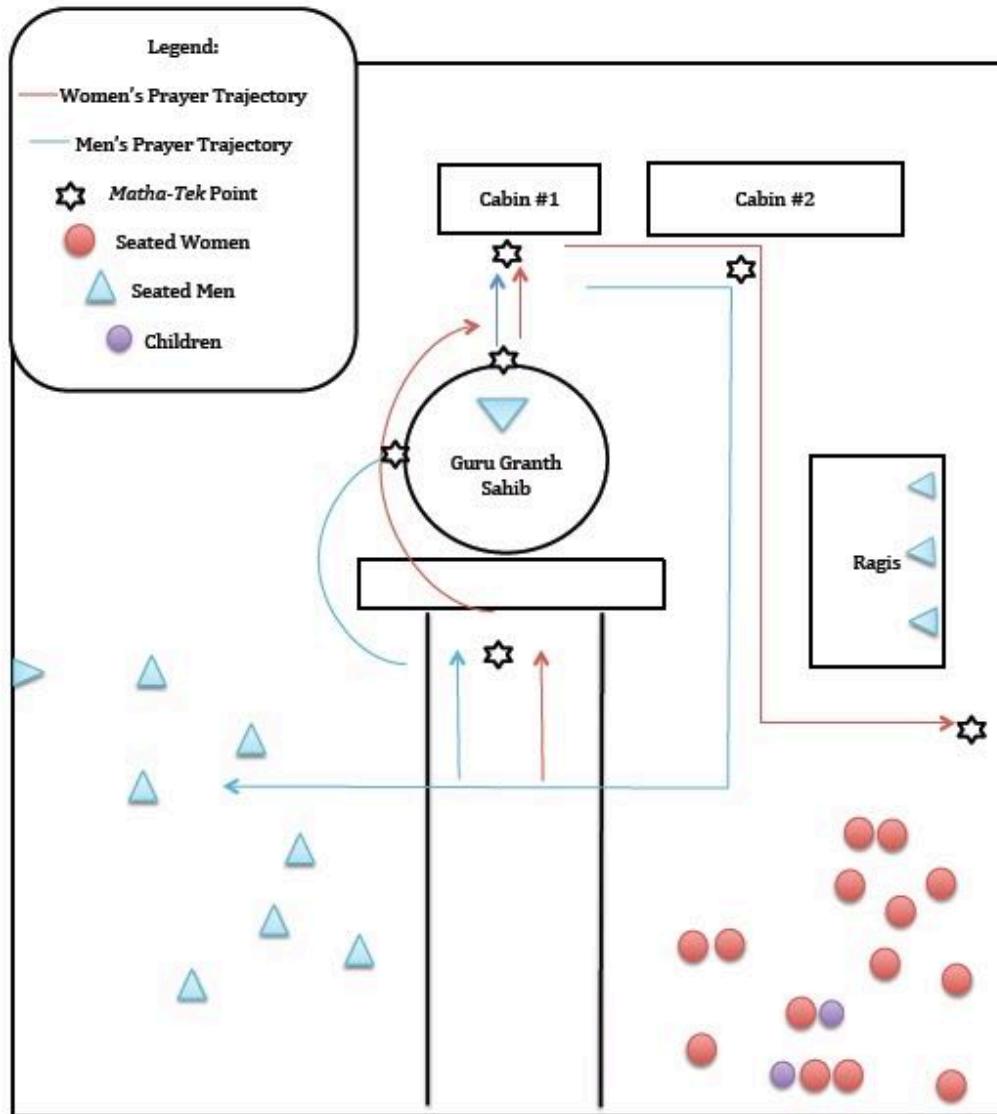


Figure 4.2 Physical trajectories of worshippers in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

The women begin filtering into the gurdwara in the early morning for morning prayer. During the winter, they are wrapped in heavy shawls and wear toe socks with their rubber sandals. Like in other gurdwaras, the women sit cross-legged on the floor, with some elderly women who have mobility and joint problems sitting on a bench in the back. One woman, who I referred to as “Cane Aunty” in my mind, given the three-tipped cane she waved around with great gusto, preferred to sit along the side of the center of the room and watch worshippers come

and go. Bhai Chetan Singh recites the *Japji Sahib* followed by *ardas*, a standardized form of prayer or petition to God. After the *ardas*, which takes place while standing, the women sit down and a *hukam*, a reading from the scripture meant to guide the congregation and chosen at random, is read for the day. One of the younger caretakers hands out the blessed offering of *parshad*, which is a welcome treat especially on a cold day. In warmer weather, wool or heavier cotton Punjabi suits are replaced with breezy muslin or cotton, with a light scarf. From about March onwards, the ceiling fans overhead are turned on and the side doors are flung open to keep the room as cool as possible. Although there are coolers, they are not used regularly. A few of the women wear white, or lighter colors, keeping in line with their widow status and colors generally worn by older women in Punjab, although most do not. They take off their sandals at the entrance (there is no designated shoe area here, though they are common at many other gurdwaras), and wash their hands at the porcelain sink to the right.

After ascending the marble steps, the women come inside to *matha thek* by getting on their hands and knees and swiftly bowing their head until it touches the floor in front of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Figure 4.2). After rising, the women circumambulate from the left, going clockwise. Many stop, standing, with hands folded, to bow their heads briefly at the *chaur* (the fly whisk made of yak hair) and then again behind the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, at the priest's back, who is reading the holy text. Then, the women generally walk to the back of the room and bow to the cabins housing an oil lamp and the room where the Sri Guru Granth Sahib is kept in repose at night. They turn back to the front of the room, stopping at the large, lightbox-type photograph of the Harimandir Sahib. Many touch the image of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and then touch their eyes, back and forth in rapid succession, as if receiving a blessing from the image. Women spend a longer time than men at the large photograph of the Sri Guru Granth

Sahib, which is lit from behind, often touching the photograph and then their eyes alternatively in quick succession, finally wiping their face with their hands. They then move to sit down, greeting women with “*Sat Sri Akal*,” a common Sikh greeting, on their way to sit.<sup>129</sup> I have noticed that usually the congregation leaves a half-circle of space from the SGGS in order to keep somewhat of a reverent distance. While most of the women sit in the middle, some of the more elderly women sit at the back bench or near the sides to rest their backs and legs. It is usually younger children who sit closer to the front, while any toddlers accompanying their mothers or grandmothers usually run around the room, repeatedly shushed by whoever has accompanied them. Many children and youth drop by the gurdwara on the way to school or college, their heavy backpacks shifting as they *matha thek*. During the program, women are more likely to greet each other, sigh, and utter words during prayer, such as “Waheguru!”<sup>130</sup> or “Waheguru, the True King, Have Mercy On Us!” their voices rippling one after another. After evening prayer, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib is moved into its chamber for the night.

Ahmed’s concept of “affective economies” helps us understand the movements and affects of women in the gurdwara (2004). Emotions play a crucial role in the surfacing of individual and collective bodies through affective economies — economies of affective circulation between signs and bodies. By the term economies, Ahmed implies interplays within a range of activity. Emotions are not housed in singular subjects; subjects are nodes in affective economies rather than destinations or origins of affect. We see this in how affect entangles women’s bodies in the gurdwara. If one woman enters the gurdwara and greets someone seated, for example, other women will begin to greet her as well. If one woman sighs, and utters

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<sup>129</sup> The greeting roughly translates to: “Eternal is the timeless lord.”

<sup>130</sup> *Waheguru* means “God is great” and is also used as a term for God.

“*Waheguru!*” often, another does the same. If one woman, distressed, discusses the illness of a family member or some other misfortune, other women will say “tch tch,” and lean in close to listen and support. Ahmed argues that as money increases in value through circulation, and capital is accumulated over time, so too do emotions work as a form of capital. An emotion such as fear, for example, is economic as it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference. Feelings appear in or as objects with lives of their own, by concealing how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production, circulation and exchange (Ahmed 2004). These insights regarding space, and the embeddedness of the body in these spheres, help to illuminate how emotions ripple their way through the gurdwara and work to mediate relationships between collective and individual experiences and material forms in particular spaces such as the colony.

After the morning prayer and conversations, some of the women stop in to the memorial room on their way out, stopping to touch the photographs of their loved ones they have lost. The women leave the gurdwara, some go off to work, and others back home to do their domestic work. Afternoons in the gurdwara are usually quiet. There is little foot traffic other than the late risers who did not make the morning prayers. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib is covered with a sheet, and the fans are turned off, except for perhaps one circling overhead as one of the caretakers rests or sleeps below it, supine and somewhat oblivious to any visitors. Traffic begins to increase again in the early evening, when the congregation flows in for evening prayers. Some of the women come to both morning and evening prayers, others come only in the morning or only in the evening; it seems that there are more children and younger women (daughters and daughters-in-law of the widows) in the evening. Communal meals are usually only reserved for special events and functions, such as the *akhand path* held in commemoration of 1984 (see next chapter). After the closing of prayer, the women again linger to converse before heading home –



shorter this time, as it is getting late and gets dark early in the winters.

If prayers are forms of communication between an individual or a community and the divine, then what does it mean to describe prayer as ritual? By ritual, I use Tambiah's definition of ritual as a

culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition) (Tambiah 1979, 119).

As Paul Connerton argues, ritual is a performative language, where the performativity of ritual is partly a matter of recurring utterances of certain pronouns and verbs (1989). How the emotive elements of ritual are coded reveals the feelings and attitudes of those participating (Tambiah 1979). The performance of ritual itself is an action. Although rituals carry within them aspects of repetition, no ritual is like any other performance of it because it is influenced by social factors and circumstances of those performing them (Tambiah 1979).

Sikh women's mourning and religious practices in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara allow us a richer understanding and complication of Tambiah's argument of ritual as cultural elaborations of codes consisting of distancing one from spontaneous expressions of emotion (1979). Although the prayers have a repetitive quality, they do not fall along these lines of elaboration, and there is room for exhibiting intentional rather than conventional behavior.<sup>131</sup> While ritual can help validate order (Durkheim 1915), Sikh women's common behaviour during times of grief (for example, often wailing, beating of the chest, loud crying, and getting "out of control" during funerals (Das 1996), and their contemporary prayer practices, complicates the Durkheimian

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<sup>131</sup> As mentioned above, a common earlier practice of mourning involved hiring professional mourners, known as a *siyaapa*, to attend funerals.

notion that ritual can help “control” experience. Thus, I would like to suggest that prayer in this context does not control traumatic experiences of the past; rather, the practices offer room for exploring grief in an embodied manner. In the days after the massacre, many women were numbed and silent due to shock and perhaps being denied an opportunity to mourn as the bodies of the dead were missing and they could not perform last rites. Perhaps it is this denied opportunity that has lended itself to how grief has become embodied in everyday life and prayer. Sikh women’s experiences with prayer rituals also unsettle the notion that ritual can simply provide a tool for understanding the world (Douglas 2005); indeed, their experiences show that rituals can provide a place where loss and grief perhaps cannot be made sense of but only enacted through raw bodily affects. At times I would see this unfold in front of me, when women rocked back and forth with intensity during prayer, uttered words to God under their breath, or, during our interviews, began to cry, their voices quivering and varying in intensity.

Harnoor Kaur elaborated on the importance of the gurdwaras in her daily life with me one day, emphasizing that she does not go there only for religious devotion, but also to socialize. Every morning, she would wake up around four or five o’clock in the morning and begin her day with *naam-simran*, or the continuous, meditative recitation of God’s name, before taking a bath. She told me that she went to the gurdwara twice a day, for morning (six o’clock) and evening (seven o’clock) prayers, because, in her words “What am I going to do sitting at home?” This statement is particularly important as Harnoor Kaur frames the activity as being the sole alternative to staying at homes in the evenings. In the evening, after returning from work, she would make a vegetable dish and then would make two *rotis* (unleavened bread) when she came back after evening prayer, which she attended for about an hour. “After 8:00 [PM], I lock my door and don’t let anyone come in,” she says. “No sister or brother, no relative. I have stopped

everyone.” Harnoor Kaur would then eat dinner, and watch one and a half or two hours of television before going to bed. When I asked her how she feels and what she gains from going to the gurdwara, she replied:

My heart...I get peace... like when I do *simran* in the morning for an hour or the five prayers.<sup>132</sup> And it takes me one hour. And I sit, I don't have any interruptions, just God.... It becomes a habit. Now even if someone calls me in the street, then I say I have to go back [home]. Nor do I go to any friend's house. I don't go to anyone's house.

K: Here, you don't have any friends?

H: No, I don't like going to anyone's house.

K: Your own house is fine.

Harnoor Kaur nodded in agreement. She told me how her sister in Chandigarh would call her and urge her to attend a religious ceremony<sup>133</sup> they would hold, and would offer to buy her travel fare as well. Harnoor Kaur would tell her, “My heart doesn't feel like it.” She discussed how she didn't feel like being social with people:

Anyways, where your parents are no longer, going to your sister-in-law's everyday... if someone invites me ten times, I'll go once. Some people, immediately – just get ready and go, not me. Surjit's mother, ask her about me, we meet, she meets me every day at the Gurdwara, but sometimes she gets late, then I don't see her. Otherwise I see, she too has seen so much pain.

Throughout our conversations it was evident that Harnoor Kaur did not think it was appropriate for women to be out socializing frequently. As discussed in Chapter 3, she complained when her daughter-in-law, Jinder, would dress and go out. The gurdwara, as a legitimate space for socializing then, serves as a homing point in the complex interplay of the places in Harnoor Kaur's life. She walks to the gurdwara from her flat twice a day, for the

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<sup>132</sup> The five prayers include: *Japji Sahib*, *Jaap Sahib*, *Shabad Hazarey*, *Rehras Sahib*, and *Anand Sahib*.

<sup>133</sup> The family would hold a *prabhat pheri*. This is an early morning ceremony in which Sikhs will form a procession and travel around a neighbourhood performing *kirtan*.

morning and evening programs. In the evenings, she walks home after prayers are finished. As I have discussed earlier, the spatial configurations in the colony and the social restrictions on widowhood work against women in that there are few places for women to socialize other than the cramped, narrow, open-air hallways of the colony flats, and to be outside on one's own seemed inappropriate to her. Whereas the space of the colony and Delhi at large pose restrictions on the bodies of all women, the gurdwara provides a legitimate space for her gendered, widowed body to be in, a body that, given the stigmas associated with widowhood, had no business being out and about the city. Throughout our conversations, Harnoor Kaur was careful to stress that she kept to herself, emphasizing that she locked herself in her apartment at night to eat, watch television and sleep by herself, and did not let anyone in, nor went out. She seemed embarrassed to tell me that she enjoyed going to the gurdwara to participate in religious activity and socialize. Her question, "[otherwise] what am I going to do sitting at home now?" implied that it was an action she was resigned to do, rather than an active choice. She did not think it appropriate to visit her sisters-in-law as her parents are deceased, and thus, had no business being there. She stressed that, even when stopped by an acquaintance on the street, she refused to visit anyone, and preferred to isolate herself in her own home other than her two daily visits to the gurdwara or going to work as a lab assistant at a school.

"If someone invites me ten times, I'll go once. Some people, just immediately - get ready and go (*tyaar hokey chaleean jandeeaan*), not me." Harnoor Kaur here is emphasizing what it means to be a "good" widow in Delhi, to be a woman who is widowed by tragedy. This is a woman who leaves the house out of necessity (prayer and work) but rarely ventures out into social spaces - and even then, only after great insistence by her friends or family. *Tyaar hokey*, or having gotten ready, implies not only getting dressed, but the specific way in which a woman

might get dressed, by putting on “going out” clothes, jewellery, and perhaps makeup, which are generally the purview of young women of marriageable age and married women, not widows. Harnoor Kaur, is not like “those” women – she knows what society expects of her as a widow, and strives to prove that she meets, and perhaps even exceeds, these guidelines. The gurdwara then, functions as a legitimate outlet for her physical presence as a widow and her socializing - indeed, it was in the gurdwaras where I first met Harnoor Kaur.

