

The Digital Story of 1984: Diasporic Sikhs and the Mediated Work of Memory and Emotion

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The story of the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 is caught between the dominant narrative of the Indian state and mass media, and the counternarrative of the militant movement for a separate state of Khalistan. Beginning in the early 2000s, however, there has been a shift from these polarized accounts and a section of Sikhs in the diaspora are telling a more multi-layered, complex and critically informed story of 1984. Sikhs in the diaspora are doing memory work by using spaces on the internet to articulate new interpretations of 1984. In the process they are creating “crevices,” or fractures, in dominant accounts. Here I discuss how Sikhs are constructing a narrative of the events of 1984 while doing the work of emotion, communicating feelings of loss, sadness and shame. I draw on website analysis and interviews and focus group discussions with diasporic Sikhs in North America and show how the digital story of 1984 constructed by members of the community is challenging “feeling rules,” or breaking down “feeling walls.”

Introduction

In June 1984, the Indian army under the leadership of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi invaded the holiest of Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple or *Darbar Sahib*, in the Sikh-predominant north Indian state of Punjab, killing thousands of pilgrims, including the controversial Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers.¹ Following closely on the heels of this attack, codenamed Operation Bluestar, Prime Minister Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. This precipitated the organized, state-backed mass massacre of Sikhs in India’s capital city, New Delhi, and other parts of North India lasting from the evening of October 31 through November 4, when more than 3,000 Sikhs died. 1984 was the first state-sponsored sectarian massacre of a religious minority in India.² Sikhs keenly experienced the sacrilege and destruction these events brought in their wake but lacked a social space to express their feelings. More broadly, “1984” became a shorthand, symbolizing the tensions between the Sikh community and the state as well as state-inflicted civilian atrocities and abuse in Punjab during that period. It became a taboo subject for the community members in India overshadowed by state-created and mass media circulated stories and Sikh militant voices.

Public discourse about 1984 is caught between dichotomous politicized narratives: the first, from the state,³ that assumes “Hindu” identity, drawing a simplistic association between the majority Hindu community as the “rightful

proprietors” of India⁴ (Hansen, 1999: 4); the second comes from the resistance/religious nationalist struggle for Khalistan, which was a counternarrative to the state, a mostly territorial movement demanding a separate, sovereign state for Sikhs. Official records of the events preceding and culminating in June 1984 contained in the *White Paper* issued by the Indian government, justified the violence and undermined its intensity. The *White Paper* is representative of the texts that came to form a dominant, official state narrative around June 1984. In the same vein, the extent and impact of the mass massacre in November was not officially acknowledged till much later. Even so, the Indian state dismissed the violence as “riots,” or as spontaneous outbreaks of violence. The Khalistan movement employed “militant political modes of action” (Murphy, 2004, 340), but it was not the only response to 1984. In state and state sponsored media, however, 1984 was deliberately constructed as synonymous with a separatist, extremist movement, blaming the community for its own victimization to undermine and create amnesia about state complicity.

Another set of counternarratives that emerged to challenge official accounts was created by Indian civil rights organizations, journalists, academics and engaged citizens, especially reports by Citizens for Democracy (CFD) and the People’s Union for Democratic Rights and People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUDR-PUCL). These constitute early ruptures in dominant narratives (see Devgan, 2013). While these reports contained eyewitness, activist, journalistic and even survivor evidence about the state’s complicity in the events of 1984, they did not find their way into the popular press or consequently, into popular memory. They were banned or discredited by the state, or drowned out by voices from the militant and secessionist movement of Khalistan. The genesis of present-day diasporic and digital counter-memories of 1984 can be traced back to these early counternarratives.

Since the early 2000s, there is a shift in representations; an intergenerational cohort of Sikhs in the diaspora began to talk back to dominant representations of 1984, creating their own collective memories of the event in and through digital media. In this paper, I examine these digitally mediated memories as a challenge to state and mass-mediated representations of 1984.⁵ I develop an earlier idea of “crevices” (Devgan, 2013) by analyzing websites; drawing on interviews with survivors, witnesses and their descendants in Canada and the United States, and focus group discussions with “everyday” Sikh women and men in the United States. I piece together the digital story of 1984⁶ and examine its reception and implications for the community. “First generation” Sikhs or survivors and witnesses of 1984 and their children or the “second generation,” in the diaspora are doing memory work, deliberate and conscious public practices of searching for fragments of painful pasts and piecing them together to give cultural meaning and shape to broken traumatic experiences (see for e.g. Kuhn 1995, Sa’adi and Abu-Lughod, 2007). I use the term “digital crevices” to describe the seemingly subtle but significant way these websites challenge “memory walls,” or state and mass media organized representations of 1984.

I argue that in contrast to the master narrative of 1984, a detached, impersonal imposition from above, diasporic Sikhs’, especially the younger

generation's close and easy engagement with the internet,⁷ with its heightened interactivity, including ability to form viable social communities and relationships traversing geographic and temporal boundaries,⁸ is facilitating an intimate re-narration of hauntings or present pasts. Narratives about 1984 in India are constrained not just by state-imposed, majoritarian community's "feeling rules," or appropriate and legitimate ways of expressing feelings (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) but what I call "feeling walls." I use this term to describe strategies of emotion management within political systems of extreme oppression, when the work of emotions transcends everyday management, to hiding and masking feelings as a survival strategy. By enabling Sikhs to construct their own narrative of 1984, I show how digital crevices are challenging feeling rules, or breaking down feeling walls.

