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## Thirty Years Later: A Community Memoir of the 1984 Sikh Massacres

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Thirty Years Later:  
A Community Memoir of the 1984 Sikh Massacres

by  
Ravleen Kaur

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

English

Thesis Adviser

Paul Collins

Portland State University

2015

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## Acknowledgements

The process of listening to audio recordings of these testimonies, translating, then transcribing them has given them a life of their own, outside those conversations I had on a few weekends last year. I am indebted, first off, to the 17 people who spoke to me, for sharing their private memories and experiences with me. It goes without saying that I literally could not have done this project without them. Beyond their contribution to this narrative, I am thankful for the gift of the stories themselves. I cherish each one and I do not exaggerate when I say I carry each testimony in my heart. Your lives and beings are poetry I could never fully render with words.

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I thank my family for their love, Punjabi translation tips, cups of hot tea while I burned midnight oil, and for instilling in me a passion for storytelling, history, and Sikhi. This is for you, Manne,

Mama, Papa, Nanima, Nanaji, and Papaji.

ਸਾਲਾਹੀ ਸਾਲਾਹਿ ਏਤੀ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਨ ਪਾਈਆ ॥ ਨਦੀਆ ਅਤੈ ਵਾਹ ਪਵਹਿ ਸਮੁੰਦਿ ਨ ਜਾਣੀਅਹਿ ॥ ਸਮੁੰਦ ਸਾਹ ਸੁਲਤਾਨ

ਗਿਰਹਾ ਸੇਤੀ ਮਾਲੁ ਧਨੁ ॥ ਕੀਤੀ ਤੁਲਿ ਨ ਹੋਵਨੀ ਜੇ ਤਿਸੁ ਮਨਹੁ ਨ ਵੀਸਰਹਿ ॥੨੩॥

## Prologue

I'm sitting cross-legged in a small, carpeted room at the back of the house converted to a Sikh gurdwara, armed with a thick notebook, my iPhone's recording application, and a list of questions. But when Surjit, the woman I've only thus far known as “Tigard wali Beeji” (the Tigard family's grandma), begins to tell me about her nephew who burned to death during the Delhi Sikh Massacre of 1984, all I can do is listen.

It is June and children are playing around the tree-swing before their Punjabi language lessons which will take place in the very room we are in. A couple of little girls are already in the room with their binders, sitting on the mattress where Surjit's husband, a solemn man with a graying face, sleeps a few nights a week, having taken up the duty of performing the early morning religious service. Surjit's Punjabi is well-worn and fraying with a rural hardness that, by its nature, seems incapable of melancholy. On top of that, she has the kind of upturned wrinkles that make her look eternally at peace. The overall effect is that when she tells me about her loss, she is full of acceptance.

Outside the window are fruit trees and miles of farmland past a yellowing field. The Sikh Center of Oregon sits off Scholls Ferry Road in the western outskirts of Beaverton, surrounded by orchards, vinyards, and family farm shops. Since March 2013, around 30 families drive every Sunday onto a gravel parkway marked by an orange Sikh Nishan Sahib flag. They listen to and perform shabad kirtan, devotional music from the holy text, before sharing a meal. A few families banded together to establish this new gurdwara in Beaverton after many found that driving an hour to the long-established gurdwaras in either Vancouver or Salem simply took too long. They wanted a gurdwara that felt embedded in their neighborhood, like the community

temples they grew up attending in India.

~

Churasee. Eighty-four. The number itself has become a sort of an emblem for a wide range of experiences. Its mere mention arouses an immediate understanding, and yet it is seldom brought up except by men discussing politics. Most of the families who attend the gurdwara lived in India back then, but their experiences during that year rarely rise up to the surface of a conversation. When it does, a kind of acknowledgement occurs, one that pardons the speaker from further explanation. They are understood.

In the early 1980s, a growing movement in India calling for greater rights for the state of Punjab had reached a tipping point. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a preacher who ignited both a Sikh revivalist movement as well as a call for Punjab's autonomy, was accused by the government of inciting violence and rebellion through his fiery oratory and call for justice through any means necessary, including physical retaliation against political enemies. Genuine demands for increased recognition and rights were often lumped together with the actions of extremist factions. Preventive policing was widespread in Punjab during the 1980s and 90s. The government began arresting young Sikh men who were visibly distinguishable by their turbans and unshorn beards. These men were subject to violent interrogations, and thus the government began a campaign of extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

Suspecting a looming threat by the Indian government, Bhindranwale and a handful of his supporters took armed refuge in a small section of the Golden Temple complex. This gave the Indian government the opportunity to act upon the pretext that they had been building up. During the first week of June 1984, the Indian army stormed the temple. The purported intention of the Golden Temple attack – dubbed Operation Bluestar – was to, as in an operation, surgically

remove the “cancerous” faction of extremists hiding within. But thousands of civilians were killed during the attack. The chapter in this narrative entitled “Summer” looks at this event from the perspective of the Beaverton Sikh community.

On October 31, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had ordered the attack on the Golden Temple, was assassinated by two of her bodyguards, who were Sikhs. For the next five days, New Delhi and many other parts of India became slaughtering grounds. Several thousand Sikhs were murdered in the aftermath of the prime minister’s assassination. Thousands of Sikh homes and shops, identified by electoral rolls, were looted and set on fire by organized groups. Over 50,000 Sikhs ended up in refugee camps as a result. The “Autumn” chapter in this work explores this massacre and its rippling effect.

During the five days of massacre, there was no attempt by government officials or police to put a stop to the violence. A fact-finding team organized by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties came to the conclusion, after interviewing hundreds of eyewitnesses, drafting case summaries, and examining government documents and actions during that time, that in a majority of the cases, these attacks were, according to the report, “the outcome of a well-organized plan marked by acts of both deliberate commissions and omissions by important politicians of the Congress.”