### **Gurdwara as Counterpublic**

In the particular spatiotemporal juncture of contemporary Tilak Vihar, the Shaheedganj Gurdwara is much more than a religious or congregational centre. In the way that gurdwaras have functioned in some ways as memorial sites overall in Sikh tradition, as Murphy (2012) argues, so too does Shaheedganj Gurdwara. It was built to serve the widows of the massacre and their families and continues to commemorate the violence through its very existence and the forms of commemorative practice and prayer that take place within it. It is a place of worship and a community centre, but it is also, in whole and in parts, a memorial in a wide variety of ways, which will be discussed in the following chapter. In addition, the gurdwara provides a space for women to socialize with one another.

The Shaheedganj Gurdwaras remains a place administered and intensely patrolled by men. Not only are all the caretakers men, but the *ragis* are too, other than the youth’s kirtan group which perform during special events. Men conduct all the daily prayers and the *parkash* and *sukhasan* ceremonies, open and close the front gates and the gates to the memorial room, make the *parshad*, and handle the donations. The elderly volunteer caretaker<sup>134</sup> particularly

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<sup>134</sup> Known as the *sevadar*.

policing the space, telling women where to sit, shooing people over, and disciplining unruly children. Yet the congregation at any given time is mostly women; in fact women often enter the men's side, due to their numbers, with a few men scattered against the far side, near the wall, on any given day (see Figure 4.2). After the morning prayer is over, the women often linger behind, gossiping about the neighbourhood goings-on, at the back and sides of the main hall.

In her overview on research on gender and language, Susan Gal posits that structural relations of gender and power are both preserved and destabilized in part through interactions in social situations. If we understand everyday linguistic interactions, for example, as forms of resistance, we hear practices that are more contradictory, ambiguous, and diverse, ranging from subversion to outright rejection to acceptance and reconstruction of prevailing cultural definitions of gender (Gal 1991, 178). We see this in the social interactions between women in the colony. They speak of events in the community, of marriages, of illness, of death. One morning, for example, I observed two women speaking in their Rajasthani dialect about a death that had occurred in the neighbourhood. From what I could understand it seemed that a man had come down with a severe viral illness - either dengue or typhoid - and after five days of medicine his "veins exploded"<sup>135</sup> and he had to have surgery. Upon getting up from this conversation, one of the women uttered, in long, emphatic syllables, "Waheguru, the True King, Have Mercy On Us"<sup>136</sup> and the other woman heaved a heavy sigh in agreement. These conversations often last more than half an hour, to the annoyance of the all-male gurdwara establishment, and the women are often admonished strongly by the elderly caretaker, who often said things like, "Have you

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<sup>135</sup> "*Nas phatgaye.*"

<sup>136</sup> "*Waheguru Sachey Badshah, Meher Karo Baba.*"

come here to pray or gossip! You should take God's name!"<sup>137</sup>

The affective ripple of sentiment discussed above also manifests itself between the male caretakers and the widows. One particular instance of this took place one winter morning in December 2013. I had arrived at the gurdwara from my cousin-brother's<sup>138</sup> house in neighbouring Ganga Ram Vatika. It was bone-chillingly cold that day, and fog rolled heavily across the early morning streets. *Parshad* was handed out as usual after the close of prayer, and the women huddled into themselves, in their sweaters and shawls, sitting in silence after morning prayers, shivering and grateful for the warm blessing. The women sat in silence eating their *parshad*, basking in satisfaction after the morning prayer, evident in their happy faces and the quiet in the air. Suddenly a voice rang out in the corner. "*EH PARSHAD DE VICH CHOOHEY DI MANG.RI HAI!*" I was unclear as to what this meant. The woman rose and shoved the food in the face of one of the volunteers. "Did you not check the flour?" My mind raced to place the words. I understood the first part, "This *parshad* has mouse ----" but I did not understand what *man.gri* meant. I turned to Cane Aunty. "*Aunty-ji?*" I asked. "What does *man.gri* mean?" With a sinking stomach, I hoped that it wasn't a mouse tail. Cane Aunty chuckled. She formed her hand into a small circle, fingers pointing downwards. "Drops" she laughed. Mouse droppings. One of the women in the congregation had found mouse droppings in the *parshad*. I blanched. I had already eaten the offering. What followed was a rising tide of emotion, anger, and shouting. All of the women began to chime in and berate the male caretakers for the lack of sanitation.

From my observations of how women's bodies mimic and respond to one another in the

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<sup>137</sup> "*Tussi ithey paath karan aye ho yaan gallan karan aye ho? Rab da na lyo!*"

<sup>138</sup> In Indian English, the term "cousin-brother" is often used for close male kin within the same generation, whether related biologically or not.

gurdwara it seems that they exist in an affective nodal relationship to each another, similar to what Ahmed's "affective economies" lays out. The gurdwara allows them a physical, communal space - so severely lacking in this colony - to share their life histories, social events, their emotions, joy and pain - their *dukh-sukh*, as the saying in Punjabi goes. If we follow Nancy Fraser's critique of the public sphere (Fraser 1990), the permeable space of the gurdwara can, in a way, be seen as a subaltern counterpublic, working as a feminist critique to Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere as an inclusive space that preserves social interaction and disregards status (Habermas 1989), and how these sphere organizes discourse.<sup>139</sup> Fraser describes these "subaltern counterpublics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990, 23). The public sphere is in fact comprised of a number of significant exclusions, which has historically discriminated against women and lower castes and classes, holding hegemonic and patriarchal tendencies. The gurdwara then, although policed by men, provides an alternative public or a counterpublic formed in part by women as a public space to discuss pertinent issues in their lives.

One day Harnoor Kaur and I were discussing her relationship with visiting gurdwaras. She told me that, after 1984, she stopped going to pray although she was staying at a refugee camp within a gurdwara. She again stopped going to the gurdwara in the colony after her son died, and only began visiting again when women in the neighbourhood came to her:

KA: Then, there are some ladies in this area, those who didn't do prayers, because they were very angry, at what happened to them.

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<sup>139</sup> As we have seen, the women of Tilak Vihar have little access to this public sphere, having little public recourse to address their grievances surrounding the violence of the event and the everyday structural violence of poverty.



HK: Yes, yes, that is what I told you, no?

KA: Yes.

HK: I never used to do it. I never went to the gurdwara or did anything [after 1984], then God brought me a little closer to him. I came here [to Tilak Vihar] then started going. Then after Balbir's death happened, I didn't go to the temple for six months.

KA: So you had the same feeling?

HK: Yes.

KA: Like, "Why is this happening?"

HK: Two or three ladies from the Gurdwara came and visited me and said, "You should come. Why don't you come to the Gurdwara?" Those women who knew me. It had been awhile. Surjit's mother also said, "you should go to the gurdwara".... Then I started going. I never sit at the front in the gurdwara.

Harnoor Kaur discussed that she liked to sit at the back because she thought it was a humble action to sit far away from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. She also enjoyed the vantage point it provided her in terms of people-watching and socializing.

HK: [I can see] those who come and go, they care a lot, they give a lot of respect to me, everyone knows me. You say hello to them. Then it makes you feel good, that we are sitting in God's home. We only go to beg from God, to beg. What else do we go for?

KA: So you sit at the back, meaning, everyone meets you.

HK: Yes, those who have been separated [from their loved ones], you see them all.

We can see from Harnoor Kaur's discussion how the gurdwara acts as a counterpublic in that it provides a space for women to socialize; it is a place where she "feels good" and peaceful.

Indeed, throughout our conversations Harnoor Kaur stressed that she did not feel comfortable making friends with anyone unless she was in the gurdwara. Although administered by men, it is mostly populated by women and their prayers, discussions, and connections with one another, and therefore, remains women's space. Issues which normally disproportionately affect women

in patriarchal societal structures, such as nurturing and care for the young, the elderly, and the ill, are not often included in the public sphere. Yet the gurdwara space provides a backdrop to bring private issues into the public sphere.

### **Gender and Religious Practice**

The examination of Sikh women's religious practices and their embodiment of mourning can contribute to the discourse of gendered embodiment in manifold ways. First, it reemphasizes the idea that gender is performative (Butler 1990), and embodied, and that gendered performativities in the global South may be vastly different from Western, liberal, secular notions of embodiment (S. Mahmood 2005; Ong 1988). In the context of the colony, Sikh widows' affective and embodied behaviours are deeply tied to their statuses and experiences as widows and their religiosity. Sikh women's emotional and outwardly expressive performances of mourning and grief during funeral rites and after a death illustrate this point, as does the very prohibition of such bodily practices by the current Sikh Code of Conduct, which instructs mourners to "not grieve or raise a hue and cry or indulge in breast-beating."<sup>140</sup>

While much of the work on gender and Sikhism by feminist scholars has focused on scriptural analysis via exegetical methodologies or development-based discussions of Sikh women's health and well-being in Punjab, I am interested here in researching the intersections between embodied experiences of affective, performative religious practice, belief, and gendered space-making in order to interrogate binary notions of freedom and agency (i.e., free or unfree, agentive or passive subjects) pertaining to religious women in India. Popular representations and performances of Sikh identity tend to be strongly masculinized, with little, or cursory, treatment

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<sup>140</sup> See Appendix A for the full text of Funeral Ceremonies in the Sikh Code of Conduct.

of women's experiences. In scholarly literature, however, some attention has been paid to Sikh women's (Bhachu 1991; Jakobsh 2003; C. K. Mahmood 2000; N.-G. K. Singh 2000) and men's (Axel 2001; Gell 1996; N. Mandair 2005) gendered Sikh body and self.

In order to understand the gendered religious practices of Sikh women in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, we must also understand how Sikh women are implicated by themselves and by others in religious practice, through exegesis, history, and contemporary religious practice. As mentioned earlier, although there has been some work on Sikh women in the diaspora, there is a dearth of research done on the religious lives of Sikh women in India.

Popular explanations and discursive constructions of women's places and roles within Sikhism is overwhelmingly absorbed in a discourse which posits gender differences based on biological sex and reproduction and argues that women are closer to nature than men or that women are endowed with "feminine" characteristics while men are not (a perspective that has been criticized by authors like Jakobsh (2003) and Ortner (1972)).<sup>141</sup> For example, many online articles<sup>142</sup> discussing the egalitarian position of women in Sikhism quote the following line attributed to Guru Nanak in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib:

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman (Guru Nanak, Raag Aasaa Mehal 1, p. 473, in Khalsa 2000).

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<sup>141</sup> Ortner's concern here is to show why "woman might tend to be assumed, over and over, in the most diverse sorts of world-views, and in cultures of every degree of complexity, to be closer to nature than men" (1972: 24).

<sup>142</sup> (see [http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Equality\\_of\\_women](http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Equality_of_women), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_Sikhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Sikhism) <http://www.sikhs.org/women.htm> <https://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikhism-articles/role-and-status-of-women-in-sikhism> <http://www.wahegurunet.com/role-of-women-in-sikhism>. Last accessed October 1, 2016).

These issues arose during a conversation with Harbhajan Singh as well, to discuss women's positions within Sikhism.

HS: ...It's my experience, that women Sikhs are – have [more of an] impression [on] the religion. Because, in this religion, the place of woman is high. In no other religion you can have this comparison.

KA: Equality, you're saying.

HS: [Speaking in Punjabi] Not only equality, women have gotten more than equality. The traditions here are too much. The traditions of this place, for example someone's pregnant and she shouldn't do this or that, to avoid miscarriage - God would say, what are you talking about? *Then God said, kings, saints, everyone, it was women that gave birth to them, right? How can you disrespect them?* Look - at that time, it was in fashion for women to have to prove their innocence by going into the fire [sati]. And then it was en vogue for women to cover their foreheads in the presence of men. But [Sri Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru] forbade it. At the time of the making the Khalsa, the tenth master, he did something really wonderful. He asked *Maa-ji* [Mata Gujri Kaur, his wife], what's your *seva*? She said, my *seva* is this [makes circling motion with arm, as in mixing water]. He put *pathaasas* [a hardened mixture of sugar] in the water. Sweetness. Everywhere.<sup>143</sup> Then they [women] fought in wars. It's in Sikh history. So the character of the woman in Sikh religion is always [high]... And I think, if the practical religion is in books, it should be in practice also [emphasis mine].

Harbhajan Singh also refers to this line in Gurbani of women as those who birth kings, using it to support gender equality for Sikh women. There has been little critique of the discursive underpinnings of this line in popular discourse – which, in part, ascribes a woman's power and worth based on her ostensibly natural reproductive capacity and relationships to men.<sup>144</sup> In Harbhajan Singh's view, however, this assertion was powerful given the prevailing practices of *sati* (widow immolation) and *purdah* (gender segregation) at the time.

According to N.-G.K. Singh (2000), Sikh scripture and teachings are feminist and gender

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<sup>143</sup> Harbhajan Singh here is referring to the Sikh baptism ceremony, known as *amrit*.

<sup>144</sup> In a conversation with a relative, who is a leader in the Vancouver Sikh youth community, he remarked that he believed this line was powerful and ground-breaking in the historical context from which it arose, given the historical status of women in India. Like Harbhajan Singh, he too discussed the problem of sati at the time of the Gurus. In feminist Sikh circles, I have encountered much resistance when questioning the suppositions underpinning this line of text.

equal, whereas Sikh rituals as practiced in the present day are patriarchal because, at least in Sikh religious institutions, it is often men who administer prayers and rituals designed to communicate with the divine (which we see play out within the Shaheedganj Gurdwara). God is beyond gender yet gets translated into a male deity in Sikh scripture, but feminine imagery in scripture presents a number of different options for self-discovery for Sikh women. Singh argues that, historically, the Sikh faith opened up wide horizons for all women irrespective of marital status, class and caste. The Sikh Gurus<sup>145</sup> regarded women as physically, spiritually and psychologically more refined, and these messages are found in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Singh posits the Gurus strategically adopted a female voice and bridal imagery to express love for the divine, and thus scripture prizes a woman's bodily activities and longing (N.-G. K. Singh 2005). Yet, perhaps such usage reifies the definition of "feminine" and "masculine," essentializing these ostensibly innate characteristics of gender. Doris Jakobsh (2003) argues that to move from a grammatically feminine form of speech (such as the bridal symbol) to a theological argument intent on discovering the intention of the scripture as Singh does is more of an interpretation of scripture rather than a reflection of the actual content of the scripture as written by the Gurus. It is therefore unclear whether male Gurus understood their enunciations in scripture to be feminine or whether representations of speech in feminine form contained in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib were indicative of their social and political surroundings. Yet, as what we know about the Gurus relies by necessity on existing scripture, any analysis of scripture would fail in this respect.

Debates on feminist interpretations within Sikh scripture notwithstanding, the patriarchy

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<sup>145</sup> There are ten successive Gurus in Sikhism, beginning with Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) and ending with Guru Gobind Singh Ji (1666-1708) The Sri Guru Granth Sahib is regarded by mainstream Sikhism as the 11<sup>th</sup> living and final Guru.

of Sikhism has tangible effects on women's autonomy in gender relations in both private and public domains. Feminine imagery in scripture dignifies domestic roles yet essentializes notions of ideal womanhood, which have tangible effects on the lived experiences of women. Negative qualities and *maya*<sup>146</sup> are associated with women, and the lineage of the Gurus was comprised of males of high-caste Khatri status. In the Sikh perception of marital relations and motherhood, traditional feminine qualities are valorized; women are still positioned as invisible in the labour force and have little say in the number and spacing of children, and the skewed sex ratio in Punjab is well-known (Mohan 2006). Sikhism's misogynistic tendencies (rather than its emancipatory potential) have influenced male perceptions and images of women and attitudes towards sex, gender and codes of conduct in domestic and public spaces (Mand 2005).<sup>147</sup> Singh argues that in the present day patriarchal intervention and colonial experience have made gender egalitarian practices in Sikhism weaker.<sup>148</sup> The Sikh message is not the subjugation of female to male but rather the rising of the individual spirit towards God; this message has been lost in current patriarchal manifestations of Sikh practice (N.-G. K. Singh 1992). Singh finds feminist potential in historical Sikh practice: women were no longer segregated, did not observe *purdah*,<sup>149</sup> could participate in the affairs of their religious community, served, ate and cooked with men in communal meals and were celebrated as important partners in spiritual growth.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> A concept which seeks to address the illusory nature of the universe.

