

# **Narrating the Experience: Oral Histories and Testimonies of the 1984 anti-Sikh Carnage Victims**

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This essay attempts to understand the word “testimony” and asks how oral histories can also become testimonial. It considers how new histories can unfold from oral accounts of the victims in the context of 1984 anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi. It argues that formal testimonies may misrepresent events by diminishing the gravity of the violence experienced by the victims, while oral narrations may be considered useful historical sources. As a case study, we consider selected affidavits submitted to Nanvati Commission in 2000, as well as oral narratives of the survivors recorded during a field visit to the Tilak Vihar widow’s colony in April 2015.

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## **Part 1: Oral History and Oral Testimony**

Several projects and archives<sup>1</sup> aim at documenting the accounts of victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi and other affected areas. Apart from the legal testimonies, the recordings of the live accounts of the victims involved “Remembering”. “Remembering” needs to be considered with an aim of revoking,<sup>2</sup> so that traumatic histories may not repeat themselves in the future. Memory plays a crucial role in “remembering”. Emotional stress, psychological trauma, prejudice and bias may accompany narrations of the experiences of 1984 by the survivors of the carnage. Do oral histories testify experiences that may be emotionally charged? This question may be answered by understanding the differences between the oral histories and archival/legal documents. Monica Dutta suggests that Oral testimonies are substantial enough for exploration of new (untold) histories: “The binary opposition between archives and oral testimonies<sup>3</sup>

is an artificial academic construction" (Dutta, 82). The archival has aspects of the oral in it and the oral is substantial enough in charting 'new' histories.<sup>4</sup> The role memory plays within the construction of the past (no matter how emotional) is that of revival of the unforgotten impressions that are impressed on to the mind of the people as an aftermath. The oral narrative may refute the neat sense of chronology of events, dates and political facts but they offer several possibilities of representing simultaneous realities (Dutta, 82).

This aspect would unfold itself in the analysis of select oral histories and affidavits in this paper. The paper studies the oral histories of the survivors (the victims of 1984 anti-Sikh Carnage in Delhi) now residing in a colony popularly known as "Tilak Vihar widow's colony". These interviews were collected during a field visit in April 2015. The paper also studies the affidavits (the legal testimonies) that were registered after the event took place in Oct-Nov, 1984.<sup>5</sup> The paper focuses on the fact that legal documents may have aspects of oral, examining how the oral becomes testimonial as it may record the unrecorded occurrences during the incident. C.A.J Coady ponders over issues of reliance or believability of testimonies: "How does one distinguish between true belief or true opinion from knowledge proper?" (Coady, 4). The distinction between the legal testimonies and natural or extended testimonies suggest the nature of narration and the role language plays is suggestive of the procedural and emotional functions of language. The authenticity can be determined by analyzing the manner in which the legal testimonies are registered and that of the extended (oral) testimonies.

Legal testimonies as suggested by Gelfert will be subjected to "strict demands for truthfulness, accuracy and relevance (Gelfert, 14). This testimony is in form of a legal document that needs to be presented before the court or to a commission of inquiry "...a kind of evidence: ...specifically the evidence provided by persons" (Coady, 27). Legal testimonies seem to claim institutional accuracy that function as "powerful legal tools in both political trials - where the historical record is adjudicated - and in ordinary, mundane trials - where "history", per se, is not at the fore, but where testimonies still play a vital role in establishing a factual narrative" (Beim, 73). Thus, the affidavits collected by the victims to be presented before the inquiry commission are the legal documents. Recorded in set structural patterns and prescribed performatives become the so-called "historical records" administering "factual narratives" (Terms borrowed from Beim's definition).

Other forms of testimony can be considered to be natural that is largely an aspect of language that aims at capturing what Gelfert suggests are 'the

conventions governing the speech act of testifying' (32). Thus, the manner of narration of the affidavits that varies from each other and is yet similar in certain cases will be analyzed in the second section of this paper. The analysis of the oral histories for this paper would also focus on the role oral histories play by becoming evidential for testifying the historical certainty of the event. This is possible because the victims testify the experience. Kant suggests that testimonial is something empirical; and the person who narrates, who is to be believed on the basis of his testimony "must be an object of experience" (Kant, 61).