The digital story of 1984 is expressed through hybrid forms of communication, visual/oral (writing and speech, images and sounds) and verbal/nonverbal (words and images/sounds) (see for e.g. Fornäs et al, 2002). In the following I discuss how Sikhs are constructing a narrative of the events of 1984 while doing the work of emotion, communicating feelings of loss, sadness and shame. In challenging the state story of 1984, Sikhs are also challenging the "masculine" identity of the Indian state. Within the community, however, mostly men are doing the work of memory, which keeps the digital story of 1984 gendered and fragmented. Finally, memory workers are sensitive to the class-specific nature of violence, and in reconstructing 1984 through digital memory projects, Sikh memory workers bring out the importance of class. Of course class hierarchy is inbuilt in the access to or lack of access to digital technology, yet there are splits within the community in the reception of texts, even with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, including digital access.

In the following I briefly discuss the relationship between representation, power and diasporic location, a description of my methods, composition of memory workers and a summary of websites. This is followed by my analysis of websites, discussing the digital story of 1984, connections with other traumatic memories, and underlying issues of gender and class. Finally, I examine the potential of digital crevices to challenge feeling rules and feeling walls.

Who Tells the Story? Representations and Power

Starting in the early 2000s, there is a shift from the dominant state narrative and Khalistani counternarratives to tell a more multi-layered, complex and critically informed story of 1984. Sikhs in the diaspora are doing memory work using spaces on the internet to articulate new interpretations of 1984 and form crevices, or fractures, in dominant accounts.⁹ Memory workers began creating websites to contest the dominant state narrative of 1984, as well as purely Khalistani representations of the event, by documenting and creating a tangible archive or repository expressing community members' feelings of loss. Websites contain narratives and testimonies¹⁰ informed by feelings of enduring

and pervasive suffering to create an experiential archive of trauma - an “archive of feelings” about 1984 (Cvetkovich, 2003, 7).

Events and experiences are represented in certain ways rather than others. Cultural or collective memory is “constructed” (Halbwachs, 1992) or “selected” (Schwartz, 1982) by the larger social group or community, and is not merely the sum total of individual memories. What memories get formed and shared, what events and experiences are excluded, are shaped by power. In the Indian national context, representations of 1984 have become static and fixed. Sikhs continue to experience feelings of fear, stigma and shame, internalizing the dominant narrative of “you brought this upon yourselves.” Socially engendered fear and socially produced shame were effective and invisible mechanisms to gag the community and preclude the Sikh story from becoming public. In seeking a “fit” between their memories and what was “publicly acceptable,” Sikhs “inevitably relie(d) on practices of repression and exclusion” (Roy, 2012, 9; see also Edkins, 2003). In contrast, in the diaspora, feeling rules and feeling walls did not find much influence, making it possible for Sikhs to express their dissent and deep resentment of state actions even in the immediate aftermath of violence.

My work is in keeping with scholarship that critically engages with “countermemories” of the marginalized and powerless, for instance in oral history (Passerini, 1987; Portelli, 1991) and in subaltern studies (Guha, 1997). Diasporic Sikh survivors and witnesses of 1984 and their descendants are creating stories of their marginalized experiences and events, in the form of “little narratives or history from below,” (see for e.g. Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Davis, 2002; Polletta, 2006) or what Foucault called “subjugated knowledges.” These are stories “that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition and scientificity” (Sturken, 1997, 6). A number of social factors are influencing this shift in storytelling, including the passage of time, diasporic consciousness combining spatial distance and imagined nearness with national contexts, proximity to narratives of the Jewish Holocaust, and presence of and access to digital media.¹¹

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

Memory Workers, Websites and “Audiences”¹²

I did a search on “Google” in its various national versions (American, British, Canadian and Indian) to come up with a pool of websites devoted to the events of 1984. The sample of websites I chose from this pool is purposive. I had two main criteria in mind in choosing websites for my study: (1) inclusivity: the website included a wide range of views on 1984 rather than a single-minded

Khalistani political affiliation. This was expressed through various forms of communication: written text, graphics and other audio-visual texts, (2) depth of content: that is websites that comprised more than 5 pages (Gunawardena, 2000, 275). I used various combinations of key words, “Sikhs, 1984,” “Sikhs, 1984, commemoration,” “1984, Sikh story,” etc. to narrow down websites on 1984. The websites I chose for my analysis are inclusive of various perspectives, opinions and feelings about 1984. There are several explicitly Khalistani or separatist websites that are not included in my analysis, in keeping with my objective to understand 1984 as a more inclusive and differentiated representation rather than extant scholarship’s exclusive focus on “cyber-archive of Khalistani struggles” (Axel, 2005, 131; see also Shani, 2010; Gunawardena, 2000).

I studied a sample of eight websites from approximately 20 websites (accessed November 2014) for “Sikhs, 1984” and “Khalistan,” on the search engine Google. I focused on the following websites: 1984livinghistory.org; sikhchic.com; sikhgenocide.org; sikhtoons.com; sikhmuseum.com; nov1984.org; carnage84.com and ensaaf.org. I examined oral, written and visual texts using thematic or content-specific and visual analysis to arrive at a broader digital narrative analysis of websites (see Reisman, 2008).

To supplement my analysis of websites I did interviews with 27 Sikhs in Canada and the US. My interview sample consisted of 11 first generation Sikhs, aged 35-80, including four women and seven men. First generation Sikhs are direct migrants from India, having migrated before 1984, as well as post-1984 survivors and witnesses. They are refugees as well as voluntary immigrants. The other 16 respondents in my sample are second generation Sikhs, children of pre- and post-1984 survivors and witnesses, either born in North America or who migrated from India between infancy and the age of five. They ranged in age from 25 to 40 years. This sample of respondents consisted of eight men and eight women.