<sup>147</sup> See for example, the gendered language of Appendix 1, the Sikh Code of Conduct for Funeral Ceremonies.

<sup>148</sup> Mandair (2009) also emphasizes the importance of intersections between colonial translation and Indology in South Asian religious subjecthood.

<sup>149</sup> A system concealing women from men, which can include gender-segregated spaces or the covering of women's bodies.

<sup>150</sup> Nijhawan (2006) outlines the possibilities for emotional release in gendered spaces. The aesthetic evaluations of the female voice in *dhadi* singing (longing, lament, agony, passion through the female voice) allow women *dhadi* singers to enter previously male-dominated spaces. He describes *dhadi* in terms of a dialectic between folk notions of female energy and spiritual notions of emotional lease.

She proposes a refeminization of ritual by which Sikh women can turn to scripture and the historical, ostensibly egalitarian origins of Sikh faith. However, although “herstory” and the historical inclusion of women are fundamental to addressing inadequacies of historical knowledge it does not confront the historical articulation of gendered hierarchies. As such, the “feminism” of some works on Sikhism, like Singh’s, fails to provide a full account of the workings of gender in Sikh everyday practice (Jakobsh 2003; Murphy 2009).

It is also critical to note that debates about scripture and scripture itself can be far-removed from the lives of Sikh widows in the colony, such as women who cannot read nor write, which I will discuss below. First, however, I turn attention to Sikh women’s religiosity as performed in prayer.

### **Healing through Performing Prayer**

Prayer, as a central phenomenon of religious life, is affective, social, and ritualistic. Prayer is social in that it is never free from social influence, even when performed individually. It serves diverse functions, it is embodied, and it is repetitive, yet at the same time transcends the body. It is a means of action, but it also involves the mind. Prayer is a spiritual conversation with a higher power and a movement towards divinity (Tiele 2016).<sup>151</sup> Earlier studies of religion

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<sup>151</sup> Mauss’ evolutionary approach to prayer earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which significantly impacted the anthropology of religion, discusses elementary forms of prayer despite differing from Durkheim’s later work in that he does not overtly espouse a trajectory of lower forms of religion and religious rites to higher forms. For Mauss, religion in its elementary forms was focused on mechanical rites of a precise and material nature, and of strict beliefs composed of tangible images, giving a greater place to consciousness with the passage of time. Thus, prayers are not just something which express a feeling - they are a type of literature which is a product of the efforts of generations past. Endorsed by social tradition, prayer, including mental prayer, is a social act that uses hallowed language and deals with hallowed things. Thus the question is not which author composed a prayer but under whom and what conditions it is being used (Mauss 2003). What is problematic about Mauss’s conception of prayer, in addition to prescribing it to a type of evolutionary mechanism, is his emphasis on the orality of prayer. By recognizing the affective, embodied dimensions of prayer, as evident in the Widow Colony we know this

discussed prayer as a general religious phenomenon in psychological or mythological terms (James 2008; Tylor 1891).<sup>152</sup> In more recent years, a more nuanced approach to prayer has been outlined. Gill (2005) elaborates on three dimensions of prayer, which can be described as forms of “human communication with divine and spiritual entities” (Gill, 2005, 7367) and “interactions with divine others” (Sharp 2013, 159): prayer as text, as act, and as subject of inquiry. As text, prayers take the form of words meant to communicate and close the gap between the human and divine. Thinking about prayer as act encompasses not only textual elements but performative elements, or actions, of prayer, often in ritualized forms. These can incorporate “certain body postures and orientations, ritual actions and objects, designated architectural structures or physical environments, particular times of the day or calendar dates, specified moods, attitudes, or intentions” (Gill 2005, 7369). These acts can include other forms, such as food offerings (Banerji 2006), dances and sacrifices (Scott 1994) or bodily actions (Henkel 2005).

The social aspect of prayer is exemplified in the *ardas*. The *ardas*, arising from the Persian word “arazdashat” (Cole 2004), is a common petitionary prayer of remembrance which is recited at the end of prayer programs in gurdwaras and Sikh homes transnationally, before or after undertaking tasks which are deemed significant, and at the end of a prayer service.<sup>153</sup> The act of *ardas* works against the idea of prayer as solely an oral action, as it involves movements of the body. *Ardas* is an oral prayer in that it involves ritual locutions spoken aloud, yet it is also

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is not the case. This emphasis on orality within prayer rites does not allow for realizing the importance of embodied rituals.

<sup>152</sup> Although I agree with Mauss’s emphasis on prayer as central phenomena of religious life, and the importance of examining social institutions to discover why one form of prayer develops over another, more current scholarly work on prayer shows that religion has not become more individual and less mechanic.

<sup>153</sup> See Appendix B for the full text of a standard *ardas*.



embodied, as it takes certain postures (bowing and touching the ground with one's forehead in front of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib before rising to stand and recite the prayer with hands folded, and then moving again to *matha-thek* before sitting down once it is over). During the *ardas* one stands, hands folded at the chest or in front of the solar plexus, perhaps one closes their eyes, slightly rocks back and forth. *Ardas*, which is recited morning and evening in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, and at special events as it does elsewhere, is one form of remembrance that takes on a particular double meaning in the colony. The *ardas* is a prayer that emphasizes sacrifice, and martyrdom, which makes it even more pertinent in the colony, where such discourses often circulate. As a recitative form of prayer, it enables healing and forms of memory-making to occur, while involving the body, which I will further discuss in Chapter 5.

Discussions of prayer-as-text are critical to understanding forms of Sikh prayer, yet these debates are far-removed from some women, particularly Labana women who do not speak Punjabi fluently or read scripture. In such cases, it is the space of the gurdwara and the affective and emotive experience of it that provides benefit. Jhansi Kaur, for example, told me that she did not know how to do *path*, but she went to the gurdwara because she likes to see other women there and she gets “peace by going.” She then said, “God gives peace through gurdwaras. Like, when someone dies, we pray, and we get such peace in that; we get peace by listening in the gurdwara.” Amar Kaur too, said,

The ladies are uneducated, they don't do prayers, like me; I am uneducated. Maybe if you're an educated lady...like my daughter-in-law is one, she goes there and does prayers with the prayer book, and takes it to the gurdwara and reads. And like my grandson, he takes the prayer book and reads there. Those who are educated will sit, read; the prayer books are lying there to use. Some do read, but someone like me will pay her respects and sit and just listen and wait for the [end] and then leave.

KA: So maybe some ladies, have they memorized it, like [the morning prayer]?

AK: Yes, yes some do some don't. Those who listen daily they may have memorized [it], those who don't know how to read any prayers, and who go daily, may memorize them.

In such instances, it is the gurdwara as counterpublic and its affective economy that brings about positive effects for the worshipper. Jhansi Kaur finds going to the gurdwara a helpful experience, even though she cannot recite prayers, because she finds it a positive social space to be in and the affective power of listening to other women's prayers brings her inner peace. Amar Kaur also enjoys sitting and listening to the prayer while still others will participate in yet another embodied form of prayer, recitation by memory. Harnoor Kaur mentioned to me that she has memorized various prayers but that reading prayers from a book was a different experience. She said that praying wasn't difficult because it had "become a habit." However, for some elderly women with mobility issues, such as Kirat Kaur, going to the gurdwara is a difficult task. Instead of visiting Shaheedganj, which was a twice-daily activity for her for many years, she now listens to prayers via the live television feeds from Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in Delhi and Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, Punjab.

Phenomenological perspectives can aid us here in understanding that one's body is a permanent condition of one's experience, i.e., that our beings are housed in bodies. Such perspectives are therefore important for understanding legacies of violence, as violence plays out on and interacts with the body. In Tilak Vihar we can see how bodily actions and habits, especially within the domain of religious practice, are not anchored in a specific body. Rather, these elements of the body are in affective relationships with other bodies, as we see in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara. These anthropological understandings of Sikh women (cf. Das 2007) complicate the view of the body as a "bounded system" (cf. Douglas 2005).

Crucial to understanding women's prayer practices in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara is an

understanding of embodiment. The human body is an expressive space that contributes to the significance of personal actions. The body is also the origin of expressive movement and is a medium for perception of the world. Bodily experience gives perception a meaning beyond that established simply by thought. Thus, Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") does not account for how consciousness is influenced by the spatiality of a person's own body (Merleau-Ponty 1962). In phenomenological conceptions of the body, the body is assumed to be the seat of subjectivity and thus effectively poses a challenge to this notion of a Cartesian duality.

Merleau-Ponty's work on the bodily nature of perception (1962), Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a set of dispositions and deeply orienting bodily actions (1977), and Mauss's discussion of techniques of the body (1973) --which are bodily skills, habits, tastes, actions and other discursive and non-discursive elements anchored in the body and informed by one's particular sociocultural location-- all point towards the crucial role of bodily experiences. Habitus, then, is a set of practices which point towards how we habituate ourselves to ways of being; it is our bodily socialization and deeply orientating bodily actions, a learned process of our physical being (Bourdieu 1977). Embodiment encompasses both the body as a lived and experiential entity and the body as the context or milieu for cognitive mechanisms (Csordas 1994). In the colony, the religious practices of women as habitus become habitual and repetitive through ritual and prayer. I would notice, for example, that women tended to sit in the same spots when visiting the gurdwara, and perform repetitive movements, as discussed earlier – bowing, circumambulating, or touching the photograph of the Harimandir Sahib. Repetitive too, were their performances of rituals, whether reciting certain prayers, singing along to devotional music, or rocking slightly while listening to others in the congregation pray.

Returning to the *ardas*, then, we can view the prayer as a social ritual that aids women in remembering their loss and healing from their trauma, one where women participate wholeheartedly. Given the centrality of the *ardas* in Sikh prayer, many of the women have memorized it, and so those women who would normally only listen to other parts of prayers will loudly chant along with the *ardas*. It allows a performative, ritual social space for a communal utterance of memory, healing, and the reinforcement of historical narratives of violence. In addition to the *ardas*, the act of continuously reciting the name of the Guru, or *naam simran*, brings about a certain inner peace for some women in the colony, alleviating, at least temporarily, the pain associated with loss.

A number of authors have analyzed how forms of prayer can enable healing (Csordas 2002; Luhrmann 2013; Tomlinson 2004; Zhang 2016) and help women cope with grief and trauma. Religious healing, as an “elaborate and persuasive cultural performance” (Csordas 2002, 2) can bring about a change in the phenomenological conditions under which one experiences suffering and hardship. In order for healing to take place, however, a subject must be predisposed towards it and believe that the healing is working (Csordas 2002).

Forms of healing through prayer take place in the social space of the gurdwara. In a sense it is the gurdwara that provides a space for affective healing, where women’s bodies are linked to one another. This relationship between women and the gurdwara underscores the importance of this place as a healing place. For instance, when interviewing Amar Kaur, she discussed how she stopped going to the gurdwara for a while when faced with the death of a loved one and several other hardships. She stated that, after her son broke his leg, she herself sustained injuries, and her daughter-in-law broke her foot, she became superstitious about these negative events and began to attend prayers again. Growing up in a village, she found it easier to attend to the gurdwaras in

the evenings because it was not possible to travel there at night in the village due to safety reasons. I asked her what she received internally by going to the gurdwara. She replied, “I feel like my heart receives peace. If I don’t go then I feel like I have lost something, I don’t feel right. When I go to the Gurdwara, I feel at peace.”

Harnoor Kaur too, echoed the positive benefits that praying in the gurdwara brought for her. During one interview, while her granddaughters played around us, Harnoor Kaur outlined her complicated relationship to God and prayer. When I asked her how often she thinks about God, she replied,

HK: I remember God daily. I stay with God twenty-four hours a day, I keep God with me, because you know God right? God is with us in the times of pain and happiness. God is truly a part of us at all times. This is why, if we let God lead us, then God will keep us on the right path, keep us from bad people, bad talk, and eliminate enemies.

Harnoor Kaur further emphasized that God punishes everyone – those who commit crimes and those who don’t – and gives pain so that we remember God more. She stated that punishments were also given out once one died (“We will get it in the next life”). Harnoor Kaur’s emphasis on having to “endure” and “pay the repercussions” reflects her belief in karma.<sup>154</sup> When I asked Harnoor Kaur what she received from doing prayers, she replied *sukh shanti* (a happy peace). I continued this line of questioning, asking her what kind of peace. She replied, “I remember 100 things from home. I remember the past, I remember what I have endured, by doing prayers.”

KA: Meaning you feel calm.

HK: Hmm. Like if I said to you today I am not going to the Gurdwara, then that entire day will go badly.

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<sup>154</sup> When I asked her what she thought about souls, she said, “You don’t have a soul, it leaves your body in minutes, it’s just us who don’t know where it flies away and where it doesn’t. Our body stays here. No one looks ahead or back.” This viewing of the 1984 massacre and the resulting loss and trauma over the last 30 years as being an unavoidable part of karma was also echoed by Amar Kaur, as I discuss in the close of Chapter 3.

KA: You, what do they say... You get a blessing.

HK: Yes, I get *shakti* [power, strength, or energy].

KA: When you pay your respects [at the gurdwara]?

HK: Actually I have kept it at home too, so when my heart feels like it, I start doing prayers [at home].

### **Embodying Sikhism: The Five K's**

In addition to the gurdwara as a welcoming, female-centered space for women and the affective power of prayer, particular forms of embodiment also bring peace for the women in the colony. Through the act of becoming *amritshak*, or baptized according to Sikh rites, some of the women enacted a self-described closer relationship with God. Heema Bai mentioned to me that her whole family had, one by one, taken *amrit*, or the baptism ceremony; she had taken hers at Majnu Ka Tilla Gurdwara, a historical gurdwara located in North Delhi. It was her sister-in-law and her niece who showed her the path to God and being a baptized Sikh. She would take a daily shower at five o'clock in the morning, or during *amrit vela*<sup>155</sup>, and then head to the gurdwara in the mornings. Although she was baptized, Heema Bai had her nose pierced and she and her family were meat-eaters.<sup>156</sup> She did not know how to recite prayers, but she enjoyed the affective resonance of the call and refrain with the *granthi*; in the mornings the *granthi* would say a line of prayer and then the women would repeat it. "Wherever God is placed, that place is pure," she said about the gurdwara. Yet, for Heema Bai, being baptized was not only about going to the gurdwara. Being *amritshak* "brings peace," she said, and it means "to tell the truth." Heema Bai told me at times she would dwell on her fate. "God, what did I steal from you to

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<sup>155</sup> A time before dawn considered to be a holy time of the day among Sikhs.

<sup>156</sup> Both practices of piercing and eating meat are frowned upon by some baptized Sikhs. The issue of meat-eating in Sikhism, especially among baptized Sikhs, remains a source of debate.

deserve this?” she said, with her eyes and her hands turned upwards, looking at the sky.

Popular representations and performances of Sikh identity tend to be strongly masculinized. The 5 K’s in Sikh religious practice (unshorn hair, small comb, dagger, the wearing of a particular undergarment, and a steel bracelet)<sup>157</sup> have become hyper-masculinized (Axel 2001; Gell 1996; N. Mandair 2005; N.-G. K. Singh 2004).<sup>158</sup> The bearded and turbaned image of the Sikhs came to iconically represent the religion from historical events and the masculine “look” of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji. British imperial forces singled out Sikhs as subjects whose visual appearance was particularly significant due to martial race theories and ideologies of Aryanism (Gell 1996). This masculine Sikh identity has a historical basis, also affected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by colonialism, and Sikh elites themselves gave sanction to colonial views on Sikhism and Sikh practice. Sikhs accepted and adopted a masculine signature, which restricted the Khalistani Sikh body’s indefinite organization to an arena of “muscular piety” in part prescribed by coloniality (N. Mandair 2005, 39). This masculinist vision of Sikh practice has become so generalized that many Sikh women today who seek a more “egalitarian” model of Sikh life adopt the markers of Sikh identity associated with men, including an overtly martial aspect, further generalizing masculinized models.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> The “five Ks” or *panj kakaar* stand for *kesh* (unshorn hair, in order to make Sikhs visible), *kanga* (small comb worn in the hair), *kirpan* (dagger to fight injustice and defend one’s faith), *kaccha* (a type of undergarment representing moral restraint) and *kara* (steel bracelet representing integrity) (J. P. S. Uberoi 1996).