The structural narrative of the oral testimonies may be read as an outcome of the consciousness amongst the victims. Thomas Reid explains, "Consciousness is the power by which we know about operations of our own minds; it is quite different from the power by which we perceive external objects; and these different powers have different names in our language and (I believe) in all languages" (8). For Reid, consciousness is a state of mind in the present. It is not a matter of past as he clearly distinguishes between consciousness and memory. Thus, consciousness, in the present study, is visible through the identity positions people/victims tend to adopt in the present that may be based on a past event having become the Kantian "object of experience". This consciousness registers the 'operations'<sup>6</sup> (in this case the collective thinking of a particular community that attacks people of another community) that led to the event in the past. In this case the matters of consciousness need to be understood by placing the victims in the present position 31 years hence from the actual date of the event in 1984. Has there been a recovery, recall or repression of memory from the traumatic experiences? The victim's situation in the present as a consequence of the past and the identity positions (both political and religious) that they take as a 'matter of consciousness' may prove substantial in authenticating the oral accounts. While referring to the Holocaust, Gelfert observes that the oral histories:

...testify not only to their first-hand experiences, but also to the enormity of the historical events and injustices they suffered. Empirical accuracy in such contexts takes second place to historical authenticity, and the quest for certainty in knowledge is secondary to the struggle for recognition. (17)

Memory is instrumental in recording the past. The memories in oral history are largely subjective based on the past experiences of the victims and effect of the past in the present on the psyche of the individuals. Nonetheless, they are "embedded within systems of collective memory, as well as dependent upon narrative structure and truth-claims" (Beim 58). The survivors claim that their

memories are not just subjective memories of the individual suffering but of communities collective memory. They are not just a recall of the past but serve an evaluative function (Fivush, 61). These memories may be repressed and fragmented. Many a times they are episodic memories that are related to certain impressionable events or episodes in life of a person. Tulving suggests that:

Episodic memory enables a person to remember personally experienced events as such. That is, it makes it possible for a person to be consciously aware of an earlier experience in a certain situation at a certain time. Thus, the information of episodic memory could be said to concern the self's experience in subjective space and time. (67)

It is evident how the survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh carnage recall their past memories of trauma through a movement backward, from present into the past, a mental ability to travel back in time as a result of episodic memory. This also authenticates the actual happening of the event in the past.

Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone put forth certain crucial concerns regarding memory that can be relevant to the present study:

The question of how suffering may be remembered has several different layers of meaning. Firstly, it asks about the very possibility of memory under certain circumstances. How can catastrophe be remembered? Does memory delete the unendurable? What are the capacities of memory to represent and recall suffering? But it also refers to the political—how should such events be memorialised?—and the therapeutic—what needs to happen to bring about healing? And finally, it is a question about the workings of memory and forgetting, and what memory does with wounds. (98)

Our next section will look more closely at oral narratives of the 1984 violence, keeping these concerns in mind.

## **Part 2: Oral Testimonies of the 1984 anti-Sikh Violence**

The following accounts are narrative summaries of the oral testimonies collected during a field visit to Tilak Vihar widow's colony in Delhi and those of affidavits presented to Nanavati commission. These oral accounts trace not just the happenings in past but the present state of mind of the survivors who continue to live with a sense of utter betrayal at the hands of the state and are completely

disillusioned.

A survey of about 20 affidavits<sup>7</sup> studied for this paper indicates that many of the dependants belonged to extremely poor classes. Out of 20 affidavits, 18 were registered in the year 2000, when many people made reference to their FIRs registered earlier (around 1984) but to no avail. The Nanavati Commission was appointed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government after the resolution being passed in the Rajya Sabha, when a number of new affidavits filed in the year 2000<sup>8</sup> were received by the commission. Some people also mention that they went to the police station but the police did not address their complaints.

Out of these 20 affidavits, 15 people declared loss of property below Rs. 50,000, and majority of these claimed between Rs. 20,000 and Rs.30,000 (9 people). Balwinder Kaur, a woman aged 50 years who lost a 19-year-old son, claimed losses worth Rs. 6000 but did not receive any compensation. Asa Singh, a 53-year-old man who lost 2 young sons, claimed losses worth Rs. 15,000 but also did not receive compensation. Only four people declared that they received a death claim compensation for their relatives which amounted to Rs. 3.50 lakhs.<sup>9</sup> From the affidavits it is evident that some families who suffered multiple human losses received death claim compensation only for one member of the family, while others were ignored.<sup>10</sup> In other cases people declared losses worth Rs. 90,000 but received only Rs. 10,000. This also implies that the majority of people who suffered were those people belonging to poor sections of society, largely, the common masses. This doesn't mean that economically rich people were not attacked. The rich were attacked, too, but could revive from the traumatic situations much sooner than the lower classes for whom life became a continuous and a seemingly unending struggle.