I studied details of producers of and contributors to websites to arrive at an initial sample of respondents. I also posted an advertisement on sikhchic.com to recruit respondents for my study. My respondents were well-educated professionals including lawyers, physicians, and PhD holders or near PhDs, journalists, writers, artists and filmmakers. The composition of my interviewees points to the relatively elite nature of memory workers. They have access to various kinds of “capital” (Bourdieu, 1984): economic or material, social or networks, and cultural or “resources such as verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, scientific knowledge, and educational credentials” (Swartz, 1997, 43). Memory work is also gendered; memory workers tend to be largely, but not exclusively, men.

While the small size of my sample makes it difficult to claim representativeness, digital narrative analysis helped me discern broad patterns and themes of memory work. The continued social stigmatization surrounding public talk of 1984, among Sikhs and non-Sikhs meant that I encountered reluctance, anger and inhibition of Sikhs, including memory workers in some instances, to share their stories, especially perhaps with a non-Sikh researcher.

To understand the reception of digital memory projects and the extent of synchronization between memory workers' aims and objectives, and everyday Sikhs, I conducted focus group discussions with a sample of the "audience," 18 urban, educated, middle class first and second generation Sikhs in the United States, ranging in age from 18-60 years old, eight women and ten men. I recruited respondents by making visits to the local *gurdwaras* and through snowball sampling.

The websites are easy to navigate and accessible to digital audiences. Their primary language is English; Punjabi language text has English subtitles or translations. All websites (with the exception of one) are produced by Sikhs in the diaspora, who are mainly activist-scholars or lawyers.¹³ They are primarily produced for the Sikh community, but also for larger South Asian and non-South Asian audiences.

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

Some of the themes that websites share include: tracing the chronology of 1984; a detailed explanation of the June 1984 events and problematizing the labels "terrorists," and "militants;" a description of the November 1984 violence and challenging the language of "riots;" forming memories of 1984 through individual Sikhs' "ideas, images, feelings," (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, 4) rather than top-imposed, impersonal imagery; extending the story of 1984 beyond the community and making comparisons with other traumatic memories, the Jewish Holocaust in particular, and challenging the Indian state patriarchal discourse.

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

Sikhgenocide.org and Nov1984.org are mainly informational websites about 1984, tracing the trajectory of events. All websites combine mixed media to renarrate 1984, integrating graphic art, photographs, videos and written text. In the following, I provide a summary of websites, which describes differences in form and content, as well as similarities, among them:

1984livinghistory.org contains recorded interviews with survivors, witnesses and descendants. It includes videos from Sikhs across the world, but mostly Punjab and North America, and is updated periodically. The website's logo illustrates the website's diasporic location and mission: it is written in Gurmukhi (Punjabi script) followed by the name of the website in English. The home page is visually arresting, including brief moving text of featured stories accompanied by short descriptions. This website is participatory and combines production and consumption. It includes instructions on how to make videos and upload them online. The website includes links to Human Rights Watch to situate 1984 within a larger discourse of human rights abuse and genocide. Interviews are subdivided into categories such as "alienation," "childhood trauma," "counter-memory," "gendered violence," and "role of media," alluding to common themes of digital memory work. In contrast to other websites that include various forms of texts or mixed media to tell the story of 1984, *livinghistory.org* is an exclusive video project. It contains direct and indirect oral testimonies about the June invasion as well as the November carnage.

Sikhchic.com is web journal with frequent updates, addressing several issues relevant to the Sikh diaspora or, as the website's byline says, "the art and culture of the diaspora." The website has several pages, including "art," "poetry," "music," "faith," "history," "cuisine," "fashion," and "sports." 1984 is an important component of the website, with an exclusive column devoted to the issue. The home page is well designed, colorful and inviting, with featured stories as well as photographs, paintings and graphic art. The website's logo is a circle with a turbaned Sikh face, to evoke the association between Sikhs and the male turban.¹⁴ Despite this implicit male bias, since the graphic does not include a beard, it can also be read as more ambiguous, inclusive and gender neutral. 1984 is represented on this website through personal narratives, short stories, poems, excerpts from books, reprints from newspaper and journal articles, as well as announcements about films, art or artistic expressions of 1984 organized in the diaspora. The distinguishing feature of *sikhchic.com* vis-à-vis other websites is that it considers memories of 1984 as one part of the larger diasporic story. It includes original written and visual text but also reproduces materials from Indian and non-Indian newspapers, journals and magazines to represent 1984 from a diasporic Sikh perspective.

Sikhgenocide.org tells the story of 1984 with the help of videos and academic papers and articles. The website is mostly static or fixed with no new additions discernible. The home page contains three videos documenting the trajectory of 1984: "Invasion: 1984," "Pogroms: November 1984," and "Genocide." The home page also has a quotation from the writer Milan Kundera on memory:

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

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

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

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

Nov1984.org features some old news stories and views related to 1984; it is fairly fixed. The banner of the website includes a phrase associated with the Jewish Holocaust, "lest we forget." The home page also has running text of the names of Sikhs killed in the November massacre along with the place and/or neighborhood to which they belonged. The website includes a media library with two videos on 1984, academic and news articles and perspectives about 1984 as

well as PUDR-PUCL'S report, *Who are the Guilty*. In addition, the website has a column named "organize," that contains templates to mobilize the community offline. Flyers on 1984, and a partial list of victims and testimonials, are some of the documents available to local organizations. This website reconstructs the story of 1984 by including documentation to support the Sikh case but is also heavily bent toward activism and ground-level mobilization.