<sup>158</sup> Singh (2004) again finds feminist potential in these bodily symbols, arguing that the 5 K’s are meant to be a social practice and are concerned with forming an ethical citizen situated within an active religious, political and social world. Hershman (1974) in his psychoanalytical perspective on the meaning of hair (uncut hair is one of the 5 K’s), argues that hair is used as semantic form in Punjab. He discusses death rituals and widowhood as examples.

<sup>159</sup> See Cynthia Mahmood’s monograph on Sikh women and gender equality among Sikhs in North America (C. K. Mahmood 2000).

Personal religious symbols are related to the larger life experience of an individual and their institutional context (Obeyesekere 1981). The Five K's present themselves in a rather different manner in India than they do in the diaspora. Thus, as Obeyesekere cautions, we must infer meaning not only from the symbol itself but also from the people who use the symbol. Every Sikh woman in the widow colony that I met had uncut hair, generally combed and swept up tight into a bun placed at the middle of the back of the head.<sup>160</sup> It was more common for some of the men to cut their hair. From my understanding, it seemed that men who cut their hair would do so later in life, as there were few male toddlers or young children with short hair in the colony. Indeed, my shorter hair (long by Western standards) has been a point of contention in fieldwork. While younger women often admired it (my assistant, for example, would tell me I look better with my hair down and my bangs styled forward), older Sikh women, especially the devout ones, would tell me to grow it out or get rid of my nose piercing. Hair is an important symbol in Sikhism, holding ascetic value but also signifying sexuality (Hershman 1974).

Many of the women in the colony negotiate embodied women's identities in the plural. They have also partly broken away from a normative (in part, Punjabi) bodily codification of Sikh women's bodies. They engage in multiple codifications at once, rather than conform to what a normative Sikh woman's body looks like. Many of the baptized women in the colony wear colorful clothing (going against the common practice of widows and elders wearing pale colors or white), have their noses pierced, or wear bright jewellery. Among some, this reflects their Labana caste and their Rajasthani ethnic background.

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<sup>160</sup> Much has been written about hair in the South Asian context, outlining hair as a source of strength, a protector, and a symbol of Sikhism (Gell 1996; Hershman 1974; Mooney 2015).



We can see how, through the embodiment of Sikh symbols and bodily, affective forms of prayer in the social space of the gurdwara, women cope with the continuing confrontation of loss and trauma in their everyday lives. We see too how women have utilized the male-ruled space of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara for their own purposes and turned it into a sort of counterpublic. These employments of place, affective prayer, ritual, and forms of embodiment have allowed collective forms of memory-making that enable women to remember the past in ways facilitating healing. The Shaheedganj Gurdwara, then, helps women heal from their grieving as it provides a social space for affective prayer – prayer that is performed and shared with other women who have gone through similar hardships and traumas. The relationship between prayer as a performative social ritual, belief, and trauma, allows us to better understand how women in Tilak Vihar continue to cope with long-term grief. While women’s belief in God provides an explanatory ground for the happenings in their lives and allows them to situate their life experience and loss as karma, the gurdwara operates as a space for women. Performative prayers, in the form of ritual, form as a bridge between place and belief. Based on my conversations with women and observations of their practice in the gurdwara, we see how religious places such as Shaheedganj Gurdwara bring women together, how belief allows women to feel closer to God, and how social, religious rituals bridge places and belief. These relationships will be discussed further in the next chapter on commemorations.

## Chapter 5: Vessels of Remembrance: Gendered Commemorations in Delhi and Beyond

In this chapter, I argue that the social memory of the 1984 massacre and moments of connection and formations between Tilak Vihar and the transnational Sikh community hinge upon the place of the colony itself, ceremonies of commemoration in the colony, and the bodies of Sikh women who have been widowed. The Widow Colony, designated as a place for widows and their families, serves as a memorial site for the massacre, as do various configurations within it, such as the memorial photographs discussed below. This location also allows the Sikh diaspora to anchor their memories and create forms of memory-making based on a particular place. A focus on the sites of past violence provides insight into the politics of what is remembered and what is forgotten (Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci 2012; Gordillo 2004). In the colony, the main commemoration of the massacre involves the three-day memorial called *akhand path*, which involves an uninterrupted reading of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib from beginning to end.<sup>161</sup> This event takes place annually in November and helps connect the place of the colony with the transnational Sikh diaspora. The bodies of Sikh women in the colony are seen as “vessels of remembrance” in that the formation of Sikh diasporic identity vis-à-vis the 1984 massacre depends on the gendered representation of their bodies as vessels, or passive conduits, that unwillingly enable forms of transnational Sikh identity-making to take place.

As discussed in the introduction, both memory and commemorations are entrenched in discourses of power and affected by the sociopolitical and cultural confines in which they take place. Yet while memory evokes more personal or spontaneous forms of remembrance,

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<sup>161</sup> *Akhand paths* are often generally conducted during significant life events: the birth of a child, for example, or moving into a new house.

commemorations are a more collective, formalized and ritualized type of remembering that are enforced by states and institutions, and that thereby dictate which events (as opposed to others) are worth remembering (Connerton 1989). The decision about what events to commemorate, then, is affected by political and social discourses of power. In 2014, the DSGMC began construction of a memorial of the massacre at Rakabganj Gurdwara in Delhi, but this has yet to be completed at the time of writing. This means that as of 2016 no official, state-sanctioned memorial of the massacre exists.<sup>162</sup> If forgetting is a core condition and experience of modernity (Connerton 2009) the Tilak Vihar community has had to create its own social spaces to work against the forgetting of the massacre encouraged by the Indian state.<sup>163</sup> These sites of commemoration are exemplified in Tilak Vihar by the *akhand path* which takes place annually, but also on a more daily basis in the room in the gurdwara, open daily and year-round, that showcases photographs of those killed in the massacre.

### **The Social Life of Photographs**

Visited throughout the year by families, the photographs displayed in this room act as a form of commemoration that, through their stylized forms, honour the dead and provide a particular site for homage and the spurring of individual and collective memory. The photographs hold a further commemorative agency that is made clear during the *akhand path*, when the room takes on particular symbolic meanings, discussed below.

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<sup>162</sup> In Ghall Kalan village near Moga, Punjab, sculptor Manjit Singh has depicted the 1984 massacre by creating a gruesome sculpture of a dog picking at a human body, which has been deskinning from head to knees, lying on the ground (Tribune News Service 2016).

<sup>163</sup> It should be noted that this 'forgetting' and 'remembering' by the state is employed selectively; as discussed in Chapter 2, the massacre becomes a prominent topic during state and national election periods.



Figure 5.1 Stylized background in a photograph of a Sikh man killed in the massacre

Entering the small room to the right side of the entrance of the central prayer court, known as the *darbar*<sup>164</sup> hall, one is faced with photographs of those who were killed in 1984. The men in the photographs range in age, from portraits of children to the elderly. All of the men are wearing various head coverings commonly worn by Sikh men and boys, such as turbans or cloth covering their topknots, their faces frozen in time; some smile broadly whereas others' expressions are more neutral. The edges of their bodies have been stylized and softly blurred; the bodies themselves have been coloured, some black and white, while others are rendered in a gaudy technicolour. The backgrounds of the photographs are mostly solid, with some lightening of shade in the middle to form a halo effect. A few of the photographs have more stylized

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<sup>164</sup> *Darbar*: court, in this case referring to the central prayer room of a gurdwara, where the Guru Granth Sahib holds court.

backgrounds that have been edited in. One photograph depicts the slim face of a turbaned man in black and white against a bright blue background with white stars (Figure 5.1). Another shows the bust of a man against a grey background with a white fence, seemingly hinting at the existence of an afterlife.

Previous literature on photography, death and the family have focused on European and North American contexts (Batchen 2004; Drazin and Frohlich 2007; Edwards 1999; Halle 1993; Rose 2003; Seremetakis 1991) although there has been some work on this topic in Gambia, Iran and India (Buckley 2000; Flaskerud 2012; Pinney 1997). In his work on Indian photographs, Christopher Pinney argues that memorial images often have a set of rules that they follow – a certain hyper-reality, and a reworking or solidification of particular features (1997, 140). Indian memorial photographs are often coloured and enlarged from an original image. Photography studios take great artistic license in making memorial photographs, where they will use an original image (from a wedding, for example) and often change the background, overpaint, and edit the subject's facial features and/or clothing. Backgrounds are often used as spaces of exploration as well as a substitute for their original referents (Pinney 1997, 174). In a similar manner, the photographs of those killed in the 1984 massacre have been overtly stylized and altered to emphasize particular features and backgrounds. As Bourdieu has argued, “the taking of the picture is still a choice involving aesthetic and ethical values” despite the automatic functions of the camera (Bourdieu 1996, 6).



Figure 5.2 Photographs of men killed in the 1984 massacre at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

As a keen outside observer, the stylized nature of the images and their large numbers often made me to think about the possible histories behind each photograph. What circumstances preceded each photo being taken? And what circumstances led to such overpainted versions here, on this wall, alongside so many others? For the families of the boys and men on the walls, there are personal stories behind the photograph – the photograph was taken at  $x$  time, at  $y$  place. But to the outsider, at first glance, it is a commemorative marker of the collective event, especially because it has been placed alongside portraits of numerous other men who died by the same fate.

Personal histories in the photographs are condensed to small captions with the name, birthdate, and date of death of the deceased. Yet, affective attachments to various photographs reveal themselves in the everyday life of the room. After prayers, I would often enter the room for a few minutes. The room was quieter than the *darbar* hall and other parts of the gurdwara. It

had a hushed atmosphere that was further amplified by the diffuse light coming in through the small, curtained high window. Given the layout of the room, with a large panel in the centre one had to walk around, moving around the room often felt like a ritual circumambulation. This circular movement reminded me of walking in Harimandir Sahib, the Bangla Sahib gurdwara in Delhi, and of the path many take when doing *matha-thek* in the gurdwara.

Ingvild Flaskerud has argued that such material images may function as memory aids, which provide information that is already known to the viewer (Flaskerud 2012, 43). The images work to remind the viewer of the loss that occurred to those who use this space, yet they do so in a particular relationship to the violence. None of the images themselves portray violence in any way other than its absence, as the images of the dead are calm, almost saintly, providing strong juxtaposition to normative images of martyrs in Sikhism (see below). Yet these serene images, in an ironic fashion, themselves act as a signifier for a massacre.<sup>165</sup> The images have a dual temporality in that the violence of the massacre becomes visually erased, yet the portraits have been put into that place because of the massacre itself. They have power in that they engender felt effects on the embodiment of those that enter that place. Throughout the year, many women, for example, will enter the room and walk along the photographs until they reach the photograph of their loved one. Similar to how women approach the large, light-box picture of the Harimandir Sahib in the central hall (see Chapter 4), women will pause for a moment in front of the image, often caressing the photographs with their hand, as if they were caressing the face of the deceased behind the framed glass, before sometimes sighing and bring their hand to their eyes. Children and grandchildren too, will visit the room. Through such images then, we see how the

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<sup>165</sup> A photograph of the images at the gurdwara were used as the cover of Sanjay Suri's recent book 1984: *The Anti-Sikh Riots and After* (Suri 2015).

memory and iconicity of the past (whether lived through, or experienced vicariously) are sustained by objects of visual iconicity and places of performative rituals. It is not only the images that matter: it is their placement in this particular room and their integration of the everyday life (and indeed the photographs are visited on a daily basis by many) of the gurdwara that enable certain embodied forms of memory-making to emerge from this place. At some point, the images were selected, called forth from shelves or photo albums or storage by family members of the deceased, edited, framed, and put up on those walls.

The images offer a way of rooting, sustaining, and producing a collective memory through the materiality and iconicity of the images themselves, the place they are in, and the forms of devotional practices by women and families who interact with them. They offer a visual and material reciprocal relationship to widows and others who have either lived through the massacre or are relatives of the deceased. Fiona Parrott writes that such images “are not static displays that define the remembrance of the deceased as a one to one relationship of looking between mourner and picture of the deceased, in the present and of the past, but dynamic assemblages, objects cognizant of obligations, judgments, love and respect, that mediate relationships between the living” (Parrott 2010, 132). As discussed earlier due to the nature of the massacre, few material remains of the dead were received by affected families. In some way, the photographs in this room counter that material loss by visualizing the bodies of those men when they were still alive.





Figure 5.3 Photographs and oil lamp at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

Most of the women I spoke to had photographs of relatives killed in the massacre in their homes. It is in fact common in households across North India to keep photographs of deceased relatives in living spaces. In some Hindu rituals particularly, photographic portraits hold an elevated status and are used in puja rooms in rituals as signs of elders, often adorned with garlands of flowers or a red mark on the forehead, known as a *tilak*.<sup>166</sup> These intimate forms of portraiture and their placing underscore the importance of the role of the dead in ritual, religious practice, and everyday life in the colony. Thus, photographic memorial portraiture allows traces of the dead to endure (Pinney 1997). Memorialization of the dead through photographic practice in the home has been noted to be a gendered phenomenon involving women in European contexts in that women are often responsible for organizing the domestic space and thus

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<sup>166</sup> A *tilak* is a mark on the forehead made by the application of red powder or paste, often worn by Hindus in India as a marker of religious practice.

memorial practices within it (Rose 2004a; Rose 2004b), while others have argued that domestic practice involving photographs have been much more flexible and include men (Miller and Parrott 2007; Parrott 2010). In a similar fashion, photographs, also tended to by the male gurdwara administration, have been placed in a small room at the back of the darbar hall housing an oil lamp, which is continuously lit (Figure 5.3).

In the transnational visual lexicon of the 1984 massacre created by Sikh people in the diaspora, it is common for journalistic pieces to depict images of widows of the massacre holding images of the dead ---something that in fact was also common in Latin America among victims of state terror, for instance in Argentina and Chile.<sup>167</sup> The widows are photographed holding photographs in a visual representation of loss, devotion, and intimacy. Such photographs aid in the translatability of affect to spatial proximities and aid in binding space and “arresting time itself” (Pinney 1997, 168). They underscore not only the significance of the dead to the subject holding the photograph but also the significance of the subject to the dead, thus visualizing a strong intimacy between them, one that gives overtones of a shared temporality and spatiality. Indeed, photographs of women holding photographs have become key visual markers for the massacre and have emerged across various types of printed material. But the main collective form of commemoration that takes place in the colony is *the akhand path* – the annual memorial event where the continuous recitation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib is performed and the dead are remembered.

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<sup>167</sup> See Roniger and Snajder for more on memory in the Southern Cone region (Roniger and Sznajder 1999). See Gordillo for more on memory as related to state terror in Argentina (Gordillo 2004).

### Three Days in the Life of a Colony: The *Akhand Path*

In official commemorations that are state-sanctioned, “culturally coded time and space” is held and placed within an “integrative frame” of a state narrative (Kistner 2010, 622). But this integrative frame also operates in commemorations that are not state-centered, like the *akhand path*. Commemorations work on producing official memories, and commemorative ceremonies are collective, formalized, and take on specific defined forms. Commemorative practices secure political power and go from “meaning to manipulation” (Olick and Robbins 1998, 108).<sup>168</sup> As an addition to private, personal cognitive and affective forms of memory, commemoration calls forth specific aspects of the past. Connerton argues that commemorative narratives are not told in the past tense but in a tense of the metaphysical presence (Connerton 1989). Doing so allows the past to continually exist in the present moment. The *akhand path*, likewise, also turns “1984” into an event that is made to continually exist in the present.