At the same time, Richpal Kaur's account, as available from her affidavit dated November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1984, depicts that the mob had attacked her husband who was badly injured in their front yard. She had managed to carry him to the hospital where he expired. When she returned she found that out of her three children, two, aged 12 and 8, were found missing. She requests the police to find her children. She also mentions that they had build one room and kitchen in 100 gaj land which had been reduced to debris. Her account though a part of legal testimony, formal and written in a prescribed performative is emotionally charged where the plight of a mother trying to find her children is evidently visible. This also takes us ahead in our discussion of the premise that oral elements may be available in what we call the "formal" or legally written accounts. Many of these affidavits have been written procedurally in a technical language and a

prescribed structure are as follows:

I, Wizoro Kaur w/o S. Jani Singh aged 60 years, resident of 13/36, Kalyanpuri, Delhi-91, do hereby solemnly affirm and declare as under:-

1. That in Oct/ Nov, '84, I was staying at the above address since 1976 along with my husband and two sons & 3 daughters.
2. That my husband was working as Iron Smith.
3. That on 1-11-84 at about 10 a.m. a large mob attacked at 13 Block, Kalyanpuri. The mob looted the household articles and then set those & our house on fire. I and my husband took shelter in neighbour Hindu family's house, but my daughter Shakuntla aged 18 years was killed. (Death Certificate enclosed).
4. That compensation against death of my daughter has not yet been given to me.
5. I also suffered a loss of Rs. 30,000/- on account of looting of household goods, but only Rs. 1000/- compensation has been given to me.
6. I am entitled to full compensation.

Verification:

Verified that the contents of my above affidavit are true to the best of our personal knowledge and nothing has been concealed therein. It has been read over to me.

Place: New Delhi

Date: 30-08-2000

It is interesting to note that the Deponent has given her thumb impression on the affidavit, which suggests that she must have been unable to either write for herself (possibly unable to write in English or may be uneducated), thus in all likelihood she may not be fully aware of what has been recorded here. Since this affidavit is written in English (though affidavits written in Punjabi and Hindi are also available), as the last line declaring "It has been read over to me" is reading an account in a language unknown to the narrator who may not have understood what was read to her. The document being read in English would not have made any sense to her. Thus, it is important to question the validity and authenticity of such a document which is limited in details providing minimum details. It is also not clear as to how her daughter was killed? Moreover, one wonders about Waziro Kaur's husband and his whereabouts as nothing has been mentioned in the affidavit. Certain queries like was her husband also killed, or attacked come to mind? Perhaps an interview could throw light on such ambiguities. These

affidavits are monological and the dialogue seems to be completely missing, where as in an interview (as a method) such ambiguities can be overcome as there is a receiver and a sender. The Interviewer and the Interviewee develop an intimate relationship in the text.<sup>11</sup> The supposed gaps about factual information, like the one in this case (a query about Waziro Kaur's husband) can be addressed, by the interviewer. Edmund Farrell writing about the first-person accounts suggests that:

Like the first-person narrators of autobiographies, poems, short stories, and novels, speakers in oral histories establish a confidential, intimate relationship with the reader/listener, though some speakers, just as some fictive narrators, are more trusting and trustworthy than are others. (89)

A little intervention by the interviewer could have helped in providing more information about the event and the unspoken or unaccounted information could open possibilities for new histories to reveal themselves. The issues related to trustworthiness of the accounts have been already dealt within the discussion about authentication of memory.

In contrast to the above account, Tara Chand's account written in a similar structure gives a detailed account of his experience. On one hand, where Waziro Kaur's account is just half a page, Tara Chand's account runs to 2 pages. Other accounts of Darshan Singh, Charanjeet Kaur and Balwant Singh provide detailed lengthy description of their experiences. Balwant Singh's account is of 3 pages. Tara Chand's affidavit reveals how the Police itself was a partner in crime. He records:

That on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1984 I went to Police Station to register my complaint and get the FIR Copy. But my complaint was not registered and I was handed over a self made FIR which I did not accept as the same was not correct.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Tara Chand's account suggests the corrupt role that was being played by the police. The neutrality of police and the police's role is also questionable as Rajwant Kaur was taken to the police station on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1984 and they returned only on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1984. No other details have been provided as to why they were arrested or how the police behaved with them? These questions remain unanswered as nothing about them is revealed through these formal testimonies.

The difference between Waziro Kaur's and Tara Chand's account is that of discursive narration, assertion, conviction and persuasion. Waziro Kaur's account

is simple declarative in which details are completely missing. One doesn't come to know about the two sons as suggested in the affidavit. Information only about Waziro Kaur and her husband taking shelter in the Hindu neighbour's house is provided. There is complete ambiguity about the sons and the manner in which the daughter dies. Whereas Tara Chand's account is not just detailed but descriptive. The details of the event provide a very graphic account suggesting that the riots erupted after P.M. Indira Gandhi's assassination; mobs rushing in shouting slogans:

INDIRA GANDHI AMAR RAHE. Mob came from Railway line side. They were all armed with Lathies, Iron Rods and Jarricanes of Kerosene in their hands. At that time I was not present in the house. At about 11 O'Clock in the morning my wife heard noise and took shelter with neighbours along with all children and left the house closed. Rioters first looted and then set my house on fire and what all was in the house was burnt. They were in drunken condition.