Disappearances and extrajudicial killings continued for another decade before cooling down in the mid-nineties. The chill of this extended period of time is dealt with the chapter called “Winter”. While the first two chapters are interlaced with media clippings reflecting coverage contemporary to the events, this final chapter does not, as there was a dearth of reporting during this period.

In an abstract sense, learning about the attack on the Golden Temple did not rupture my

understanding of the Sikh experience. I grew up on parables of saints literally sacrificing their heads for justice, on stories of Gurus who became martyrs. Because Sikhism came into its own during the increasing invasion of the Mughal empire, its very existence was bred in the soil of survival. And to a child of eight or nine, the year 1984 seemed as distant as the year 1684.

But when my mother pointed out bullet holes in brick during a family trip to the Golden Temple, I could not fathom it at all. I was standing in a place where the sense of peace was almost overwhelming, a place that seemed removed from time itself. I could not imagine bloodshed at this place of ghee and jasmine, of scripture and cool water, of braided fingers and bare feet. I could not reconcile the history of this place with my experience of it.

Part of my motivation in embarking on this project, then, was to re-member this history for myself, to bridge personal intimacy with a trauma that felt severed from my own identity as a Sikh. I felt this applied to the Sikh community on a larger scale, too. This was a history that truly lives in the private memories of millions, but whose official imprint is the version that politicians and the police force decided to give the media at the time.

While academic scholarship on the events has been carried out for decades, many projects are now dealing with this trauma through new lenses. A Sikh playwright recently launched a stage piece called *Kultar's Mime*, a fictional portrayal of the horrors witnessed by children during the Delhi massacre. The Saanjh organization has called on Sikhs nationwide to video record testimonies from their own local communities and upload them to a web site where they are preserved.

I wanted to know what kind of history would emerge if individual testimonies were woven together, overlaid on a historical frame and set in scene, so I interviewed 17 people who attend the Beaverton gurdwara about their experiences during the crises of 1984. Further, I intentionally



limited the scope of my interviews to people who live in the metropolitan area, as another goal of this project was to paint a portrait of a specific community and its memory. This narrative is not merely a Sikh story, but also a Portland story.

This is a memory-finding endeavor, not a fact-finding endeavor. In a sense, I am writing on a fault line between memory and forgetting, between intimacy and distance, between diaspora and home. Memory, no doubt, is subject to many forces which distort its factual accuracy, but that contingent, personal quality is fundamental to this narrative. How these memories are woven together reflects both my subjectivity and the subjectivity of the people sharing their stories. One goal of this process to emphasize that to a certain extent, all history is subjective, and that for any given event, there are multiple histories that are adjacent yet fragmented from one another. To join these fragments might shed new light.

The uneven nature of cultural memory is undoubtedly reflected in the narrative, and some readers might find this frustrating; there are gradations in theme, steep drops in chronology, areas where detail is fine and granular, other sections that skirt the waters. I've tried to hedge this in, to a certain extent, by dividing the work into three chronological chapters that focus on three defining aspects of the crisis. The interviews I conducted ranged in specificity and proximity to the events, but each added another vantage point to the picture. Some people spoke in generalities, painting a climate that they experienced during a decade. Others knew the exact date and time of particular instances they shared with me. Many people expressed that there are major gaps in their own memories. Out of respect for each testimony's inherent value, this rough terrain is often preserved in the narrative.

I.  
Summer

The first rays of June usher Hazura out of his small room at a rural religious sanctuary and aboard a train to Amritsar, where he must undergo surgery. His wide, sharp eyes, framed by black-rimmed glasses, have developed cataracts that need to be removed. A tall man with a white goatee and an aquiline nose, he never married and has devoted his retired years and monthly pension checks in the service of Nanaksar gurdwara in the village Kaleran, where he lives in the countryside among men called *bihangams* – “birds” – who eschew worldly entanglements and instead immerse themselves in Sikh scripture.

When he lands at his elder sister's home in congested Amritsar, she is hesitant about hosting him. Not wanting to burden her, Hazura tells the family that after he gets his eyes fixed, he'll spend a couple of nights at the Golden Temple, sleeping on the cool marble concourse among pilgrims who have come from across the country to mark Jod Mela festival, the martyrdom commemoration of the fifth Sikh Guru, who was tortured by Mughal emperors for refusing to convert to Islam. Hundreds of thousands of worshippers flock to Amritsar, undeterred by a growing police presence around the temple entrances during the past few years. The police do not bother them, locals say, so there is no need to halt ordinary activities.

The gold-specked tank of water surrounding the temple heaves in concert with the bow-struck undulation of hymns. The words of the nighttime prayer, the *Sohila*, the song of comfort and peace, lull Hazura to sleep: *Bestow the Water of Your Mercy upon Nanak, the thirsty song-bird, so that he may come to dwell in Your Name.*

~

At dawn, a deep, thunderous blast sounds through Amritsar. Rippy, asleep under thin sheets on the roof terrace atop her family's home, is jolted awake. The noise comes from the direction of the Golden Temple, two kilometers west. Her siblings rise from their beds as well.

They look at each other in a daze, unsure of what they just heard. A few minutes later, another blast shakes them up. Across a sprawling patchwork of laundry lines and red brick terraces, fifteen-year-old Rippy watches neighbors get up from their rooftop beds, their gaits bewildered. In the din, she hears panicked murmurs, shuffling footsteps, eruptions of gunfire in the distance. And then after a few more minutes, another *boom*.

A few hundred rooftops away, four-year-old Pawneet feels the vibration of the blast as he stands on his terrace, looking east. He lives in the Lion's Gate neighborhood, a ten minute walk from the Golden Temple. In the distance, he sees smoke rising. As the sun climbs higher and parents gather their children indoors, the cannon blasts grow louder. In the evening, Rippy and her mother, Rajinder, watch from a window as visible gunfire flies over their neighborhood. Her father, Balwant, dials through the radio for any trace of news. None. Rippy sees trails of smoke and a faint fire on the horizon that competes with the setting sun.