If commemoration promotes participation, as Casey (2000) argues, in our case it promotes participation in a particularly *gendered* way, both in the colony itself, in the *akhand path*, and in diasporic forms of remembering. Commemorative ceremonies help create this social, gendered identity which is made possible by master narratives of remembrance. The performativity of the *akhand path* ritual enables this social memory to be brought forward and

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<sup>168</sup> Much work on commemoration has crystallized around particular events, such as the Holocaust (Brog 2003; J. Jacobs 2010; Kelso and Eglitis 2014; Kidron 2010; Maier 1988; Milton and Nowinski 1991; Stewart 2004; Moses 2012; Stier 2003; Young 1994), the Rwandan genocide (Fox 2014; Hitchcott 2009; Ibreck 2008; Ibreck 2010; Nyirubugara 2013) and confronting the memory of atrocities elsewhere (Buruma 2002; Coombes 2003; Nino 1996; Roniger 1997; Rousso and Hoffmann 1994). Other works have discussed the relationship between commemoration and history (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012) and commemoration via museums and memorials (Bennett 1995; Chopra 2013; Denton 2014; Gillis 1994; Paliewicz and Hasian 2016; Young 1994) Contestations of official narratives of history and struggles for memory too are an area of exploration (Kistner 2010; Sandage 1993; Wagner-Pacifici 1991; Zarkov 2014).

sustained in addition to individual memories of the massacre. In these gendered forms of commemorative and community memory, women who have survived the massacre, I argue, are turned into what could be called “female vessels of remembrance” while men who were killed in the massacre have become “martyrs” (*shaheeds*) in both local and transnational discourse. The bodies of women also enact forms of remembrance through the bodily actions of *seva* during the commemorations. The very place of the colony and the bodies of Sikh widows function as material objects, and subjects, acting as conduits through which a normative transnational, diasporic Sikh identity become solidified.

The *akhand path* is a prayer service in which the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) is continuously read in its entirety on the first weekend of November. Preparations for the annual event in 2013 were largely carried out by the gurdwara management, and the widows of Tilak Vihar had little involvement in the planning or setting up until they are directed by the management to use flour that they have been given to help prepare the free, communal meal, known as *langar*. Their contributions, largely relegated to cooking, were thus highly gendered. Some of the children in the colony however, who had been taking kirtan classes at the gurdwara, prepared to sing *shabads* during the event in the days before it began.

Many of the widows looked forward to the event, and the days before the *akhand path* held an air of expectation, as women would chat about the forthcoming event in the gurdwara with each other after their prayers. As annual events of this scale are few in the colony,<sup>169</sup> they provide a space for socializing and remembrance to which the residents largely look forward.

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<sup>169</sup> Given the proximity of the Diwali holiday to the Delhi massacre with regards to the date (Diwali takes place between mid-October and mid-November), it is not celebrated with nearly as much gusto as other Delhiites celebrating, and in some cases, and by many, not at all.

Throughout the *akhand path*, the residents of Tilak Vihar socialize with each other at the back of the *darbar* hall, the downstairs space used for serving meals, outside while taking off their shoes and washing their hands and feet before entering, or while putting on their shoes on the way out. The three days provide a welcome temporary respite in the dogged temporality of the hardship of everyday life in the colony, paradoxically carrying within it both a mournful and a festive atmosphere of remembrance. It was over almost as quickly as it began, and everyday life continued. For a brief period, the participation in this formalized commemoration aided in alleviating individual grief through collective mourning and commemoration, and one could feel this in the demeanors of the women in the days following the event. Although at the outset this is a sad occasion, the event also brought about a formalized space in which to socialize and connect with the community.

I attended the *akhand path* that took place between November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 at Shaheedganj Gurdwara. The gurdwara, normally shabbily furnished, had been heavily decorated for the occasion. In the room with the memorial photographs, purple curtains were placed flanking the window. Inside the *darbar* hall, several Sri Guru Granth Sahibs had been placed alongside the central Sri Guru Granth Sahib for the reading.<sup>170</sup> Airy, transparent floral curtains had been placed around the holy texts. A red sign with a gold border and gold lettering above the central text carried a line in Gurmukhi meaning “I have seen all places, but none can compare to you [God].”<sup>171</sup> Clean, fresh blue sheets had been laid on the floor, and blue string lights had also been placed in the central hall. Televisions had been placed flanking the central

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<sup>170</sup> The multiple Guru Granth Sahibs indicates that multiple families donated and sponsored simultaneous readings of the Guru Granth Sahib.

<sup>171</sup> The line was written in Punjabi script, the Roman English is: *Dittay Sabhay Thaav Nahi Tudh Jayhaya.*

Sri Guru Granth Sahib which were playing back the recording of the videographers in real time. Specialized audio equipment was brought in for better acoustics. More experienced and well-known *ragis* were also present, which brought about better acoustics for their musical recitations.

In the morning, Bhai Chetan Singh, the religious custodian and administrator discussed in Chapter 4, began the *akhand path* by performing a prayer at the back of the hall where the Sri Guru Granth Sahib was kept, with a small group of men standing behind him. Normally in neutral colours, Bhai Chetan Singh had worn an orange turban for the occasion. He wore a slightly see-through top in which the outline of his undershirt and his kirpan was clearly visible. The main SGGS was brought out, with someone waving a whisk made of yak hair (known as a *chaur sahib*)<sup>172</sup> behind it in a back-and-forth sweeping motion, and placed in the centre of the room. Bhai Chetan Singh then placed a floral garland around it. By nine o'clock in the morning, the women's section of the gurdwara was full and women began flowing into the men's side due to a lack of space. The congregation on the morning of the first day was mixed in terms of age and gender, although there were many more adult women than men. I remembered noticing this discrepancy and thinking a macabre thought: that women were all that were left in that particular generation. Although I had expected that the women would wear paler colours or white, some were wearing clothing<sup>173</sup> in a range of colors, while the male *ragis* wore white. Some women sat at the back of the gurdwara facing the SGGS. A woman with a *kanga*<sup>174</sup> tied to the hilt of her *kirpan*<sup>175</sup> came to sit beside me, and I noticed another woman following along with the prayers

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<sup>172</sup> The act of waving the whisk is seen as a form of *seva*, known as *chaur seva*.

<sup>173</sup> The women wore *salwar-kameez*: baggy, tapered pants and long tunic, with a *chunni*, or scarf.

<sup>174</sup> *Kanga*: wooden comb, one of the 5 K's.

<sup>175</sup> *Kirpan*: small dagger, one of the 5 K's.

on her smartphone. Many young men began to engage in more overtly physical movements than the women – walking around inspecting the room, emphatically waving the whisk of yak hair over the scripture, or placing ceremonial orange cloth<sup>176</sup> on the *ragis*. Some of the women sang along as they sat. Along with the reading of the SGGS, *shabads* were performed in both morning and evening programs, usually followed by an utterance or ovation to rouse spirits,<sup>177</sup> where someone would yell out the familiar refrain, “Whoever utters, the following phrase shall be fulfilled”<sup>178</sup> and the crowd would shout back, “Eternal is the timeless lord!”<sup>179</sup> After the *ardas*, the program for the evening was discussed. The evening prayer<sup>180</sup> would start at six o’clock, with the singing of *shabads* following from half past six until seven o’clock in the evening. A sermon would take place by Bhai Chetan Singh from a quarter after seven until about eight, followed by an hour of hymns by *ragis* from Amritsar. It was announced that afterwards a new program of recitation of poems<sup>181</sup> would follow from nine to ten o’clock, and all were encouraged to attend. The final announcement was that Saturday’s morning program would culminate with a free, communal meal<sup>182</sup> served in the hall downstairs at 9 o’clock.

After the morning program, I took a rickshaw to my cousin-brother’s home in neighbouring Ganga Ram Vatika and returned for the evening program. The evening prayer started at six o’clock sharp. A man fiddled with acoustics in order to rid the room of the echo coming from the mic. Ten minutes later, a camera crew was brought in, and the two televisions were placed diagonally flanking the Guru Granth Sahibs, their screens depicting in real time

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<sup>176</sup> These are called *saropas*.

<sup>177</sup> This is known as a *jakara*.

<sup>178</sup> *Bole So Nihal!*

<sup>179</sup> *Sat Sri Akal!*

<sup>180</sup> Known as *Rehras Sahib*.

<sup>181</sup> Known as *kavita var*.

<sup>182</sup> Known as *langar*.

what was being recorded, reflecting the congregations' image back at them. The room was mostly overrun with children at this time, some of whom would run up to stare at their reflections on the screens. A young man, possibly disabled from polio and who I had not seen before, crawled down the center of the hall to *matha thek*. At the same time, the elderly caretaker<sup>183</sup> of the gurdwara came up to me and began a conversation. He began with saying, "I make a humble request"<sup>184</sup>, and asked me for money for his grandson's school fees. Unsure of how to respond, I told him I would speak to Bhai Chetan Singh about it. He then brought his grandson to meet me, a young child who wore a yellow head-covering over his topknot, who chirped, "*Sat sri akal, Madame-ji!*" After the evening prayer, a children's group, comprised of five girls in cream Punjabi suits and a boy dressed in a white tunic and pants and a blue turban, and their teacher sitting behind them, began singing a hymn by Bhagat<sup>185</sup> Kabir, (God Created Light Of Which All The Beings Were Born).<sup>186</sup> At around seven o'clock, a group of seven male adolescents began to sing more hymns. I could hear some fireworks go off although I was unsure if they were related to the *akhand path*. More adults filtered into the room, with a few women going up to the front to sweep the whisk over the Guru Granth Sahib. At around 7:30 pm, Bhai Chetan Singh performed a sermon along with a hymn (The rays of light merge with the sun, and water merges with water),<sup>187</sup> followed by a sermon by Bhai Mehtaab Singh from Amritsar, from 8:00 PM to 9:00 PM. As I had gotten lost previously, I was apprehensive about being able to find a rickshaw to take me back to Ganga Ram Vatika and so I left shortly after.

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<sup>183</sup> Known as the *sevadar*.

<sup>184</sup> "*Main benthi karna.*"

<sup>185</sup> *Bhagat* means devotee. In Sikhism, Sufi Islam, Hinduism, and the Bhakti tradition, a *Bhagat* is a holy man who whose teachings lead humanity towards God. Kabir was a 15<sup>th</sup> century *bhagat* whose writings are included in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

<sup>186</sup> "*Awwal Allah noor upaya, kudrat qe sab bande.*"

<sup>187</sup> "*Sooraj kiran miley jal ka jal hua Raam.*"





Figure 5.4 The congregation at the *Akhand Path*

The Saturday program was similar to Friday's, with the recitation of the scripture continuing along with *kirtan* programs in the morning and evening. The program was read out for the “great martyrs:”<sup>188</sup> evening prayer would begin at six o'clock, followed by hymns by local *ragi* Bhai Santokh Singh Ji from six thirty to seven. Bhai Fateh Singh from Bangla Sahib would then do *kirtan* for an hour beginning at seven o'clock, followed by Bhai Manpreet Singh Kanpuri from eight to nine in the evening. Finally, a *kirtan* group would provide more hymns from nine to ten o'clock. The speaker from the gurdwara committee requested that everyone come on time, after completing their daily household duties.

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<sup>188</sup> *mahaan shaheedaan.*

## Male Martyrdom

As argued by Connerton, commemorations share with other rituals the fact that they are expressive performances, yet they differ in that they often work under a master narrative of remembrance, a particular representation of memory and a collective adaptation of the past (Connerton 1989). In this case, a crucial component of the master narrative of remembrance of 1984 is that of martyrdom. A sermon on martyrdom was delivered during the morning program by a *ragi* I was not familiar with. During his sermon, he said,

A *ghallughara* [see Chapter 2] happened, wherein many Sikhs became martyrs (*shaheeds*). An extreme *ghallughara* happened. By the government of our own country. In the country we live, in the same country we claim is our freedom... [F]or our religion, whoever suffers and dies for our religion, whoever become finished, they are called martyrs. The death of a martyr is the life of our religious community (*quom*). Whichever religious community can bear martyrs, they will never die. They will continue to live in high spirits.. Because the spilled blood of the martyr gives new life-force to the religious community. Religious communities come close to extinction, but those who can give birth to a martyr, inside that community that blood will give a new life....Those mothers who lost their sons, those sisters who lost their brothers, those parents who lost their children, those sisters who took care of small children, gave them life, took care of the families, allowed them to re-enter society and made them into something, those sisters too are blessed...the Guru (God) is always with us when we come [it] and give our humble prayers. Whatever we do, the Guru reaches you, is always with you. So to those martyrs, those who were affected by the *ghallughara*, you remember them every year, and you give a freshness to the memory of their lives. So come, let us give this hymn in that memory, “(Stop your wavering, O crazy people!).”<sup>189</sup>

Notions of *shaheedi*, or martyrdom, have had a large role within Sikh discourse and other religious traditions and have played a central role particularly in historical and contemporary

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<sup>189</sup> This shabad, known as “*dagmag chaad re man baura*” found in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and is written by Bhagat Kabir. The lines preceding the title given by the *ragi* at the akhand path read: “O people, O victims of this Maya, abandon your doubts and dance out in the open/ What sort of a hero is one who is afraid to face the battle? What sort of satee is she who, when her time comes, starts collecting her pots and pans? ||1||/ Stop your wavering, O crazy people!/ Now that you have taken up the challenge of death, let yourself burn and die, and attain perfection” (Bhagat Kabir, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 38, in Khalsa 2000a).

Sikh discourse (Axel 2001; 2005; 2008; Baixas and Simon 2008; Fenech 2000; C. K. Mahmood 1997; N. Raheja 2014). Martyrdom in Sikh discourse, specifically, long predates the events of the 1900s.<sup>190</sup> Narratives of Sikh history have often focused on two specific events of martyrdom, those of Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji and Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, which, along with many other sociopolitical and historical factors, led to the formation of the *Khalsa* by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. A popular cultural trope which partly solidifies Sikh identity, depictions of *shaheedi* can be seen across varying Sikh religio-cultural contexts, whether at home or amongst diasporic spaces, and they inhabit places such as gurdwaras, retail stores, the internet, calendars, posters, paintings, and gift items (Fenech 2000). The historical discourse on martyrdom amongst Sikhs and the Khalsa, therefore, can only be understood within a larger context of martiality and the larger historical military labour market in North India (cf. Dhavan 2011; Kolff 1990; Murphy 2015; Syan 2011).<sup>191</sup> These ideas of martyrdom and persecution were nurtured further by events

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<sup>190</sup> The origin of the word *shaheed* (martyr) means “witness” in Arabic, or one who testifies on behalf of the Prophet Mohammad. The term has come to denote a witness in the general religious sense of sacrificing your life in order to act as a witness to your faith.

<sup>191</sup> Sikh militancy evolved from a gentry movement to one focused on political sovereignty during the early modern period of the 1400s to 1700s (Syan 2011). Peasant communities in precolonial South Asia achieved upward social mobility through military means, accompanied by the adoption of elite warrior behavioural norms from Mughal and Rajput rulers. By 1699, multiple warrior identities were present in Punjab. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a shared martial culture dominated contemporary conceptions of politics for warrior communities (Dhavan 2011, 139). Notions of honour and masculinity had deep roots in Punjabi rural traditions and helped shape ethnic identity in Punjab for several decades. These formations led to the inclusion of martiality in conceptions of Sikh identity. Dhavan has argued, for example, that these discourses on martial ethics draw “from a larger pan-Indian cultural ethos rooted in notions of social hierarchy” (ibid 2011, 46). This joining of the martial and the devotional within Sikh discourse has persisted in contemporary times (Murphy 2015). These historical factors and more contemporary re-inscriptions of masculinity in Sikhism during and after the colonial period, through British martial race theory (where Sikhs were one among a range of “martial races” that were identified by the imperial administration), the Singh Sabha (a Sikh movement which emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century interested in reviving the teachings of the Gurus) and contemporary sociopolitical events, have led to contemporary discursive formations around martiality, masculinity and martyrdom. The Singh Sabha’s efforts to assert a particular form of Sikh identity led to a usage of the rhetoric of martyrdom of both *shaheed* as witness and martyr in contemporary usage (Fenech 2000, 220). The Singh Sabha movement, in its attempts to

such as Partition, Operation Blue Star, the Khalistani movement and the 1984 massacre.

Martyrdom, or persecution in order to uphold the tenets of Sikh faith, has gone on to occupy a crucial position in Sikh communities both in Punjab and abroad amongst the Sikh diaspora, centered on descriptions of unjust killings, martyrdom, and bodily torture.