Carnage84.com focuses on the November violence of 1984 and the content has remained the same for the past several years. The opening page starts with an ominous music score from a Hindi movie soundtrack. The homepage is stark, and not as aesthetically appealing as the other websites, with a byline that reads: "massacre of 4,000 Sikhs in Delhi." The website includes legal testimonies from survivors and eyewitnesses of the massacre, along with excerpts from enquiry commissions and committees set up by the state. The website also has an image library and a map of Delhi to show what areas were most affected by the violence. The primary objective of this website is to document the November carnage and includes testimonies or affidavits,¹⁵ from survivors and witnesses.

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

The Digital Story of 1984¹⁶

Sikhs are constructing a digitally mediated story of 1984 by bringing together fragments of a broken past. The preceding websites converge and intersect to narrate common, underlying experiences of 1984. They suggest that unlike the Indian state and media's representations, Sikhs do not remember 1984 as an isolated incident. Instead it is recollected as continuous and compared to other grim memories of Sikh past, especially the Partition of 1947.¹⁷ For instance, AAA¹⁸ a Sikh male living in Punjab, in an oral testimony on 1984livinghistory.org explained that while 1984 reminded the community of the violent losses of 1947, it was also different because Sikhs were let down by their "their own people." Websites such as sikhgenocide.org contain papers outlining the history of what is termed India's "illiberalism," starting before 1947, culminating in 1984 and extending beyond 1984. Sikh remembrance of the

events of June and November offer an experiential, affective chronicle to resist the cold rationalizations and erasures of official representations.

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

Friday June 1st

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

Sunday June 3rd

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

Wednesday June 6th

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

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

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

These digital narratives complicate the state's self-portrayal as a benevolent and calm patriarch curbing and controlling Sikh "terrorists." They show the state's role in attacking its citizenry inside a sacred and revered community symbol, symbolic of the Sikh collective body.

Many Sikhs describe Operation Blue Star as one of the major "watershed(s)," (Zerubavel, 2003) in Sikh collective memory. In an oral testimony, SS, a Sikh male from Punjab, writing on 1984livinghistory.com, recalls the unprecedented nature of attacks and of feeling isolated in postcolonial India. He brings out

feelings of abandonment and desolation among Sikhs at the time, with no community of listeners to share their pain.

We hadn't even thought something like this could happen. Sikhs could never have thought that they would be attacked like this. *Koi hamdard vee naee sigga, sajjie-khabbe, gawand jaye, gal kar sake*- there were no sympathetic listeners to share our pain with, no one on any side, no neighbors who we could speak with. We saw such good days. We had to see these days too. *Bahut maada samaa sigga, bahut maada, bahut maada*- it was a very bad time, very bad, very bad (1984livinghistory.org).

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

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

In addition Sikh memory workers construct the narrative of November through legal testimonies or "affidavits," of victims and eyewitnesses from enquiry commissions formed after 1984 (carnage84.com). Despite the inefficacy of these commissions and "wasteful degeneration," of these testimonies in the pursuit of justice (Kaur, 2014), they are a way for the community, especially diasporic Sikhs to imagine the suffering of community members removed in space and time. Carnage84.com also publishes overviews and excerpts from enquiry commissions and committees on 1984 as a means of making transparent the discrepancy between law in theory and in practice. As Simeon writes, 1984 is a "defining moment" in the Indian context because "the gap between official and political utterances and the evidence of our eyes and ears became an unbridgeable chasm (2014, 84).

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

In June 1984, the Indian state orchestrated two cataclysmic blows on the Sikh population in India. With the purported goal to eradicate "terrorism," the state army unleashed an

unprecedented terror on the holiest of Sikh shrines...Dubbed *Operation Bluestar*, this carnage resulted in the deaths of at least two thousand devotees, two hundred of which were labeled "militants," as well as the detainment of more than 1,500 civilians suspected of terrorism, twenty-two of which were children under the age of sixteen (HS, sikhchic.com).

Sikhs contest the discourse around the November "riots," even more vociferously and emphatically than the June attacks. The following columnist writing on sikhchic.com nudges and interrupts the official vocabulary of spontaneous violence by setting out the complex nuances of violence and evoking statements from the propaganda machinery used to frame and justify the Holocaust. A shift in language is necessary to own the difficult memories of 1984 that continue to be shrouded in feelings of shame and the narrative of "blaming the victim," within the Sikh community and outside. Sikhs are doing the work of memory and representation to bring out the gravity of the crime aided and abetted by the state and its functionaries, and renaming the violence, "carnage," "genocide," or "pogrom."

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Another way to communicate the sacrilege and damage to the collective Sikh body is through images such as the following painting (see figure 2) on sikhchic.com which evokes the bloodshed and ruination of the June attacks in a form that is more palatable and ambiguous than what Mahmood calls “massacre art.” Massacre art includes pictures and paintings of “torn, broken, and seeping bodies...it is a kind of witness that will not allow one to rest” (1996, 189). It is commonly displayed in *gurdwaras* and Sikh homes, representative of the tradition of *shahidi* or martyrdom,¹⁹ but as Mahmood explains, massacre art was especially displayed in Sikh homes in the immediate aftermath of 1984. There was an unambiguous quality to massacre art: its “potency derives only in part from their blood; it derives also from their unwillingness to be masked, covered, or distorted” (Mahmood, 1996, 189). It saw militant martyrdom as a way to fight the state, and naked violence as a means to undo state oppression. In contrast, digital narratives, or crevices, are more reflective, contemplative, ambiguous and complex, translating suffering into a language that makes it possible to consume images more readily.