Middle-aged Ranjit thinks of a man from his village who is now a sevadaar at the Golden Temple. The man sits every day on the gilded roof of the Amritsar temple, reading from the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy text. The text is revered like a living teacher, its wing-like pages handled with delicacy, its spine resting on velvet blankets. As the shelling intensifies, he shields the massive text with his entire body. A bullet flies through his turban, killing him. The man's blood drenches the pages of the Guru Granth Sahib.

~

India seals off Punjab in effort to quell violence - Monday, June 4, 1984

AMRITSAR, India (AP)

The government sealed off Punjab state Sunday and sent in thousands of troops to try to end the Sikh terrorism that has claimed 350 lives in the past three months.

All travel by road and rail was banned, and an immediate blackout on news coverage was declared by Indian President Zail Singh, who is a Sikh.

Gurpreet's morning ritual includes tuning to her favorite radio station, which announces "Yeh All India Ki Urdu Service Hai" before playing songs from old Hindi movies. Then, she will dial into a religious channel to listen to devotional music. She's eighteen years old and lives with her mother in Ludhiana while studying commerce at the local college. But that morning, all she hears is static on every station, so she puts a kirtan hymn cassette into her Walkman to get by. She tries again later and is able to get signal from scratchy Pakistani channel which is airing a BBC news report: *Tanks brought into the Golden Temple. Heavy shelling all around the complex.*

In Dubai, crane operator Daya hears the same report. He sits outside the air-conditioned quarters provided to him by the German company he works for, listening to the radio: *The Golden Temple has become a warzone.*

In Northern England, Daman is huddled with a fellow Sikh friend who is getting calls from Punjab as the attack unfolds. Daman's family has lived in the United Kingdom for six generations; they don't wear turbans or beards and blend easily into their small town. In fact, he never met a Sikh outside his family until he was nine years old. The voice on the other end of the line is muffled; Daman can hardly make out the conversation from his arms-length distance from his friend on the phone. His friend inquires about Bhindranwale, the militant separatist who has been lodged in the temple complex as tensions have risen over the past few months. Daman hears the one-word reply: *"Martyred."*

Women, children killed in temple raid, Sikh says - Monday, July 2, 1984

AMRITSAR, India (AP) -

A Sikh leader says a large number of women, children, and elderly men were killed June 6 when troops fired on a 150-room guest house in the Golden Temple complex during the Indian army's assault on the shrine. [...]

"There was no question of the army firing indiscriminately at anyone," said Home Ministry spokesman S.C Kacktwana.

At the Peacock Court apartment complex in Santa Clara, California, Arjit spends the first weeks of June sitting with his wife and adult children, following nightly news updates about the attack on CNN.

Arjit is sixty years old and can remember being a young man who took the train along the ancient Grand Trunk Road from his home in Lahore to the Golden Temple in Amritsar in the early 1940s. He would bathe in the temple's water tank – the sarovar – and sleep on the marble concourse before heading home the next morning, stopping to slurp up falooda, a milky vermicelli dessert, at Amritsar's famous market, Hall Bazaar. Arjit is hit by a sense of loss but also relief that they immigrated to the United States from India two years prior.

One evening, he receives a call from the gurdwara Nanaksar, informing him that his uncle Hazura traveled to Amritsar for an eye surgery earlier in June and never came back. Sevadaars, religious volunteers, at Nanaksar had sent out reports to police stations, but after an extensive search, Hazura was not found. Top generals they spoke to through connections in the army told them that nothing can be known, that Arjit's *chachaji*, his jovial, plain-spoken uncle who was more like an elder cousin, was probably killed during the attack.

~

The narrow, concentric alleyways spiraling out from the Golden Temple are colloquially known as the *shair*, the inner city. Living here, amidst shops and traffic, fifteen-year-old Rippy studies for her college admission exams late at night, in the exhale of diesel, soil, and noise. Before June, during the first few weeks of her summer holiday from school, she would stay in bed past sunrise, covering her eyes with sheets until the sun on the high terrace was too fluorescent to bear. She'd listen to the marketplace stretching its bones below her; her father Balwant's wholesale fabric shop on the ground level below their home brought vendors who waited in the alleyway to pick up rolls of silk, cotton, georgette. She'd hear the running water of outdoor faucets where elderly neighbors bathed. She'd hear onion mongers and dairy boys announcing their arrival to the street. She'd hear Hindu pandits reciting prayers amidst the clattering of crows.

Today, Amritsar is silent but for gunfire that sputters throughout the days like a leaky faucet. A blackout has been ordered across the city. A curfew has banned city residents from leaving their homes or even stepping out onto their terraces at any time. But when Rippy and her mother Rajinder look down at the alleyway from their windows, they sometimes see barefoot women and children in soiled clothing running by with a few items tied to baskets on their heads. Word spreads that these people fled either the Golden Temple or their homes that neighbored it.

Electricity has been cut and the June heat grows more intense every day. It's the kind of heat that pinches Rippy's skin, that chokes her lungs. She and her siblings lie on the concrete floor to cool down. Rajinder and Balwant wave hand fans while rehashing the same fearful speculations with Rajinder's sister and her family, who had been visiting from Bombay before the attack. Sometimes a prolonged silence descends on the group. Rippy's younger cousins try to lighten the mood by pulling out a chess board or a deck of cards. Whenever Rippy has to use the

bathroom, which is open-walled and thus partly outdoors, her heart pounds.