The discourse of martyrdom was heavily inscribed for the rest of the *akhand path*. I arrived early in the morning on Sunday, the last day of the service. By eight o'clock in the morning, the room was packed full of people and many lingered outside. I sat in the back to gain a better vantage point from which to see the proceedings, and it was there that I met and chatted with Harnoor Kaur. After some morning announcements, a *ragi* from Bangla Sahib performed hymns for an hour. During his kirtan, the *ragi* continued the theme of martyrdom, stating that “the martyrs have not gotten justice.” He carried on discussing the massacre by stating that, in 1984, people were taken out of their homes and tires were placed around their necks, and that the SGGS was burned. He stated that the congregation would do prayers for the dead, in the feet of the Guru. Then, *ardas* was performed for the closing of the *akhand path*.<sup>192</sup> In the *ardas*, the gurdwara committee member stated that in 1984, the government had committed a mass murder, and that was why they were praying today. He then read out the names of families that had donated to the services, followed by a common statement made during the *ardas* asking God for forgiveness if any mistakes had been made during its recitation. This was then followed by loud ovations from the crowd. Several *hukams*<sup>193</sup> followed, one for each reading of the Sri Guru

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define Sikh orthodoxy by delineating Sikhs from Muslims and Hindus, stressed martyrdom and heroism as two important facets of Sikh religious identity (Baixas and Simon 2008).

<sup>192</sup> Known as a *bhog*.

<sup>193</sup> A religious decree or message from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib which provides guidance, which is chosen at random by the reader.

Granth Sahib that was performed. A few announcements were then made about the program for the rest of the day (including one about women and *seva*, below). After the close of the reading and one hour of *kirtan*, a section of morning prayers<sup>194</sup> were performed and further *ardas* was led by Bhai Chetan Singh. In the second *ardas*, Bhai Chetan Singh stated that this prayer was being done for the “state-sanctioned murder.” He also declared, “for those Sikh men and women who witnessed these sacrifices – for them too we pray. In memory of the Sikh men and women, from their families who did prayers and donations, for them too we pray.” He continued on to say, “we put our witnessing [of the massacre] in front of the face of the Guru.” He followed with reciting a popular phrase written by Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji emphasizing how God gives freedom from captivity<sup>195</sup> before continuing the rest of the prayer. He also said that the families who donated to the offering of *parshad*, would be blessed with good health. This was followed by more *ardas*, which mentioned famous Sikh women: Bibi Nanaki Kaur (sister of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji), Mata Ganga Kaur (wife of Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji), and Mata Gujari Kaur (wife of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji). It is telling that, aside from Bibi Nanaki Kaur, the two famous Sikh women mentioned were wives of Gurus who had also become martyrs. This was then followed by the usual *dohra* (a form of self-contained rhyming couplet used to break scripture into parts) and a final *hukam*.

The emphasis on martyrdom that has become a central component of Sikh memory and a Sikh transnational identity often involves a *male* martyrdom that implicates the notion that political violence predominantly affects male Sikh bodies globally. This gendered notion

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<sup>194</sup> *Anand Sahib*: Part of morning prayers, written by Sri Guru Amar Das Ji, which comprise part of the Five Banis or prayers read daily by baptized Sikhs.

<sup>195</sup> *Ghai bahor/bandi chhor /nirankar dukhdari*: A phrase written by Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji, meaning: The Restorer of what was taken away/the Liberator from captivity/The Formless Lord/The Destroyer of Pain (cf. Khalsa 2017).

marginalizes women's experiences of political violence. What is striking, then, is how discourses of martyrdom have unfolded in Tilak Vihar. During the three-day memorial prayer service, *shaheedi* was brought up constantly by the male ragis and the male administration of the gurdwara. Yet, this male-centered usage of martyrdom is infrequently used by the widows or families of the deceased themselves. The concept of martyrdom denotes a purposeful death that ensures the longevity of the religious community, as outlined by the *ragi* above. In contrast, during my fieldwork I noticed that survivors of the massacre and their kin conceive of the killings as pointless, serving no particular purpose to the Sikh religious community. This was of great interest to me, as in my previous research in the Punjab I found that the Khalistani (militant Sikh) women I interviewed did view their husbands as martyrs. Khalistani women in Amritsar were encouraged by their community to view the deaths of their husbands not through mourning, but through the pride of being the widow of a *shaheed*. In contrast, widows in Delhi have been fixed by national and transnational discourse as life-long mourners regardless of their current marital status. Thus, while men are turned by this commemoration into martyrs, women have been positioned as vessels of remembrance, that is, as bodily but largely passive conduits of memories in larger discourses of history largely produced by men. This inscription of remembrance on the bodies of women became clear to me during the prayer service when discussions of *seva* came to the fore.

On Saturday morning, before the beginning of the day's program, one of the gurdwara committee members announced that flour was being sent to homes and that the women of Tilak Vihar were expected to participate in *seva* and use the flour to make the *rotis* that are given out during the free communal meal.

Yesterday evening we announced that we were to give 400 kg flour to peoples' homes. We sent 400 kg of flour, and how much was made into bread? ... We sent 400 kg and out of that only about 100 kg of the flour was made and 300 kg came back.... So just like how we come to listen to hymns, at the same time we should do *seva* with our hands and with the happiness of the Guru. We should do this because this too is our contribution. Tomorrow as we know the *akhand path* will end – I don't have to tell you; it is going to be very crowded. The 3<sup>rd</sup> day, like every year is very busy, there is not even enough room to put your foot down, and people have to sit outside. We request you: tonight you will receive flour in your homes. Tomorrow after morning hours and your morning bath please make the bread and bring them to the gurdwara so people can come and have their meal and leave happy.

The speaker continued discussing the importance of *seva* by telling a story about Sri Guru

Gobind Singh performing *seva* by giving people water to drink, before stating,

Without *seva*, your hands and feet are useless. So in the evening, in every home flour will be sent. We request that you make *rotis*. We've made arrangements for tonight, but those *sisters and mothers who want to make their hands successful*, you can come do *seva* tonight, otherwise we will send flour to your homes [emphasis mine].

These messages about the importance of *seva* continued on Sunday morning, when the committee member further admonished women for not making enough *rotis*. He stated,

Many of you didn't take the flour. So now, I request you, that those of you want to do the *seva* of making bread, there is an area behind the gurdwara where we have made a space to make them. We need to make bread so that the congregation will be able to eat. If some of you don't want to make them, that's fine. We can't force you. But scripture says, "Those who do *seva* are successful." Those who are people of God will do this. If your heart is into it, take out 10 minutes, 15 minutes. *Whichever Bibi* [respected term for adult woman], *sister, mother can do this, should – but if your mood isn't into it, I can't force you* [emphasis mine].

It is domestic female labour, through the cooking and preparing of food, that allows the *akhand path* to take place successfully. Without the bodies of the women and their actions, in this case using their hands to cook, the communal meal at the end of the service would not be possible. Thus, the annual *akhand path*, as a form of commemoration, relies on female labour and the hands and bodies of the Sikh widows to take place. With the gurdwara committee's constant reminders for women to participate in *seva*, we see how women's bodies and their

actions become the embodiment of the memory of the massacre. Through their *seva*, which was so heavily prescribed by the male administration, women's bodies become vessels of remembrance, particularly remembrance of those conceptualized as martyrs. Thus, the memory of the massacre during the *akhand path* becomes gendered in ways that both enhance the status of men as martyrs and relegates the widows as subordinates that are recurrently told to engage in domestic and "feminine" forms of labor such as preparing food. Murphy has argued that *seva* has become a way in which Sikh women have been written into Sikh history, "especially local traditions of historical representation centered around material culture" (Murphy 2004, 164). Historically, famous women in Sikhism have been remembered in gendered ways through material objects and forms of *seva*. *Seva* then, becomes an ethical field of action which allows the participation of women, as women (Murphy, 2004, 106) In this instance, I want to expand on this idea and argue that the usage of material objects for remembrance can extend to the very body itself. The usage of gender here, then, becomes tied to a larger ethical project which posits women as carriers of memories. In other words, it is their very bodies that allow this annual commemoration. Their bodies as vessels of social memory but also as laboring bodies that are assumed to belong in the kitchen. This is clear in the continual admonishment of the women by the gurdwara administration to engage in *seva* by cooking for the congregation. This gendered enforcing of an official memory of 1984 extends far beyond the local. This placement manifests itself in national discourse, through media and politics particularly, as well as transnationally through the same means with the added conduit of youth diasporic activism.

Local media coverage on the *akhand path* was heavy on the last day of the service. By late morning on Sunday, a few media outlets had arrived in Tilak Vihar. In addition to the large crowd, several journalists and some camera crew began interviewing some family members.



They decided to conduct interviews in the memorial room with the photographs of the deceased acting as a backdrop, thereby engaging with potent visual cues of the violence and women's relationships to those who had passed. I witnessed one of the widows becoming extremely agitated and upset on camera, almost as if on cue, only to return to a calmer state as soon as the cameras turned off.



Figure 5.5 Journalists interviewing widows at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

### **“1984” as a Transnational Commemoration**

I argue that debates about naming violence are political in nature as they work to hide the role of the state in actively promoting or tolerating massacres. As discussed in Chapter 2, while such naming debates can detract from examining the actual elements of violence, an analysis and problematization of terms used to describe violence allows us to see political ideologies underpinning language.

Commemoration of the 1984 violence spreads much farther than Delhi alone, for it is caught up in a transnational diasporic network of Sikhs, their identities, communities and lives. To say that “1984” has held an important place in the Sikh diaspora is an understatement. Indeed,

“1984” plays out as the main historical contemporary trope among Sikhs worldwide, eclipsing even Partition, which has had the most significant impact on normative diasporic discourses of community identity and memory. From *akhand paths* in Delhi, to yearly candlelight vigils in Vancouver, hip hop nights in Toronto, and demonstrations in London, “1984” is remembered, in particular formations, with particular effects. Acts of remembrance, whether experienced firsthand, or experientially, have created a transnational discursive network which have had long-term impacts on the creation of a pan-Sikh social, religious and political identity

In an unpublished article that puts forward a feminist analysis of diasporic remembrance among Sikh youth in Canada, I have argued with Michael Nijhawan that Sikh youth often express critical analyses of the violence of 1984 through masculinist and emotive content (Arora and Nijhawan, n.d.). We observed, in particular, how members of a Sikh youth group in Toronto, the Sikh Activist Network (SAN), stood in a central building of York University to distribute information about a memorial event (entitled “Remember ’84”) to students passing by. The foyer of this particular building, Vari Hall, is constructed so that there is a large round open area that serves as a busy thoroughfare, and a mezzanine provides clear sightlines to this area. A female student and a male student stood in the center of the building’s foyer, their bodies and clothing made to resemble victims of violence. The young man’s long hair was disheveled and worn down and uncovered, giving the impression that his turban or *dastar* had been taken off forcibly. The young woman wore a *salwar-kameez*, and both young adults’ clothing was marred by soot and ripped in places. As I viewed the students from the building’s mezzanine, I thought of how they looked uncannily similar to photographs of victims and survivors of the 1984 massacre I had seen across various media. The students too, were silent, recalling what I imagined as silence immediately after the massacre. While some passersby continued walking with a cursory glance

towards the “victims,” other students looked confused and stopped in their tracks to figure out the scene before them or to speak to the SAN members and ask questions. Still other students snapped photographs on their cellphones. We argue that the affect and performed aesthetics of the two youths mimicked similar images of the violence of 1984 circulating online. The young male’s disheveled hair and dirty clothing also had an uncanny similarity to images circulating of Bhindranwale after he was killed by state forces during Operation Blue Star, while the young woman’s clothing and appearance resembled the many circulating images of women who had survived the sexual violence of the 1984 massacre. We argue that such performances, which tap into gendered concepts of female and male victims of the 1984 violence, whether Operation Blue Star or 1984, serve as a way to immediately call attention to the violence to an audience that has limited, if any, first-hand experience of the events. We suggest that, in part, such performances reproduce mythologizing idioms of *shaheedi* through a necromantic aesthetic (cf. Klima 2002). At the same time, such performances serve to tap into deep constructions of identity and community commemoration.

Many popular articulations of the violence in 1984 rest heavily upon framing Sikhs as victims of a genocide, or *ghallugara*,<sup>196</sup> which has over time become memorialized through

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<sup>196</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the term *ghallughara*, although literally meaning “great attack,” is in popular parlance used to denote both ‘genocide’ and ‘holocaust.’ Genocide is at once both a transnational process inherently tied to our postcolonial era and modernity, and an intensely localized process involving specific actors. The discourse of genocide, including the term’s definitions, are couched within an international legal framework. Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that the categories of definition in the Genocide Convention (religion, race, class) are too discrete and ignore other categories of definition such as sexual orientation, tribe, caste, rural/urban divides, etc (2002). Genocide has been described as a process which works to “eradicate a category of people” (Roth 2002, ix–x), an event where “the State—or fractions of it with access to the State apparatus—leads organized crime and “[instrumentalizes] categories and history to organize violence against specific groups of its own population in order to achieve hegemony” (Violence 2007). Genocides have identifiable beginnings (Scheper-Hughes 2002, 368) and “brings extraordinary events—killing neighbors and kin—within the realm of everyday life”

visual images of Operation Blue Star (Shani 2010). These events begat a feeling of “mass trauma, when Sikhs around the world felt that a boundary of the community’s sacred and political identity had been transgressed” (Axel 2005, 129). As discussed earlier, the ways in which communities name violence reveals underlying beliefs about the nature of this violence. The usage of the words a “pogrom,” “genocide” and “holocaust” in this context partly stems from a tendency for diasporic Sikh (and some India-based) constructions of the violence in 1984 to use the holocaust as a master narrative. These usages can be seen in a variety of contexts among North American Sikh communities. For example, in the play *Kultar’s Mime*, the Holocaust is used as a framework and a symbolic reference to explore the lived experience of violence, here through the eyes of a child, Kultar, evoking notions of victimhood. *Kultar’s Mime* picks up one of the disturbing features of 1984 discourse: that Sikhs are a “proud and noble” people who did not deserve this. This implies that there are people who deserve to suffer, or be demeaned. In the play, the character of the young boy is so traumatized by the massacre that he is only able to mime with his hands the atrocities he has witnessed.<sup>197</sup>

The discourse of the 1984 massacre as a pogrom or genocide in the political arena has extended to Canadian politics. The 1984 Genocide Petition<sup>198</sup> spearheaded by Sikh for Justice, a

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(Violence 2007). The difference between genocide and other forms of political violence, in popular parlance, and within international human rights frameworks, seems to be one of scale. Indeed, one genocide scholar describes the difference between genocide and other forms as a sustained effort to destroy the other (Fein 1993). Kenneth Roth, one-time director of Human Rights Watch (an organization that has written extensively about violence against Sikhs,) writes, “Of the many abuses that might be studied, there is none so grave as genocide” which is “our era’s most heinous crime” (2002, ix). Thus, well-known violence in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Cambodia have all been described in terms of genocide, as well as more obscure (in the international arena) violences, such as the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh, or the Australian genocide against aboriginal peoples in the 20th century, for example.

<sup>197</sup> The play is based on Das’s article on children of the massacre, entitled “Voices of Children” (Das 1989).

<sup>198</sup> Available at: <http://www.1984yesitsgenocide.org>. Last accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

non-profit human rights advocacy group with offices in New York and Toronto, was read in the House of Commons by Liberal MPs Andrew Kania and Sukh Dhaliwal in June 2010. Former NDP leader Jack Layton released a video statement<sup>199</sup> in November 2010 which was played at a 1984 memorial event organized by the Sikh Activist Network as well as a formal statement regarding the 1984 violence in Amritsar.<sup>200</sup> Former NDP leader Thomas Mulcair also issued a formal statement in which he named the violence as a “pogrom.”<sup>201</sup> More recently, discussions of naming violence in the diaspora again came to the fore with the discussion of the UBC “Blood Donation to the Sikh Nation” by Vancouver journalist Douglas Todd (Todd 2016).<sup>202</sup> Jagmeet Singh, NDP MPP, also brought forward a motion in June 2016 in the House of Commons calling on the Ontario Government to formally recognize the 1984 massacre as a “genocide” perpetrated against Sikhs; it was by rejected by the Liberal Government. At the time of writing, these efforts are ongoing. Notably, the above statements were all timed to coincide with anniversaries of the Delhi massacre and Operation Blue Star. In addition to the political arena, a number of Sikh interest groups, ranging from smaller-scale activist groups to incorporated charities, have emerged over the years in the diaspora in areas where Sikhs have chosen to immigrate, such as the Jakara Movement, Sikh Activist Network, Sikh Coalition, SALDEF (Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund), Sikh Federation UK, World Sikh Organization, Ensaaf, etc, which have been involved in asserting identity, issues of human rights and recognition.