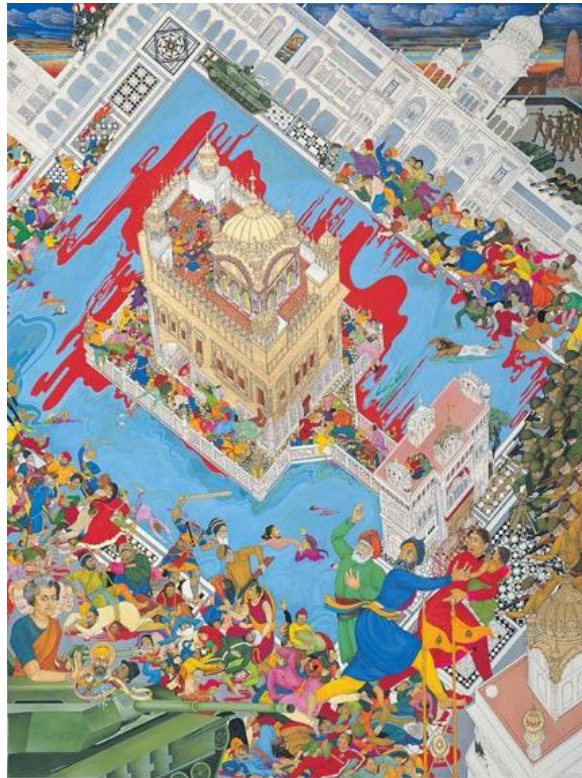


Figure 2: Painting Re-presenting 1984 Distinct from “Massacre Art”
(source: sikhchic.com)

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

Sikhtoons.com©2010

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

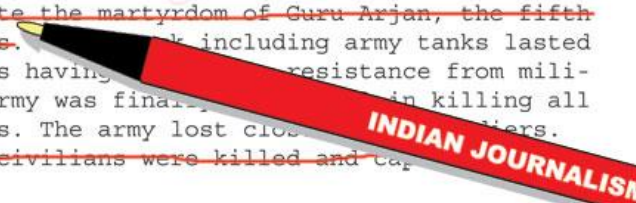


Figure 3: Red Pen to Challenge the Veracity of Indian Journalism (source: sikhtoons.com)

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



Figure 4: “An Image Haunts Me...” (Source: ensaaf.org)

The digital story of 1984 includes the lasting impact of violence, extending beyond the events of June and November. Websites such as ensaaf.org include documentation of the reverberations of 1984 beyond that year. For example in a report entitled, “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India,” published by ensaaf.org, the authors examine the Indian state’s role in the “disappearance” of young Sikh men. This report in combination with other documentation available on the website investigates the Indian government’s abuse and killings of these “disappeared,” by cremating them en masse.²⁰ Websites including ensaaf.org and nov1984.org also make available templates, such as sample flyers and handouts, for mobilizing the community. These and other projects create connections between online and face-to-face interactions.

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

Connecting Traumatic Memories

In constructing digital memories Sikh memory workers are making connections with traumatic experiences of other religious minorities to situate 1984 not only as a specifically Sikh but also a generalized experience shared by other disenfranchised communities. In particular they evoke language and imagery from the Jewish Holocaust to translate their experiences in a widely understood framework (see Devgan, 2013).

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

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

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

Gender and Class in Digital Memory Work

Gender comes across in memory work in two main ways, *between* the Sikh community and external collective bodies, including the state and the dominant Hindu community; and gendered divisions *within* the community. In

representing experiences of the larger community Sikh memory workers stress the “masculine” role of the state. Within the community, men mainly tell the digital story of 1984. In constructing the story of 1984 using digital technology, class is an implicit factor. Memory work is uneven, unequal and not representative of the entire community because of the issue of the “digital divide” separating those in the community with easy access to digital technology and an English education, and those lacking these resources.

On the whole, digital crevices challenge the Indian state’s patriarchal discourse. But there are also different ways to understand gender in memory work. While within the community, women are repositories of *izzat* or honor (Das, 1976, 15), gender morphs and takes on different forms depending on the level of confrontation: inter-community or intra-community. Between the Sikh community and state, Sikhs represent themselves as a community “emasculated” by a “masculine Hindu state.”²¹ In confronting the majority community, however, the distinction between Sikhs as “masculine,” and Hindus as “feminine,” brought out most keenly in the Sikh militant discourse, also continues to some extent in present day memory work.²² This is especially evident in reconstructing the June assault on the Golden Temple. Sikhs “felt the destruction of the Akal Takht as a humiliation inflicted upon the Panth, a humiliation demanding some counteraction to restore Sikh *izzat*” (Dusenbery, 1990, 251), in relation to the masculine state and majority “effeminate” community.

Within the community, men are at the forefront of memory work, and relating their experiences. In keeping with the rigid private-public division between women and men, and “principles of silence, negation, accommodation and idealization” of women in Sikh history (Jakobsh, 2003, 3), memory work remains a male domain. The digital narrative that is under construction focuses on the loss and shame inflicted on males, and female suffering in their relational roles as daughters, mothers, wives and especially widows to “carry the moral burden of narrating the wounds inflicted on others” (Kaur, 2014, 37). Men were killed, their bodies burnt alive, their hair or ‘*kes*’ shorn and they underwent the shame of letting go of the turban - all symbolic of violent emasculation, directly experienced by men and vicariously internalized by women. Female bodies and voices are less conspicuous, silent sites that both experienced the suffering and continue to bear witness to it. Visual narratives on websites convey this “irrecoverability” of loss and bearing witness to violence (see figure 5). Widows in patriarchal Indian society are treated as less than human, contaminated, stigmatized and “discredited” by the loss of husbands (Goffman, 1963, 4). In telling the story of 1984 digitally, memory workers represent this experience of the widows. In a patriarchal system “where widowhood is a prolonged curse, a punishment, a form of wound that never ever heals,” images of widows of communal violence “symbolize the tragic depths of that irrecoverable loss in the public sphere (Kaur, 2014, 37).