In the evenings, Rajinder cooks by candlelight. They are running low on stored dry food, so she makes an extra-thin *khichadee* stew out of lentils and rice to give out in small bowls to her family. Several days pass before police trucks come to deliver a limited ration of flour, milk, rice, and lentils to each neighborhood. A few alleyways west, past the Golden Temple, little Pawneet watches as his father climbs a ladder to pin up black fabric to cover all the sky lights in their house. Despite the blackout, they've found a way to turn on some dim lighting under the dark sheets. The police has warned that if they see any light coming from a home at night, they will shoot.

Hearing the hum of engines outside, Rajinder peeks through blinds on the windows facing the market. The blackout is still being enforced and the alleyway is dark but for the faint lights of pick up trucks. The parade of trucks is headed on the path that leads from the Golden Temple out of the city center, out to the rural outskirts of Amritsar. In the open trolleys of the trucks she sees dead bodies – countless corpses thrown one on top of the other. She cannot see their faces but can make out their human shapes – hundreds of legs and arms all tangled together. Rajinder stays silent, absorbing the shock waves within her own bones.

~



*“There was so much slaughter that the people screamed. Didn't You feel compassion, Lord?”*

Written by Guru Nanak in 1521, the words of this shabad are sung at Manji Sahib gurdwara in Ludhiana during the weeks after the attack. Commerce student Gurpreet arrives there early in the mornings and washes her feet in a basin of water, crosses mats wet with footprints, and cups her hands in front of a volunteer who gives her parshad, a ghee-sugar-semolina flour halva, in a bowl made from leaves.

*“O Creator Lord, You are the Master of all.*

*If some powerful man strikes out against another powerful man, then no one feels any grief.*

*But if a powerful tiger kills a flock of sheep, then its master must answer of it.”*

She bows her head to the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy text, and sits on the ground in the spacious hall to listen to the devotional music. A lingering grief sounds in every key of the harmonium, in each reverberation of the tabla drum. As she helps pass out chapaatis in the free kitchen after the program, Gurpreet shudders to imagine how she would feel if Manji Sahib, this gurdwara she visits every week, were to be attacked. If the Golden Temple is a kind of Vatican, a distant but revered figure, then Manji Sahib is a dear elder.

*“This priceless country has been laid waste and defiled by dogs, and no one pays any attention to the dead.*

*There was so much slaughter that the people screamed. Didn't You feel compassion, Lord?”*

~

10,000 pilgrims present as Sikh temple reopens - June 26, 1984

NEW DELHI, India (The Washington Post) -

The Golden Temple of Amritsar in Punjab was opened to the public Monday for the first time since troops stormed the 72-acre site to flush out Sikh separatist forces nearly three weeks ago.

About 10,000 pilgrims, both Sikhs and Hindus, went to the temple to pray, and some to bathe in the sarovar, or "pool of nectar", that surrounds the 17<sup>th</sup> century gold-domed shrine.

Balwant walks through the dilapidated marketplace with fellow businessman – among them, a dry fruits vendor, a rock candy salesman – heading for the Golden Temple. The curfew has been lifted and streets begin to fill up with the daring. As they walk through Nimok Chawk neighborhood, through Atta Mandi bazaar, they see bullet-cut windows, smashed buildings, damaged homes, endless clutter. The ground beneath them is uneven with bricks, rocks, dirt. In the immediate vicinity of the temple, entire shops are looted empty.

In an alleyway a few minutes' walk from the temple, past the fried snacks shop his family would visit after Golden Temple trips, Balwant and the group stop at the home of a friend who was forced to evacuate; he wants to see the condition it's in. As he enters the home, Balwant is hit by a sickening smell like raw meat. On the floor are four dead bodies with hands tied behind their backs with rope. The men have long black beards and wear the white kameez shirts of sevadaars, the temple volunteers.

Bullets wounds on noses, necks, chests sear iron hot in Balwant's eyes. Flies swarm around these bodies missed by the clean-up that happened during the curfew. The group runs off in a matter of seconds, knowing the Central Reserve Police are on patrol everywhere.

Balwant's wife Rajinder, and children Rippy, Happy, and Saloni join him on his next visit

to the Golden Temple a few days later. Rippy begins to sob when she spots remnant bloodstains on the marble concourse around the temple. While the Golden Temple itself has escaped heavy damage, bullet holes dot its brick foundation. Rajinder remembers being a schoolgirl in a white uniform who would visit the temple with her classmates during festivals, with her parents after daily shopping errands, with no fear whatsoever.

Visitors are silenced by the extent to which the Akal Takht – a white domed shrine taking up one side of the rectangular temple complex – is damaged. Behind metal wires which prevent the public from coming too close, the shrine is blackened and burnt, its upper floors collapsed, its walls crumbled to the ground. The choking smell of smoke lingers in the air.

Baljinder mourns the motif paintings that covered all the ceilings and walls inside the Akal Takht. She lives in Khalaree, a village forty miles east, so close to Pakistan that she can see the border lights from her window. She never took the time to fully absorb the intricacy of the sixteenth-century designs she grew up reveling at. When she visits the temple in the aftermath, the water tank has been drained and the damaged building is covered on one side by a curtain.

After the government throws together a repair effort to rebuild the Akal Takht, Ranjit, who lives in the neighboring state of Haryana, comes to Amritsar to see the temple. For several days, his relatives in the city would try to go to the temple, only to be stopped by a Sikh police officer who looked at them with sad eyes and clasped hands, telling them, “There's nothing you can do. Go back home.” Ranjit sees pieces of the new Akal Takht building material fall from the structure. People pocket these rocks and inscribe them with mottos like “This Isn't God's Service, This Is The Government's Service.”

II.  
Autumn

All India Radio, Broadcast from Delhi - October 31, 1984:

"We regret to announce the death of the prime minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She was critically injured this morning at the residence and [unclear]. She was immediately rushed to All India Medical Institute where she succumbed to her injury."

Ten year old Ravneet sits in an classroom in the city of Hoshiarpur, near the foothills of the Himalayas, when his school principal walks in.