Internet and communication technologies are particularly suited to commemoration as

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<sup>199</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R00zXRh811E>. Last accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>200</sup> Available at: <http://www.ndp.ca/news/statement-ndp-leader-jack-layton-remembering-1984>. Last accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>201</sup> Available at: <http://www.ndp.ca/news/statement-new-democrat-leader-thomas-mulcair-tragedy-november-1984-india>. Last accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>202</sup> Copeman (2004) has discussed how blood donation is a common feature among Indian commemorative political rituals.

they can foster transnational forms of community, and activity online forms “virtual commemorative crevices” which fit neither Khalistani or state narratives of the violence of 1984 (Devgan 2013). Websites discussing 1984 often frame the violence as a human rights violation, focusing on trauma and testimony (Devgan 2013). These “memories” of the events of that year, whether experienced directly or not, are kept alive through the medium of the internet, allowing graphic photographs of Operation Blue Star, an attacked Harimandir Sahib, and other forms of violence against Sikhs and/or Sikh militants to be accessible to a younger generation of Sikhs who did not experience the violence firsthand (Shani 2010).

In previous research Michael Nijhawan (York University) and I conducted, we explored, through personal narratives and an examination of memorial events, media content, and artistic practices, how Sikh diasporic youth articulations of identity did not fit neatly into larger frameworks of Canadian migration and citizenship which position the Sikh body, particularly in a post 9/11 world, as gendered, racialized, and a potential threat.<sup>203</sup> The dissenting voices of Sikh youth in Canada are grounded in experiences and analysis of past and present violence including the 1984 massacre and 9/11, which affect racialized experiences in everyday life (Nijhawan and Arora 2013). The Sikh youth’s fears of persecution and violence against people mistaken for Muslims in the post 9/11 climate makes them revive the memory of the traumatic experiences of 1984.<sup>204</sup> Many Sikh youth, living in a hostile socio-political climate, subsequently

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<sup>203</sup> During fieldwork, I had a short discussion with one of my neighbours at a party, a wealthy *sardar* (Sikh male with turban and beard), who was married to a white woman from California. He asked if I had seen the comedy videos on Punjabi/Sikh culture made by Toronto youth; I informed him I had, and that I had published on it. He said he found the videos funny because the young men were bearded but were acting like their mothers (i.e., gender-bending). He then said, “Although, I don’t know why the fuck you would wear a full beard if you live in Canada.”

<sup>204</sup> Since 9/11, many Sikhs have been, attacked, or subject to other forms of racial profiling in North America; in the USA, some have been killed. In August of 2012 for example, a white supremacist used a gun to kill six people and wound four others in a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

become re-traumatized. Thus, the politics of remembrance links Sikhs together, providing a space to reflect on their experiences, and varying configurations of violence and trauma form individual and collective figurations of memory (Verma 2006).

Brian Keith Axel argues that the significance of circulating images of martyrdom via technologies such as the internet mark out what he calls, borrowing from the work of Benjamin and Kant, the “diasporic sublime” – “the constitution of diasporic subjects by means of an irruption of what has not been lived into a moment that comes to be lived” (Axel 2005, 143). Martyrs, through the act of becoming martyrs, bear witness to an experience that cannot be known, and touches the void, or, in Kantian terms, noumena (Axel 2005). In other words, martyrs, in their death, bear witness to that which cannot be known through lived experience. The discussion of martyrdom earlier in this chapter also applies to the diasporic imaginary. The gruesome, circulating images of Sikh martyrs, in gurdwaras (and by extension, in print, and via internet and other technologies), form a type of “massacre art,” as Cynthia Mahmood notes, which “assert themselves in a room; they are impossible to ignore, and intrude in conversation, meditation, and everyday activities” (C. K. Mahmood 1997, 189). Conceptualized in normative Sikh discourse in Punjab, Delhi, India, and in the transnational Sikh diaspora, the figure of the martyr is defined through such images as one who chooses death rather than renouncing their Sikh faith, one who chooses to sacrifice, and one who becomes a witness both to faith and death (Axel 2005, 144). The image of a Sikh martyr is an overwhelmingly male image, which Axel argues has been twinned with the image of gendered *amritdhari* Sikhs in the seventeenth century (Axel 2005).

The trope of the “Sikh widow” as passive victim is the flipside of this gendered commemoration and emerges repeatedly in Indian national and transnational discourse

surrounding the 1984 massacre. But this gendered discourse extends beyond the violence of 1984, having historical roots in Sikh her/histories (discussed above) and in larger discourses around gender and the Indian nation state. Das (2007), for example, discusses how the bodies of women take a particular meaning of “citizen as sexed” during and after the violence of Partition vis-à-vis the state, where the state’s interest in women’s well-being was not premised upon them being subjects in their own right but had more to do with their reproductive and sexual roles.

The attitude of the diaspora towards charity and toward widows as passive victims of violence has been undoubtedly influenced by mainstream North American views of charity towards “the Third World.” In my experience, claims about 1984 and the Sikh widows’ experiences by youth and youth groups based in North America and Europe are often based on community hearsay, such as the claim that “Sikh widows have to walk a mile to get water.” In August 2014, for example, a young Sikh from England, “DJGurmz,” posted the following on the charitable giving site *JustGiving*, in response to the viral ALS Ice Bucket Challenge of 2014:

Hi Guys as many of you may have worked out by now I'm not really up for the #ALS#IceWaterBucket Challenge. ... As many communities around the world don't have access to #Water or #CleanWater never mind wasting it on these challenges... However in the nature of good will and for a good course [sic] I ACCEPT SomeSikh Guy 's nomination and will be collecting #RainWater to fulfill my challenge.... Therefore I shall be donating to the #Seva84 and also I request that you all follow suit and donate to Seva84. *[Name] Singh & Seva84 team will do #JaalSeva [water charity] in the widows colonies. I have heard countless stories how Sikh widows have to walk mile to get water and are often refused clean water and/or are abused in the process* (Emphasis mine) (“Remembering Shaheed Singhs-Kaurs” 2014).

In another incident, I received a phone call from a young Sikh woman in Calgary who said that she was going to India for a couple of weeks and “wanted to help the widows.” She had called to seek my advice as to how to do so. I discussed with her how many widows in the community actually find short-term foreign presence, whether by researchers, media persons,



volunteers, or politicians, at times disruptive and/or intrusive. We can see from these examples how the trope of 1984 is articulated in diasporic conceptions of charity and how stories of the Widow Colony as a place inhabited by powerless victims enable such attitudes. The residents of the colony thus become bounded by territory through the dynamics of Sikh diasporic aid (Arif 2008). Given the prevalence of this overarching discourse, it is common for well-meaning Sikhs abroad who are aware of issues around the 1984 massacre to want to participate in some sort of charitable giving. This impetus, however, is rarely made in a sustainable way. Bhai Chetan Singh for example, remarked that many gurdwaras abroad raised money “for the victims of 1984” but he didn’t know where that money went. At the very least, he said, the Shaheedganj Gurdwara did not receive many overseas donations. Donations in kind, too, caused problems. I had heard from a few members from Nishkam and the gurdwara that it was common for foreign Sikhs to come to Tilak Vihar with material goods such as blankets. They would then distribute them along the main road. This would create tensions within the community as those that lived facing the main road and on the lower floors were able to receive the goods due to proximity. Those that lived further away, facing away from the street or on higher floors, would not be able to receive such donations. Distrust regarding foreign Sikhs was a common theme expressed throughout my interviews by those living in Tilak Vihar. Amar Kaur’s son, for example, made it clear that foreigners, including myself, “should put their money where their mouths were,” so to speak. Many expressed frustration that, after experiencing such a massive trauma, which has continuing, traumatic implications for everyday life, they were continually confronted with the meddling of local and diasporic Sikhs, whether researchers, media persons, writers, or ordinary people interested in doing *seva*. In a sense, the lives of women and families living in the colony have become signifying fodder for diasporic articulations of identity, yet, aside from a handful of

works, long-term engagement by the Indian or diasporic scholars with regards to researching the aftermath of 1984 among survivors is almost non-existent.

Positioned within such circulating discourses and affective dispositions, then, it becomes apparent that the women of the widow colony, their very bodies, and the colony itself, function as memorial sites. The widow colony and the bodies of women function as conduits through which a normative Sikh identity becomes solidified and officially commemorated. In addition, 1984 as a larger metaphor for the trauma endured by Sikhs writ-large becomes its own temporally bounded memorial site. 1984, then, becomes a larger concept which has specific gendered dimensions rooted in both place (the colony) and time (the year of 1984). As I have argued above, however, this latter tendency runs the risk of ignoring legacies of violence and the very real struggles faced by families in Tilak Vihar over the last three-plus decades.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Women in Tilak Vihar perform memory everyday through their religious lives and their movements about the colony, and in part, this is dictated by the circumscribed place they are in. The massacre in Delhi, which followed a long period of unrest in Punjab, created long-term ramifications for not only women in the colony, but Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere whose minority status was further solidified as a result.

Even though official, unofficial, and lived narratives and experiences of violence can point towards a shared understanding of the massacre of 1984, the understanding of this violence can still remain incomprehensible for those who have lived through it. Reminiscing and reaching back into the past brings about shifting narratives according to a number of factors – who is in the room listening, or avoidance or embracing of particular memories, for example. Thus, inquiries establishing the absolute truth of these narratives are misguided. Rather, we should recognize that they point towards the nature of memory and the recounting of violent events.

The place of the colony itself has been prescriptive for the women I worked with; it is both born as a result of violence and has allowed various forms of violence (poverty, health problems, caste divisions, tensions within kinship networks, etc) to continue and embed themselves in the lives of women and their families. One wonders then, if the emphasis on the 1984 massacre and on those who live within the spatial confines of the Widow Colony would exist if the colony itself did not exist or existed in a different formation. The particular place of the colony, for example, allows survivors to be easily located by the media, journalists, politicians, researchers such as myself, and diasporic Sikhs wanting to engage in modes of charitable giving that are often poorly executed.

The Widow Colony has afforded women a place, and therefore an opportunity, to slip into gendered, performative modes of widowhood and suffering. Many of the women, for example, did not move out of the confines of the neighbourhood in their everyday lives unless necessary for work or perhaps special occasions such as a family function or religious pilgrimage. As such, for some of the women, especially elderly widows with limited mobility and young women and girls, the majority of their daily lived experiences are played out within the confines of the neighbourhood.

On the other hand, the Widow Colony, as a particular place, brings about certain forms of healing. A few of the women I interviewed stated that they did not wish to go back to where they lived in 1984 and revisit their homes and areas where the violence happened, finding it too painful. Jhansi Kaur especially was adamant about not visiting. Perhaps the colony works to safeguard women from further trauma in the sense that the place of the colony is not directly associated with the horrors that occurred during those few days in October and November of 1984. By living in the colony, they are removed from particular places, homes, and neighbourhoods that are tied to their experience of the massacre.

The gurdwara, too, is a significant place of healing because of its location in the Widow Colony. Forms of prayer and the place they are done in, the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, are used as tools to cope with the violence in Sikh widows' lives in Tilak Vihar, both historical and contemporary. This religious practice can take various forms, at times private, at times public, and always embodied. I emphasize here how women negotiate within the patriarchal confines of how Sikhism is administered in contemporary times. Not only do women carve out a place of their own by using the gurdwara as a social and religious place, they also engage in shared forms of healing within it, as evidenced by the affective nature of practice that takes place there. I have

tried to emphasize that Sikh women's religious practices and beliefs are fluid and often do not fit into prescribed views of how Sikh women should behave, embody their gender, and engage in religious practice.

Religious practice in the form of commemorations also play a big role in the life of the community. The Shaheedganj Gurdwara, in its particular material configurations as a place in the colony, allows certain forms of gendered memory-making, to flourish. The annual memorial prayer service not only upholds popular discourses around Sikh martyrdom; it does so by positing women as gendered, widowed signifiers of this martyrdom, and women are expected to bear this legacy in certain ways. This relationship between commemoration and Sikh women's bodies in the Widow Colony also extends into the transnational Sikh arena, where diasporic Sikhs tend to construct limiting narratives of women who have experienced loss as a result of the massacre. The year of 1984, then, is fixed as a temporal trope upon which discourses of transnational Sikh identity become solidified.

### **Continuing Legacies of Gendered Violence**

As my research presented in this dissertation and various other artistic and scholarly avenues show, the 1984 massacre is very much alive in the subjectivity of people living in the colony as well as in the transnational networks of the Sikh diaspora. For women and their families who survived and suffered losses in 1984, debates around the violence continue. In September 2016, for example, a number of survivors of the violence attempted to meet Deputy Commissioner<sup>205</sup> Ravi Bhagat in Ludhiana, Punjab; they were demanding new homes, more monetary compensation from the government and job reservations. They were turned away at the

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<sup>205</sup> A Deputy Commissioner is a mid-ranking position within the IAS, or Indian Administrative Service.

door and attacked by police using police batons (Hindustan Times 2016). In Chandigarh, Punjab, five women fasted in front of Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, threatening to commit suicide by self-immolation if their demands were not met. The women stated that, like the women in Delhi, they too deserved compensation and that there was too much bureaucracy surrounding receiving aid (Tribune News Service 2016). Back in New Delhi, in the same month, the Delhi AAP government continued to clash with the BJP-led central government over reimbursements for increased compensation the state government recently provided (The Indian Express 2016b).

In addition to compensation, issues surrounding legalities continue to unfurl. While women in Punjab were demanding compensation and the state and central governments were arguing over compensation reimbursements, India's CBI filed an investigation report in mid-September 2016 regarding Congress politician Jagdish Tytler's role in the violence (as discussed in Chapter 2, they had earlier exonerated him) (Firstpost 2016). Shortly thereafter the Delhi court pressed the CBI for delaying requests for information from the Canadian government, where the son of a witness who was reportedly bribed by Tytler resides (Sikh24 Editors 2016).

More than three decades after the 1984 massacre occurred, feelings of fear, insecurity, and a sense of injustice continue to haunt Sikhs in Delhi who survived the violence. Due to the inactions by the Delhi administration, the military, the Delhi police, and bystanders, witnesses, and mobs, an overwhelming aura of fear and terror was created which further allowed the machinery of the massacre to operate. This technology of terror - feelings of terror, fear, and a sense of being unsafe - tapped into longstanding remnants of emotions and memories associated with the violence of Partition and the Emergency. It is crucial, therefore, for those involved in the

violence, including state actors such as the police and politicians, to be brought to trial, ensuring a speedy handling of cases in a nation known for its slow justice system.

As women are often prominent among the victims of “communal” attacks (such as the Gujarat 2002 or Muzaffarnagar 2013 violence), it may seem unusual that more women were not killed. Men, however, were targets in the 1984 massacre for a variety of reasons. There was a long-standing animosity towards Sikh men arising out of the Punjab crisis and an older, historical narrative regarding Sikh masculinity. As well, Sikhs across India in contemporary times are stereotyped as dominant, brutish, vulgar, exploitative, unintelligent, and well-off (many Sikhs, particularly Khatri and Jat Sikhs, are a part of the prosperous middle class and upper classes). Indeed, for land-owning Jat Sikhs in particular, it is because of their wealth, without the educational and urban acculturation that is seen to accompany such wealth, that positions them to be viewed as vulgar. The massacre also had long-reaching economic effects as Sikh men who contributed wages to support their families were targeted (Sethi and Kothari 1985; Jarnail Singh 2009). (This is not to say, of course, that women were not involved in economic activities through their double and triple burdens of domestic labour, reproductive labour, and formal and informal market labour).