Figure 5: Sikh Women Suffer and Bear Witness to Suffering (source: carnage84.com)

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

On other websites, memory workers reflect on their class positions explicitly, explaining that this accounted for both the time lapse and the experiential distance between 1984 and the work of memory. As a first generation Sikh memory worker writes on sikhchic.com, it was the very distance with the economically marginalized Sikhs that made it seem that the experience

of 1984 was not “ours,” but “theirs.” His middle/upper class belonging overrode his religious affiliation.

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

Class hierarchies are inbuilt into memory work. Sikhs in the diaspora have easy access to digital technology, compared to India.²³ However, even in the diaspora, memory work is confined to a small segment of educated and professional Sikhs. Sikhs in the North American diaspora are a differentiated group with differences in socioeconomic status (see for e.g. Mitra, 2012). Unskilled and semi-skilled working-class Sikhs are excluded from digital storytelling.

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

Responses to Digital Crevices

There are gaps even among those in the community who have access to digital technology. A graphic on Sikhtoons.com (see figure 6) represents heterogeneity within the Sikh community vis-à-vis memories of 1984. Memory work is considered “radical,” while “liberals” recommend “moving on,” in keeping with the popular narrative.



Figure 6: Heterogeneity within the Sikh Community (source: Sikhtoons.com)

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

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

educated enough or resourceful enough or both...and the third category is a very, very small minority, that have the resources, that have education in English...they think it's important to communicate it to our children, what our roots are and what happened to us...

I observed these splits in my focus group discussions. Of the 18 “everyday” Sikhs, that is Sikhs who do not actively remember and represent 1984, I included a sample of first generation Sikhs including recent migrants, that is those who migrated anywhere from 10 years to 30 years ago and second generation Sikhs aged 18-40. In assembling my focus group sample, I encountered resistance from Sikhs to participate in my study. While my focus group participants provided consent, their reactions, recorded below, varied from disavowal and disapproval of digital work to a hearty approval and endorsement. Sikh memory workers are creating digital projects to engage community members, encourage them to speak up about their own experiences, and/or share their opinions to build an effective public sphere counteracting the Indian state. The content of such websites is not esoteric; most websites include background information about the community and events for non-Sikhs to access the materials readily.

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

Another reaction to public memory work that I encountered in my focus groups is the distinction Sikhs drew between the June and November violence. For instance, a 25 year-old second generation woman who was visiting India in November 1984 and had dim memories of her own explained that while the November violence was “indisputable,” website producers needed to be more cautious in representing the June massacres, because this was a murkier history. Overall, I discovered that the June violence is considered contentious even within the community. The state and mass media depiction, combined with the active engagement of Sikh political leadership, especially the disagreement over Bhindranwale’s role, makes some members of the community question the sympathetic portrayal of the latter. In addition, even though my respondents did

not discuss this, first generation Sikhs such as those in my focus group sample would have witnessed not just state-inflicted atrocities but also those from the degenerated, criminalized militant movement.²⁴ Civilians, Sikhs and Hindus alike, found themselves caught in the war between security forces and militants. Estimates of those killed vary from 21,000 to 100,000 (Tatla, 1999, 231). There is a much wider consensus about the injustice and senselessness of the November massacre. Still, most Sikhs, especially recent migrants and some second generation Sikhs, are disenchanted with the entire issue, expressing the futility of memory work.

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

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

The different responses of recent first generation Sikh immigrants and more well-established and well-settled first generation immigrants, and the second-generation cohort, is encapsulated in the question: who tells the story and what version of it is circulated? The difference in responses is a result of internalization of the larger discourse of silence, evasion and denial engendered by the Indian state and mass media. While it would be revelatory to see how recent immigrants’ attitudes change with time, for my sample of urban, educated, middle class first generation immigrants, these sentiments abound. It would also be insightful to compare responses to websites along class lines.

What is the difference between perceptions of 1984 among uneducated, semi-skilled and unskilled working class Sikhs and educated, middle-class Sikhs? Unfortunately, that is beyond the scope of this paper.

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

Distinctiveness and Implications of Digital Crevices

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

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

Memory workers spoke of the power and effectiveness of the internet as a way of expressing affect that has been veiled and guarded. Memory workers explain that various forms of online communication, prose, poetry or art work are a way to "express our general frustrations," a means to challenge silence and denial "forced by the powers that be." In reply to the official narrative that Sikhs had "done something wrong...and every Sikh should be punished," Sikh memory workers spoke of the internet as a "mechanism that we could express ourselves in." One of my first generation interviewees, Kiran, referring to her digital account

of 1984 writes that her feelings about 1984 came across online through “this voice, this pen.” Vikramjeet, another memory worker, explained that the purpose of an online archive on 1984 was to overcome “fear...stand up and say whatever you want,” including pro-Khalistan, anti-Khalistan, more nuanced opinions, “as long as it’s intelligent, written properly and argued well, we’ll print it.” Despite the pervasiveness of official discourses that Sikhs have internalized, diasporic distance and consciousness and the advantage of hindsight helps memory workers become aware, acknowledge and reflect on externally imposed feelings of shame, stigma and fear associated with 1984. So while digital crevices have their limitations - lacking face-to-face, proximate interaction - they are mostly enabling.