"Go back home," she tells the fifth graders. "The situation is getting worse."

An early release and an indefinite closure is announced to the whole school. The principal's words roll through Ravneet's mind as he bikes home with a group of friends. Their legs pedal on as usual, but they are paralyzed with fear; rumors of thugs with knives are tossed from child to child as their wheels spin. Ravneet takes an alternate route home that morning, winding through empty lots and quiet residential areas instead of taking the usual path that cuts through the bustling marketplace.

Seventy-five kilometers south, past the tributaries of the river Sutlej, a small group of college students stand outside the courtyard of their private tutor's home; the Hindu and Sikh girls face each other after the lesson. The sun is high and bright in Ludhiana, a densely populated city surrounded by Punjab's agricultural heartland.

"I would be very happy if the assassin turns out to be a Sikh," says Gurpreet, who is an eighteen year old student of commerce and current affairs. Any pretense that today is an ordinary afternoon is immediately extinguished; her classmate Bindu is aghast at Gurpreet's comment.

"How can you condone a killing? How can you have that kind of mentality?"

"How can you condone the killing of thousands?" Gurpreet retorts back. "She's the woman who ordered tanks onto the Golden Temple."

The Times of India - November 1, 1984:

INDIRA GANDHI SHOT DEAD

Sikh security men pump bullets in chest, abdomen.

~

Intermittent updates spiked with radio static compete with truck horns on National Highway 95, which runs west from Ludhiana for fifty kilometers before hitting the village of Ajitwal. Lentil farmer Daya bids his neighbor, a close family friend, farewell as the latter travels south to Delhi for routine business.

In the city of Panipat, police halt his truck and warn him of the dire situation further out. "I have to see my children in Delhi," he insists, sending his passenger back to Punjab with his truck before boarding a bus that continues on ahead.

At the tollbooth crossing between Haryana and Delhi, Daya's friend and three other Sikh men are thrown out of the bus by a mob and killed on the side of the road. A hotel owner, who Daya hears from months later, witnesses this and remembers the gold bracelets and rings adorning the man's hands, ornaments Daya can never forget.

~

November 2, 1984:

DoorDarshan, the government-run and singular news broadcast on television, airs constant footage of a crowd swarming the prime minister's residence, shouting the slogan "*Khoon Ka Badla Khoon*" (Blood for blood).

Kaleran, Punjab is just a short auto-rickshaw ride from the village where Daya sends off his friend. There, Surjit, a small-framed mother of college-going sons, listens to All India Radio and waits for her cousin-brother's return from Delhi; he has gone on a day trip to fetch his family and bring them back to the relative safety of the village.

The streets of Delhi burn with Sikh men who wear marigold garlands of fire around their necks. Mobs surround a man, force a tire filled with petrol over his turban and onto his bearded neck, then set him aflame. Passerbys on motor scooters choke on the black smoke that congests the alleyways. Surjit's nephew, who works at a steel dish and utensil factory, is necklaced along with his fellow workers. Elsewhere in the city, Sukhjinder's uncle, who runs a small taxi business, is killed in this way as well.

~

*Don't send the children to school. Stay at home,* neighbors advise Ravjot's parents, who live in the eastern coastal state of Orissa, 1500 kilometers away. They hear that the mobs encircling their city, Rourkela, throw balls of fire at the homes of Sikhs. On the second day of November, they shut their windows, undress their home of anything that might catch fire – curtains, winter blankets – and dress themselves for exile. The administration of Rourkela Steel Plant, where Ravjot's father is employed as an engineer, has ordered all Sikh families to evacuate the township.

On the third day of November, after a few hours' notice, Ravjot and her family packs their bare essentials – a few clothes in small bags, the Sikh holy text, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, folded into a box. Buses used for daily commute by steel plant workers are deployed to the twenty-plus sectors of the township. Fourteen-year-old Ravjot boards a bus that takes her family to a neighboring gurdwara.

At night, boys and men keep guard around the temple grounds. Ravjot sleeps on the floor of a classroom attached to the gurdwara. No news of her brother, a medical student in Cuttak, yet again. They have not heard from him since the riots began. Acquaintances tell her family they might have seen someone who looks like him running in front of a train, or being chased by a mob. She thinks of people in other sectors who were only given a few minute's notice before they had to board the buses, some hardly dressed. She thinks of the Bhukara Steel Plant where Sikh employees were thrown into the facility's furnances that melted their bodies like iron.

~

In Moga, Punjab, Surjit's cousin finally returns from Delhi, his eyes wet.

“It's like this, sister,” he says. “I've brought back the rest of the family, but my son was left behind.” Surjit melts with grief.

~



November 19, 1984:

"Some riots took place in the country following the murder of Indira Ji. We know the people were angry and for a few days it seems India had been shaken. But, when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it shakes."

-Rajiv Gandhi, who was sworn in as prime minister following his mother's assassination.

Punjab fills up with refugees. Sukhjinder's aunt goes to a shelter after she is widowed. Ravjot and her family leave Orissa for Punjab, where her mother's side of the family lives. Upon their arrival, the Punjab government presents to them blue migrant cards indicating they were displaced by the riots. The cards allow migrants to fill displaced-person quotas in school and college admissions. You must keep your card on you at all times, they are told. Ravjot feels marked. The card is a stamp that tells her: *Yes, you are a refugee in your homeland.*

Displaced families from across India arrive in neighborhoods like Gurpreet's, a cul-de-sac in a Ludhiana suburb just past the canal, where she and her divorced mother rent out the larger portion of their home. Those who have family in the area know where to go; others turn to local gurdwaras that match migrants to homes with available space to rent. Gurpreet's circle grows to include Kanpur residents whose businesses were burned down, families from Delhi and Lucknow who leave out of fear. A family who owned a sugar mill in Gorakhpur – four teenage daughters in tow – migrates to Punjab and rents out the space in Gurpreet's home; they are shaken after their mother witnesses Sikh soldiers being thrown off her train and killed on the railroad.