The gendered nature of violence, of course, is not unique. The experiences of the Sikh women in the Widow Colony invite comparison to other parts of the world. A different but comparable example is that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) in Argentina, whose children disappeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the military dictatorship. The protests of these Argentinean women heavily employ their status as grieving mothers, and this movement has become “a site through which social memories are transmitted” (Burchianti 2004, 134). In a similar manner, the experiences of Sikh widows, their

memories, and their bodies themselves, become sites that unwillingly embody social memories for Sikhs transnationally. Both groups of women have a “theatrical visibility” (Peluffo 2007, 80); In Delhi, we see this visibility play out in the political arena to this day. More importantly, this performativity is spatially anchored. The protests by the Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo evolved into “a ritual by means of repetitions at precise intervals” (Bondrea and Duda 2014, 427) carried out in the plaza in downtown Buenos Aires that is next to the government palace, and therefore the symbol of the Argentine state. The place of the protests became through their actions a symbol of the violence inflicted by the state on the disappeared. As a result, new meanings were associated with that particular place (Bondrea and Duda 2014). Similarly, the women in Tilak Vihar also employ rituals in a particular place that over time became the ‘Widow Colony’. And this place has been produced as now symbolic of and synonymous with the 1984 massacre.

However, there are some important political differences between the two groups. The mothers in Argentina formed a women-led political organization that openly confronted a repressive state and reclaimed public space as theirs. In contrast, most of the Sikh widows have not engaged in activism at all and their lives largely take place within the spatial enclosure of the Widow Colony. While women in Argentina took to the streets as activists protesting state terror and then became highly politicized activists, internationally renowned for their cause, many of the women in the colony prefer to remain apolitical and keep themselves away from rallying for justice for the massacre. While the Argentinian mothers were non-religious, with some criticizing the Catholic Church and others openly atheist, religious ideologies weigh on Sikh widows powerfully. At the Widow Colony, much of these women’s subjectivity is inseparable from their belief in God and karma and their bodily performance of religious practices.



Throughout this dissertation, I have conceptually framed the long-term ramifications of violence as its “legacies.” I use this term to denote not only the felt presence of violence of events past, but also the transmission of these experiences throughout successive generations through oral histories and collective commemorations. The term “legacy,” I believe, implies a sort of “handed-downness” or transmission from generation to generation that other terms, such as after-effect or aftermath, do not. It also taps into comparative discourses that examine the long-term, ongoing, traumatic effects of state violence in other places, such as the legacy of residential schools and colonialism in Canada and its effects on aboriginal women (cf. De Leeuw 2007; B. Jacobs and Williams 2012; Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton 2009). What the usage of legacy, in the plural, shows then, is that these transmitted experiences have both material remnants, such as the Widow Colony itself, and multiple, embodied, felt effects on the everyday lives of those who have survived and their kin.

### **Feminist Ethnography: Strengths and Limitations**

The ethnographic material I have presented, and the everyday experiences and narratives of women I have focused on in this dissertation, bring a lived gravity to the theoretical and conceptual ideas surrounding violence, place, gender, practice and memory I outlined in the introduction. My research reveals how Sikh women are produced by and produce themselves through religious practices, the politics of their surrounding spaces, discursive formulations, and embodied memories. And the diversity of experiences I have covered undermines the idea of “Sikh women” as a singular subject with a singular inherent identity. Given the popularity of tropes of “religious extremism” in the mainstream media (Puar 2007) and the constant shifting migration patterns of the Sikh diaspora elsewhere in the globe, situating my ethnographic findings within transnational discourses on religion and religious conflict allows a more nuanced

and heterogenous picture of Sikh women's lives. Given, too, the salience of religious violence in India facing Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, and others, this research also seeks to contribute to the critique of essentialist notions of communal and religious identities in South Asia and beyond by exploring what it means to be a "Sikh" at all, particularly among women whose husbands were murdered solely because of their religion. Sikh women's practices of mourning, their inhabiting of grief, and their embodied, gendered religious practices point towards understanding the body as a relational being wider than its physical boundaries. The legacies of violence which span over thirty-two years point towards the importance of studying the long-term ramifications of such events within anthropologies of violence.

I was born many thousands of miles away from Delhi on another continent, and I am privileged in many respects compared to my interlocutors. I felt a certain amount of proximity to them due to our shared background as Sikh women, and this closeness particularly manifested itself when speaking Punjabi or Hindi and praying together in the gurdwara. But I cannot certainly claim to understand their experiences. Like other second-generation immigrants, I have witnessed the continual erosion of the Punjabi and Sikh cultures and practices I am embedded in. Coming from a family that identifies as Sikh and growing up as a Sikh woman in Vancouver have brought about experiences of racial aggression, both overt forms and microaggressions, that have had a lasting impact. As the daughter, sister, and aunt of turbaned Sikh men and boys, I have witnessed, particularly, overt forms of racism against them, ranging from being treated as exceptions at airports to being bullied in school for their long hair. As a daughter, sister, sister-in-law, and aunt to Sikh women, I have witnessed how the women and girls in my family have been discriminated against in the workplace and how they have dealt with the academy's ivory tower. I too have encountered racism; the number of racial slurs that have been thrown at me

growing up as a racialized minority have been too many to count, and these experiences increased in the volatile aftermath of the Air India Flight 182 tragedy as well as post-9/11. In my teenage years I felt a sense of embarrassment at my racialized self and family life, and I cringe now to think of the various ways I tried to embody whiteness. My name has been mispronounced for as long as I can remember, and other experiences of racialization within academia are prevalent – a sense of alienation, for example, amidst discussions about how to study ‘different’ cultures as an outsider, when I did not consider myself as one. Although I therefore understand what it is like to be a religious minority, my experiences are completely different than the women in Tilak Vihar as the racism I have experienced coming from White Canadians clearly has different dimensions than prejudices that Sikhs have faced by the Hindu majority in India. I have not witnessed the massacre of loved ones nor have I gone through anything remotely comparable, and I come from a completely different socioeconomic class, with a privileged citizenship and academic background.

Working within violent contexts affects how we subjectively experience the field and our learnings from it. This hit home for me in the multiple losses of my own suffered throughout my PhD program – the death of my father, my paternal aunt (*Poua-ji*) and two uncles (my *Phuppha-rji* and *Masa-rji*). These losses intersected with health issues I encountered in the field - dengue fever, and later, typhoid, among other issues. As anthropologists and “vulnerable observers” Ruth Behar (1996) argues that we must work through our own emotional entanglements and involvements with our areas of research; indeed, after my mother became a widow, for example, I understood more intimately the stigma attached to widowhood in the Punjabi culture within which I live.

Kamala Visweswaran's work on feminist ethnography as failure has aided me in thinking about my fieldwork experience in Delhi and my position as an anthropologist of colour. She writes that, as an anthropologist, she was not sure if she "chose" to work on India; what led her to fieldwork was in part her already being inscribed as "Indian" (Visweswaran 1994, 108). In the same manner, my work on Sikh women's lives in the aftermath of violence does not feel so much like something I chose as something that seemed to have been inscribed on me already.

Visweswaran argues for a nuanced understanding of ethnography as a type of "feminist failure"- in methods, representation, and epistemology - stating that even feminist ethnography "propagates a sanctioned ignorance" (Visweswaran, 1994, 99) By this, she means that feminists can run the risk of continuing to posit women as "women" rather than as complex, multifaceted subjects constituted by a variety of different factors – class, race, sexuality, and so on. She argues that it is not that feminist ethnographers do not recognize the importance of these factors, but that we can be at a loss to represent them. She proposes that we suspend the belief that we can completely identify and understand other women and their life experiences and instead that we work within this tension between knowing and representing (Visweswaran 1994). In the same manner, given the methodological issues I identified in the Introduction, I recognize both the limits of the work presented here, as well as its strengths.

Potential avenues for further research abound. Regarding the residents of the colony in particular, it would be fruitful to engage in research with those born in the generation after the 1984 massacre and explore the continual impact of violence and its aftermath on them, for example. Also, multi-sited ethnographies of communities that have lived through similar violent events in South Asia and beyond would allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the commonalities in legacies of violence and point towards avenues of healing. During a discussion

with Nishkam staff members, they indicated that they would be interested in a summary of major issues faced by those living in the colony and any programming recommendations I might have. This document serves a small purpose in that it lays out the precarious lives and everyday realities of those living in the colony, and as such I hope it is useful in this manner.

At a methodological level, I hope I have unfolded a narrative of what it is like to engage with women as a feminist ethnographer and anthropologist, one who maintains some ethnic, gendered, and religious affinities with the community she works with. I hope that my research will contribute to the literature on violence, space, gender, and memory, and to the nascent work on gendered Sikh religious practice. I hope, especially, that I have done justice to the women of Tilak Vihar and made women's accounts of violence in India more visible in the public arena.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Funeral Ceremony of the Sikhs

#### Article XIX - Funeral Ceremonies.

Taken from the Sikh Rehat Maryada, or Code of Conduct. (“Official Website of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Sri Amritsar – Sikh Rehat Maryada in English” 2016).<sup>206</sup>

- a. The body of a dying or dead person, if it is on a cot, must not be taken off the cot and put on the floor. Nor must a lit lamp be placed beside, or a cow got bestowed in donation by, him/her or for his/her good or any other ceremony, contrary to Guru’s way, performed. Only Gurbani should be recited or “Waheguru, Waheguru” repeated by his/her side.
- b. When some one shuffles the mortal coil, the survivors must not grieve or raise a hue and cry or indulge in breast beating. To induce a mood of resignation to God’s will, it is desirable to recite Gurbani or repeat “Waheguru”.
- c. However young and deceased may be, the body should be cremated. However, where arrangements for cremation cannot be made, there should be no qualm about the body being immersed in flowing water or disposed of in any other manner.
- d. As to the time of cremation, no consideration as to whether it should take place during day or night should weigh.
- e. The dead body should be bathed and clothed in clean clothes. While that is done, the Sikh symbols - comb, kachha, karha, kirpan - should not be taken off. Thereafter, putting the body on a plank, Ardas about its being taken away for disposal be offered. The hearse should then be lifted and taken to the cremation ground; hymns that induce feeling of detachment should be

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<sup>206</sup> Available at: <http://new.sgpc.net/sikh-rehat-maryada-in-english/>. Last accessed: January October 10, 2016.

recited. On reaching the cremation ground, the pyre should be laid. Then the Ardas for consigning the body to fire be offered. The dead body should then be placed on the pyre and the son or any other relation or friend of the deceased should set fire to it. The accompanying congregation should sit at a reasonable distance and listen to kirtan or carry on collective singing of hymns or recitation of detachment-inducing hymns. When the pyre is fully aflame, the Kirtan Sohila (prescribed pre-retirement night Scriptural prayer) should be recited and the Ardas offered. (Piercing the Skull half an hour or so after the pyre has been burning with a rod or something else in the belief that that will secure the release of the soul - kapal kriya - is contrary to the Guru's tenets). The congregation should then leave. Coming back home, a reading of the Guru Granth Sahib should be commenced at home or in a nearby gurdwara, and after reciting the six stanzas of the Anand Sahib, the Ardas, offered and karhah prashad (sacred pudding) distributed. The reading of the Guru Granth Sahib should be completed on the tenth day. If the reading cannot, or is sought not to, be completed on the tenth day, some other day may be appointed for the conclusion of the reading having regard to the convenience of the relatives. The reading of the Guru Granth Sahib should be carried out by the members of the household of the deceased and relatives in cooperation. If possible, Kirtan may be held every night. No funeral ceremony remains to be performed after the "tenth day".

f. When the pyre is burnt out, the whole bulk of the ashes, including the burnt bones should be gathered up and immersed in flowing water or buried at that very place and the ground leveled. Raising a monument to the memory of the deceased at the place where his dead body is cremated is taboo.

g. Adh marg (the ceremony of breaking the pot used for bathing the dead body amid doleful cries half way towards the cremation ground), organized lamentation by women, foorhi (sitting on a

straw mat in mourning for a certain period), diva (keeping an oil lamp lit for 360 days after the death in the belief that that will light the path of the deceased), pind (ritual donating of lumps of rice flour, oat flour, or solidified milk (khoa) for ten days after death), kirya (concluding the funeral proceedings ritualistically, serving meals and making offerings by way of shradh, budha marna (waving of whisk, over the hearse of an old person's dead body and decorating the hearse with festoons), etc. are contrary to the approved code. So too is the picking of the burnt bones from the ashes of the pyre for immersing in the Ganga, at Patalpuri (at Kiratpur), at Kartarpur Sahib or at any other such place.

## **Appendix B: Ardas, English Translation**

Taken from SikhiWiki, Encyclopedia of the Sikhs (“Ardas English Translation - SikhiWiki, Free Sikh Encyclopedia.” 2016).<sup>207</sup>

Having first remembered the One God, think of Guru Nanak, then of Angad Guru and Amar Das and Ram Das; may they help us! Remember Arjan, Hargobind and holy Har Rai. Think of the blessed Harkrishan, whose sight dispels all sorrows. Remember Teg Bahadur, and the nine treasures shall run to our homes. May they all assist us everywhere. May the Tenth King, Guru Gobind Singh, the protector of the faith, assist us everywhere.

Blessed, blessed, O Khalsa Ji, is the Guru Granth Sahib, the Light of all. With the light of the Guru in your heart, call on God!

Wahe Guru!

The Five Beloved Ones, the four sons of the Tenth Master, the Forty Liberated Ones, and all the other righteous, steadfast and long-suffering souls who stood their ground in the face of tyranny and unrightousness: think of their deeds and call on God!

Wahe Guru!

All those men and women who, keeping the Name in their hearts, rose in the amrit vela to remember and merge with the One; who shared their earnings with others; who defended those who could not defend themselves; who stood fast through all the tests of time and space; who saw others' faults but overlooked them and served them anyway; think of their deeds, O Khalsa Ji and call on God!

Wahe Guru!

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<sup>207</sup> Available at: [http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Ardas\\_English\\_Translation](http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Ardas_English_Translation). Last accessed October 10, 2016.

Those who allowed themselves to be cut up limb by limb, who had their scalps scraped off, who were broken on the wheel, who were sawn in half or flayed alive, but who never gave up their faith and never betrayed their own soul, but remained steadfast till their last breath, think of their sweet resignation, O Khalsa Ji and call on God!

Wahe Guru!

Meditate on all the places blessed by the touch of the Gurus' feet. O Khalsa Ji, call on God!

Wahe Guru!

Now let the whole Khalsa offer our prayer together. Let the whole Khalsa remember the Naam.

As we think of Him, may we feel completely blessed.

Wahe Guru! Wahe Guru! Wahe Guru!

May God's protection and grace extend to all the bodies of the Khalsa, wherever we may be.

May the Lord's glory be fulfilled and His will prevail. May all our homes and endeavours be blessed with success. May the sword of God assist us. May the Khalsa always triumph. May our Sangats, flags and Gurdwaras abide for ever and ever, May the kingdom of justice prevail.

May we be blessed with the sight of the Holy Harimandir Sahib and the sip and dip of it's holy pool of Nectar.

May all Sikhs be united in love.

May the hearts of the Sikhs be humble, but their wisdom exalted in the keeping of the Lord, O Khalsa Ji, say that God is Great!

Wahe Guru!

O true King, O beloved Father, we have sung the sweet hymns, we heard Your life-giving Word and have meditated on Your many blessings. May these things find a loving place in our hearts

and serve to draw our souls ever closer to You. May all the silent prayers of our hearts be fulfilled by Your grace.

Save us from lust, wrath, greed, pride and attachment; and keep us always and only attached to Your Lotus Feet.

Grant to all of Your Sikhs the gift of Sikhi, the gift of long hair, the gift of faith and confidence in You, the gift of reading and understanding Your Gurbani, and most of all, the gift of the Holy Name

O kind Father; O loving Father, By Your grace we spent the night in peace and happiness; and we rose to meditate on You and listen to Your Holy Word. Grant that we may always do what is right according to Your Will.

Grant us light and understanding so that we may act in Your will at each moment.

We offer this prayer in Your presence, O beloved Guru:

Forgive our mistakes and help us to keep ourselves pure.

Let us be in the company of only men and women of love, so we may always remember the Name in their presence.

O Nanak, those who know their True Identity ever live in ecstasy and excellence.

Through the Power of Your Bani, may the whole world be blessed to live in this way.

Wahe Guru Ji ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru Ji ki Fateh!