The state response to 1984, a single-minded vilification of the secessionist movement without offering any redress, acknowledgment or healing measures for the community created feeling walls for everyday Sikhs that trapped them in a “shame/shame or shame/anger” spiral (Scheff 1990), without any social buffer to prevent shame from reproducing itself or degenerating into anger. Scheff analyzes this both at the micro level and as a way to evaluate inter-group relations:

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

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

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

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

Sikhs as “terrorists,” and “anti-national.” Digital crevices are giving Sikhs a way to reinstate “symmetry of the communication process” (Goffman, 1959, 8) and in turn break free from the tyranny of officially imposed, other-defined pejorative representations and emotions.

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

Convergent (Jenkins, 2006) and evocative digital narratives are especially helpful in challenging and questioning feelings of *sharam* or shame and stigma imposed on Sikhs in 1984 and post-1984. For a community already seeped in ideas of *sharam* and *izzat*, the effect of dominant narratives is even more insidious. While the Indian social-cultural context and construction of past events have created and imposed marginalized feelings and engendered “minority anxieties” (Gupta, 2007) digital-diasporic cultures are creating a shift toward overcoming these fears and anxieties. Memory workers are turning tables and directing stigmatization and shame against majoritarian Indian politics of the state and their blatant suppression of human rights. New media is facilitating an affective reversal (see figure 7). In the following image the artist compares the attack on high-ranking state officials in December 2001 with the November violence, bringing out the stark differences in legal rulings between them, capital punishment to offenders in the former, and blatant state impunity vis-à-vis the latter. The graphic is labeled, “Hindustan’s Shame,” or India’s Shame, showing the very different engagement with feeling rules in the diaspora. Instead of internalizing shame and hurt, keeping stories private and secluded, as encouraged by the Indian state and mass media, memory work is negotiating with these feelings directly and publicly.

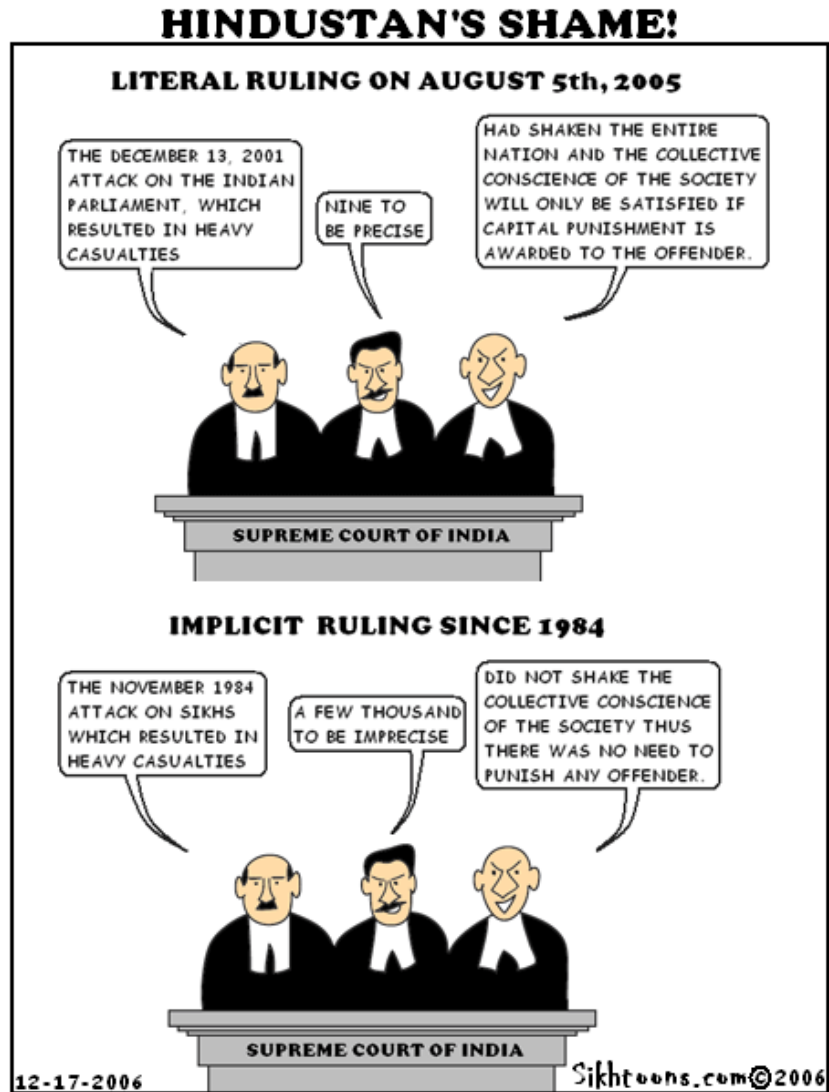


Figure 7: New Media and Shaming the Indian State (source: sikhtoons.com)

Conclusion

In summary, Sikhs are using digital media to tell the untold story of 1984. Their narratives act as crevices to challenge dominant walls of representation and affect. Crevices are made up of multi-layered and complex experiential narratives to re-present the story of 1984. Digital media's mixed media form and content facilitate contestation, extending state and separatist accounts of 1984

beyond either/or frames. Sikhs in the diaspora are doing the work of memory and reinterpreting the violence of 1984 as orchestrated, deliberate, and calculated rather than as an accidental and spontaneous set of events. They are challenging the language of “terrorism,” and “riots.” Digital crevices contain many Sikh voices and these are supplemented by the voices of other religious minority experiences particularly the Jew, as Sikhs situate the story of 1984 within a cross-cultural template to make their experiences known to wider audiences.