Ravjot's father, a former steel plant manager now unable to find work, spends his days locked up in small room inside the family's new home in Punjab. He collects raw material – acid, detergent – to make washing powder at home, in the hopes of maybe peddling it and growing a

small business.

“I want to do something for my family,” her father says.

At Gurpreet's house, the unemployed Gorakhpur father becomes embittered as he finds no sugar mill in Ludhiana where he can apply his experience.

~

The nightmares the migrant girls brought with them begin to infect Gurpreet – the stories of girls who disappeared, the stories of young women who were gang raped. The Gorakhpur parents brought their teenage daughters to Ludhiana, in large part, because of the violation of girls that was erupting elsewhere in the country.

Gurpreet's nanaji, her maternal grandfather, shares the same haunting fear. “Be prepared to die at our hands,” he tells her one day. “If anything were about to happen, we would rather kill you ourselves than have you dishonored.”

~

Daman, who has begun wearing a turban, travels the length and breadth of the United Kingdom to be a part of the Sikh uproar against the massacre in India. He goes to gurdwaras in Gravesend, in Scotland, in Manchester, in Southall, taking in the electricity of a community whose roots have been charged. He spends nights at ran-subhai programs, where spiritual music is sung until dawn. In London, he attends a massive protest against the bloodshed.

In San Francisco, Sukhdev – who immigrated from Delhi two years ago – marches with thousands of others in front of the Indian Consulate, demanding a response to the atrocities that drenched his hometown in blood. The Consulate does not open its doors.

III.

Winter

Across the moong lentil fields, Daya sees the police Jeep and he knows.

It's three in the afternoon on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1989 and he is spraying his crops. After a decade working abroad as a crane operator for a German company in Dubai, Daya returned three years ago to his family village of Ajitwal; the turmoil of 1984 made being away from Punjab a burden on his mind.

“Run,” his brother tells him. They both know that someone had been caught who knew Daya's name, who would probably give the police Daya's name.

“I'm not someone who runs,” Daya replies. Last year, he was away from home when the police came, so they arrested his wife, a government school teacher, instead. She told them he had taken his passport and ran off to Bombay without a word. In fact, he was on a short trip to Delhi. Daya wasn't going to let that happen again. The jeep comes closer. He isn't afraid.

~

While Daya remembers the day he was taken away, for others, like Sukhjinder, the years blur together. He was ten years old in 1984 and in the years since, he grows up on stories of communal fighting, of people being thrown out of buses and killed. Sukhjinder's parents tell him farmhouses like theirs are easy targets for violence. News stations play it up as Hindu versus Sikh conflict. Any time conflict erupts, the media emphasizes the religious identification of both parties.

But Sukhjinder doesn't sense religious tension in Mukerian, the Hindu-majority Hoshiarpur district village where his family grows wheat in the winter, rice and sugar cane in the monsoon season. Though they live on the outskirts of town, farmland separating them from neighbors, they have friendly relations with the Hindu families who come in the mornings and evenings to buy buffalo milk from his family's dairy.

Sukhjinder sees army convoys on Gurdaspur Road when he goes to school, but no one tells him why they are there. He hears stories of innocent people disappearing after encounters with the police. He hears stories of families leaving Punjab. He hears stories of older cousins being swept up in the movement. So he retreats to his imagination, where, full of anxiety and excitement at once, he envisions his Hindu friends rescuing his family if something bad were to happen.

“Of course we would protect you,” they tell him at school.

~

A man with a black cloth tied around his face sits in the back of the jeep. The police ask him to confirm Daya's identity and he nods. Daya knows this man is someone who had been beaten so he would divulge something. Since he returned to Punjab in 1986, Daya began giving assistance to a group of rebels he met at Baisakhi festival. He would serve them roti bread and water, wash their clothes, give them rides to places, provide shelter for a few days. They told him to not get too involved. Raise your son and daughter, they said.

~

Aman is the same age as Sukhjinder. She lives in the village of Mansa, two hundred kilometers south of him, in a lone house away from town. Her Mummy and Daddy turn on the evening news as they go about their errands. She can sense their fear when she overhears them talking. Rumors of the 'Black Trouser' gang, who robbed homes and killed people, haunted her for years before 1984. And in the years since, she hasn't been able to escape stories of fake encounters, where police would apprehend innocent Sikh men who were never seen again.

~

Daya arrives at the Ajitwal police station, a place that has threatened him many times in

the past several years. Young men in full Sikh form, with a beard, long hair, and a turban, were harassed regularly. Daya could not ride his motorcycle without being stopped by police and asked the same questions. *Where are you going? Where are you coming from? Who is this with you?* It made Daya feel like a refugee in the land where his roots were.

Since he's returned to Punjab, he's noticed one thing above all: anger. People were angry. The villagers he met would cry before they could talk. When they were finally able to form words, they'd tell him the military has surrounded village after village, that they've made living itself a sin. At the Baisakhi festival celebrations of 1986, months after he returned home, he met people who had escaped the Golden Temple, who saw it all. They told him it was a matter of self-respect to take action against the government. This shook Daya's soul, and he became their supporter.

~

In Hoshiarpur city, not far from the village where preteen Sukhjinder grows fearful of the military, Ravneet is regularly stopped and questioned by police when he drives his motorcycle. His parents tell him not to stay out late; people look at Sikh boys differently. By the time he starts attending Guru Nanak Dev College in Ludhiana, the fear has only escalated. During his first year, a student is killed by police during an encounter at the swimming pool; the college remains closed for several days afterward. The priest at the college gurdwara shows Ravneet an album with pictures of hundreds of former students who were killed or disappeared over the past few years.

At Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, where once she looked down when groups of boys would make suggestive remarks to girls who passed by, Rippy sees the number of male students dwindling. Those who remain tie their turbans taller and neater, with more pride.