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

Overall, digital crevices are making invisibilized affect more visible. They are breaking dominant feeling walls to re-present 1984 as experience more than event, feeling more than fact. Digital representations have the potential to disrupt the state narrative.

Notes

¹ Some Sikh scholars assert that the state perception around Bhindranwale changed from being a saint or ‘sant’ to a terrorist, motivated by political rivalries (Tatla, 1999). Sudhir Kakar’s (1990) insightful psychoanalytic analysis of ethnic violence discusses Bhindranwale’s embodiment of the two M’s-militancy and martyrdom- implicit in the dominant “Khalsa warrior” tradition in Sikhism, founded by the 10th and last Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Kakar writes of how this elevated Bhindranwale to the near status of an 11th guru, particularly among the Sikh youth involved in the militant movement that gained ground in Punjab after 1984. At present, the views about Bhindranwale from within the Sikh community are best understood as fragmented.

² There have been many other instances of state sanctioned and legitimized violence against religious minorities in India since 1984, of which the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat stands out.

³ It is important to note here that the state itself is not an undifferentiated monolith. Veena Das brings out the fragmentations within the state narrative in her own recollections of the events of 1984: “There was a certain splitting in my own understanding of the state as we recognized that the various state actors were aligned differently in relation to the violence. For instance, while one faction of the Congress Party was actively engaged in abetting the riots in hopes of mobilizing support for their own leaders within the party hierarchy, others equally located within the state structures were appalled at the events” (Das 2007, 208). However, since the predominant accounts available through civil group and journalistic reports of the time are that of justification and non-

acknowledgment (Kishwar, 1984), I consider this as the main official narrative in my paper.

⁴ The state taking on a Hindu identity in 1984 has parallels but also differences from the ideology of Hindu nationalism that has taken center stage in India today (Hansen, 1999; see also for e.g. van der Veer, 1994, Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012).

⁵ In keeping with recent work on new media, I consider digital memory projects in continuity with the offline/face-to-face work of memory in *gurdwaras* and museums, rather than a neat, clear-cut distinction between these domains (see for example, Chayko, 2008, Boyd, 2012). Still, as an anonymous reviewer points out, studying offline spaces would help us hear many more voices and enable a comparative study between digital and analog archives. Regrettably, a detailed study of offline sites of memory lies outside the purview of this paper.,

⁶ Stories or narratives possess a temporal plot or a structure and logic: a beginning, middle and an end. They give social meaning and make sense of otherwise chaotic and disconnected events (see for e.g. White, 1980; Plummer, 1995; Stein, 1997; Ewick and Silbey, 2003; Polletta, 2006; Maynes et al, 2008).

⁷ I don't capitalize internet in keeping with the recent shift on emphasizing the "everydayness" of the technology. See:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/29/weekinreview/the-nation-case-sensitive-crusader-who-owns-the-internet-you-and-i-do.html>

⁸ For interactivity, see for e.g. Fornäs et al (2002), Baym (2000); for digitally mediated communities and relationships see for e.g. Rheingold (1993), Chayko (2002); for electronic place, see Meyrowitz (1985).

⁹ For more on how memory work is rooted in the Sikh cultural apparatus, see Devgan 2015.

¹⁰ Testimonies constitute a form of remembering (Langer, 1991). Testimonies are acts of speaking out about painful pasts and they constitute "a necessary and political act for the teller because they reveal injustices" (Wolf, 2007, 156).

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis, see Devgan (2015).

¹² I use quotes to indicate that community members I recruited to participate in my focus groups did not necessarily engage with/visit websites on their own; they became an audience for the duration of my focus group.

¹³ Carnage84.com is the only website created by an India-based Sikh lawyer along with a team of other lawyers, journalists, social workers and activists.

¹⁴ See Jakobsh (2010) for visible identity for women.

¹⁵ Affidavits are "sworn oaths, testimonials furnished in the presence of a recognized public authority, and authenticated by authorized judicial agents to be true" (Kaur, 2014, 35).

¹⁶ In this section I draw on previously published ideas (Devgan, 2013) and extend my analysis, along with including new empirical data.

¹⁷ See for e.g. Jeffrey (1987), Murphy (2012).

¹⁸ I have used initials instead of pseudonyms for my "digital interlocutors" to maintain anonymity while being cognizant of the fact that these websites are publicly available. I gave my interviewees pseudonyms.

¹⁹ I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

²⁰ See Ensaaf (2007).

²¹ Militant Hindus aspire for just such a masculine identity of Hinduism, “more vigorous and uncompromising in the defense of its devotees” (Lal, 1999, 149).

²² As Das explains, in the Sikh militant discourse masculinity contained in the idea and body of the heroic Sikh martyr, is synonymous with the Sikh community while the “Hindu community was characterized by an emasculated femininity that, in turn, slides into the idea of the Indian nation” (2007, 112). See also Axel (2001) on creating the body of the Khalistani male subject digitally. The militant discourse constructed the Sikh community as unequivocally masculine and the community at large echoed this sentiment. Dusenbery (1990) makes a distinction between the masculinity of Sikh militancy and patriarchalism of other fundamentalist ideologies. About Sikh militant masculinity, he writes, “It is an idiom of protecting masculine honor without policing the public behavior of women” (329).

²³ Statistics from 2014 show 84% use the internet in the U.S. (Rainie and Poushter, 2014). Canada has similar numbers (Statistics Canada, 2012). In India, however, only 13% use the internet (Reilly, 2013).

²⁴ I’d like to acknowledge an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this.

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