Whenever Ravneet sees police on campus, he runs.

~

At six in the evening, Daya is taken to another police station, this one in the village of Mehna. Six or seven policemen approach him; they've clearly been drinking. They lie him down and slowly roll heavy cylinders of wood down his thighs.

“Tell us, where do they live, those who come to you?”

Daya tells them he doesn't know, that they do not tell him that much.

They press the instrument down his leg. His flesh begins to break.

Daya does not deny being loyal to their cause. He tells the police he helped them because they do the fighting he himself cannot do. Though he knows very little, he's heard murmurs of government bank robberies to purchase weapons. More importantly, he knows what they stand for: self-respect.

These policemen come and beat him two or three times a day before throwing him back into a room where he sleeps on the floor.

After a few days, he feels as if he has died. They roll the wooden cylinders across his numb legs, but there is no more pain. They break his right leg.

Daya tells himself that if Mughal emperors can peel off Bhai Taru Singh's scalp because he would not cut his hair and symbolically convert to Islam, then a group of drunk policemen can break his leg. He would take it.

~

Hundreds of kilometers southeast, in state of Haryana, Ranjit Singh is hit by the disappearances by both his nephew and younger brother.

His nephew was away from home, visiting another village for his sister-in-law's father's

funeral, when the police slammed open his door and pulled him into their car. He was dressed only in his underclothes.

Ranjit's brother hides from house to house, escaping the police for a while. One night, he wanders through the village of Sirhali, having missed the bus and finding no horsecart to board. The police pick him up.

Eight days later, someone notifies Ranjit and his family of the police station his brother is being kept at. Weeks later, his nephew turns up as well, bearing a wound on this thigh that was further inflamed by salt and red pepper.

~

Daya's ankles hang crimson from the branches of a neem tree.

Neem trees, known for their medicinal properties, grow in a huge, ceiling-less space inside the police station, surrounded by concrete walls. Daya dangles from the tree, his legs tied up with rope. The officers pull a rope lever and his face is drowned in a bucket of water.

At the point where he feels he is about to die, they pull him back up.

“Now tell us.”

When he is thrown back onto the cold floor between beatings, he is given food. But Daya isn't able to get up, let alone eat. He goes a week at a time without food, subsisting on water alone.

~

“It was a bad time,” the adults in Rup's family tell her whenever the period of turmoil comes up. She is an elementary schooler in early nineties Punjab, escaping the virtual state of emergency by a hair. But fear continues to infect her family. Her parents hide their cassettes of Bhindranwale's sermons, knowing the presence of materials linked to the leader killed at the



Golden Temple would invite police harassment. Neighbors burn any books, pamphlets, and tapes that might arouse suspicion.

Rup's father never talks about his best friend, who was picked up and shot dead by the police after years of harassment. Years later, when Rup returns to her town after immigrating to the United States in 2001, she meets this man's mother, who adopted her father as her own and calls Rup her granddaughter.

The elderly woman does not talk much, only briefly laughing at jokes before returning to the daze she lives in. When she does speak, all her stories lead back to her son, who calls handsome and good, who she searches for in Rup's father.

It takes meeting her, the saddest woman she's ever known, for Rup to realize the magnitude of what happened.

~

Daya is released after thirty days in prison. His fractured leg prevents him from being able to tend to his crops; he hires men to drive his tractors for the next year and a half.

Regular nightmares make Daya ask God if he was punished for something.

Four or five years after his release, Daya travels to Bombay, where he undergoes an operation at a volunteer medical camp. When the surgeon asks him what happened to his leg, he tells them he fell off a horse. He is sure that if he told the truth, he would end up once again hanging from the branches of a neem tree.

## Epilogue

Two years ago, Daya's right leg went under the knife once again, this time at OHSU. The surgery in Bombay was done poorly and his leg bothered him even after he immigrated to the United States in 2003. Now, he's finally found relief.

After working on a farm in Oregon City for several years, he retired, Daya tells me. We sit on a log underneath a shady tree by the gurdwara. From inside the building, I hear young girls take turns playing the shabads they learn in their morning classes. At one point, Daya's five-year-old granddaughter comes up to him and whispers something in his year before running off. When he tells me he finished secondary school around 1974, I realize he is far younger than I took him to be by his haunted gray eyes and long white beard.

Later that afternoon, his granddaughter sits in a Punjabi language class taught by Gurpreet, who wears a neat white turban. Beginners learn the Punjabi alphabet while advanced students work on their reading comprehension. When I sit with Gurpreet after her class, the former commerce and current affairs student recalls being struck with activist zeal during her college days in Ludhiana. Her teenage daughters have inherited their mother's opinionated nature but not necessarily her positions.

“So I remember my oldest daughter and I would have the discussion and her opinion is that it's not a genocide because it wasn't systemic. But that's what I'm trying to refute, that yes, it was,” Gurpreet tells me. “They know my views. We have some passionate discussions.”

Gurpreet has only visited India once since moving to the United States over twenty years ago. The media spotlight on rape and harassment makes her wary of taking her daughters to the country she once called home.

Sukhjinder's daughters and Ravneet's sons attend the Punjabi class, too. The fathers sit on the sidelines, congratulating their kids when they raise their hands and pitching in when they need reinforcement. The prospects of explaining 1984 to his children as they grow up weighs heavily on Sukhjinder, who was ten years old during the massacres.

“Our parents, being in Punjab, being in the thick of this thing, they didn't do a very good job of explaining or talking about this. It was a kind of taboo topic,” he says. “What's essential for the kids to understand is how we deal with adversity, to use that as a character building thing.”

Still, he worries that they will have a much weaker connection to it all than he does.

Ravneet says the climate his sons are being brought up in is radically different than what he experienced.

“You had to choose your friends carefully,” he says. “Our parents would tell us not to stay out late.”

Aman teaches Punjabi classes alongside Gurpreet. Both women play an active role in organizing gurdwara activities; their daughters are good friends. Unlike Gurpreet, she hasn't spoken much to her daughters, who are 12 and 18, about the incidents.

“I would say that they are still kids,” says Aman. “Slowly, a little at a time, you can tell them what happened, why it happened. Then, it's up to them, if they want they can research more.” While teenagers and twentysomethings at the gurdwara, like master's student Rup, turn to YouTube and social media to fill up with information the silences of the past, grandmothers like Surjit and Baljinder tune in to satellite obtained television channels like JusPunjabi, a New York based Punjabi-American channel, to watch panelists try and unravel the incidents of 1984.

“Then, I'd listen to the government news. On the radio, we'd listen. That was when I

developed an enthusiasm for the news,” Baljinder tells me. “Now, on that here channel JusPunjabi, a show called Mudha comes on in the evening. You can call them or write them on the Internet. They have a lot of information.”

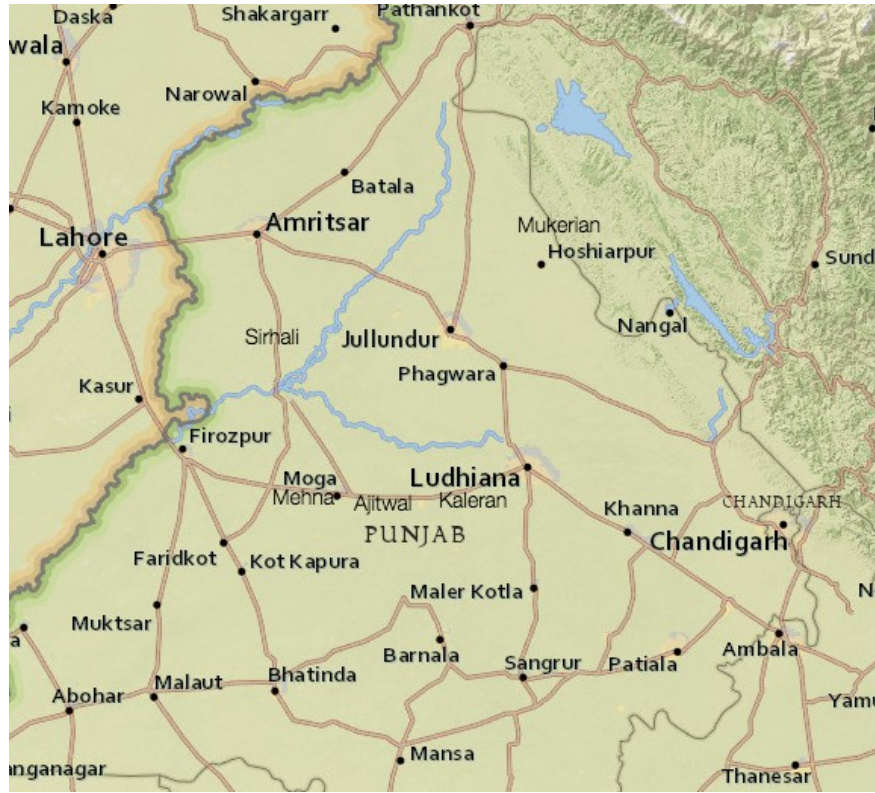
Surjit, who lived a hundred kilometers away, did not know the extent of the Golden Temple's condition after the attack until she watched shows like Mudha that filled in the details that had been suppressed for decades. And many of the things she did experience escape her today.

“In household life, busy with the kids, I forget my memories,” she says. “But I did see a lot.”

Appendix I – Maps:



Map 1: Northern India



Map 2: Punjab



*Map 3: New Delhi and surroundings*



*Map 4: Aerial Photograph of Amritsar. Golden Temple, center*



Appendix II – List of Interviewees:

Note: The surnames 'Singh' for men and 'Kaur' for women are religious names adopted by many practicing Sikhs. These do not indicate familial relations.

Name:	Appears in Chapters:
Amandeep Brar (“Aman”)	3, Epilogue
Rupinderpreet Kaur Brar (“Rup”)	3, Epilogue
Daya Singh Dhillon	1, 2, 3, Epilogue
Baljinder Kaur	1, Epilogue
Gurpreet Kaur	1, 2, Epilogue
Ravjot Kaur	2
Rupinder Kaur (“Rippy”)	1, 3
Surjit Kaur	Prologue, 2, Epilogue
Rajinder Kour	1
Ranjit Singh Randhawa	1, 3
Pawneet Sethi	1
Arjit Singh	1
Balwant Singh	1
Daman Singh*	1
Ravneet Singh	2, 3, Epilogue
Sukhdev Singh	2
Sukhjinder Singh	2, 3, Epilogue

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\* “Daman” is a pseudonym given to this interviewee, who requested anonymity

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- "Interview with Daya Singh Dhillon." Personal interview. 1 June 2014. Follow up interview conducted in person on 14 September 2014
- "Interview with Gurpreet Kaur." Personal interview. 1 June 2014. Follow up interview conducted in person on 14 September 2014 Additional interview conducted via email on 25 February 2015
- "Interview with Pawneet Sethi." Telephone interview. 18 Jan. 2015.
- "Interview with Ranjit Singh Randhawa." Personal interview. 1 June 2014.
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- "Interview with Ravneet Singh." Personal interview. 14 Sept. 2014.
- "Interview with Rupinder Kaur." Personal interview. 21 Jan. 2015.
- "Interview with Rupinderpreet Brar." Personal interview. 31 May 2014. Follow-up interview conducted via email on 13 September 2014

"Interview with Sukhdev Singh." Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2015.

"Interview with Sukhjinder Singh." Personal interview. 1 June 2014. Follow up interview  
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