His account, unlike Waziro Kaur's, is assertive and confirms that Indira Gandhi's assassination was the triggering point behind the action. The slogan has been reproduced in capital letters in order to emphasise, as well as, suggest that the mobs were supporters of Indira Gandhi. Though in majority of affidavits people begin by reporting that they heard about Indira Gandhi's assassination, while in Waziro Kaur's account this slightest detail is also absent. The rioters were not concentrating on killing alone but their objective was also looting the household goods from the houses of the victims as depicted from Tara Chand's account. Further as suggested above, Tara Chand boldly reports about how he was handed a "self-made FIR". Tara Chand continues to describe the dislocation he faced as a consequence of the event, his stay in the relief camp for two months and then after that he had to stay with his in-laws at Vikas Puri. He was allotted a plot in G-Block with other victims but he had to sell it off at the time of his daughter's marriage as he was in a dire need of money. He started staying in a rented accommodation near that flat. He was not paid compensation for the loss of material goods worth Rs. 80,000/- by the government.

Nothing about Waziro Kaur's post-carnage experience is known. Similarly, the seemingly self-written/self-narrated<sup>13</sup> accounts like those of Subedar Balwant Singh (aged 55 years), Darshan Singh, Charanjit Kaur, another Balwant Singh, and Piar Kaur are more detailed and reveal new facts with respect to individual experiences. Some deponents declare the names of some of the attackers



involved in the disturbances. Darshan Singh in his account declares that he was informed by his mother about a veteran congress leader H.K.L. Bhagat's involvement in distributing "iron rods, some powder to the mob which was later used by mob to kill and burn the bodies of Sikhs."<sup>14</sup> Balwant Singh names 12 people who were involved in the mass killings. These 12 people were his neighbours and some of them were the tenants of his shops. He owned ten shops that he had rented out. All tenants were Hindus. His house was burnt to ashes but not a single shop damaged. He also mentions that one of his tenant Bhim Singh, a tailor by profession was leading the mob. He also reports that the mob was shouting slogan that "'En Sikh Gidharon Ne Hamari Man ko Mara, Ab Hum En Ko Mare Gayen." Capt. Hira Singh at that time was saying that "Burn the Sikhs alive." Subedar Balwant Singh narrates that on asking for water at the hospital when his son was attacked, the doctor replied that "There is no water fit for drinking as the Sikhs have poisoned the entire water supply." Such rumours, and also that lacs of Sikhs are coming to Delhi from Punjab and trains full of Hindu's dead bodies had arrived at old Delhi station and that the Sikhs were distributing sweets at the death of Indira Gandhi, had been spread around. This was considered to be the first phase of the organised structure of the carnage (Mukhoty and Rajni Kothari 1984; 1-2). Thus, rumors may be considered to be "intricately interwoven with images of control and power" (Hasan-Rokem 2005, 31). Madhu Kishwar suggests that "these rumours have become not only a way of justifying the monstrous happenings which have no real justification, but also a weapon that is used with telling effect against the victims" (Kishwar 1984; 24).

Likewise, Piar Kaur also reports how her husband was thrown in the well when he asked for water, she names two persons whom she identified directing the mob to throw him in the well by saying, "Sardar Pani Mangta Hai. Isko Kuan Main Phek Do."<sup>15</sup> Later, the body was removed from the well and handed over to Piar Kaur.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the use of reduced language in the cultural genocide was an important tool in instigating the partners in crime and also instilling fear amongst the target group of people. Such language is effective in forcing a blame on the community as an added insult to the injury. In a way, it is used as justification for the act (of mass-killings) by the perpetrators and holding their targets guilty of the crime, in the present case, holding them guilty for Indira Gandhi's assassination. Thus, the mass also exerts another kind of narration that is dominant and authoritarian resulting in a complete breakdown of democracy. The refusal for registration of FIR in Tara Chand's case in the police station and of the doctor denying water to the patient, of involvement of veteran leaders

suggests as rightly put by Uma Chakravarty that the “sanctions for the killings had come from the highest quarters....It had dissolved because the code between the “watan”, the country, and its people had broken” (Chakravarty 1994, 2724).

The affidavits only render the factual details, may be descriptive, detailed or even first-hand narratives. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the written has aspects of oral within it but the live oral-histories capture the emotions, impact of the event on the victims. To some extent the psychological delineation depicted through pauses, silences, tears, excitement, aggression, pathos, helplessness, illocutionary/locutionary acts and the speech acts find its way in the oral/spoken accounts of the survivors of the carnage. The interviews selected for the present study were recorded (videographed) in April 2015.<sup>17</sup>

The following narrative summary of Attar Kaur resident of Tilak Vihar widow's colony posits the plight of the victims 32 years hence the pogrom. More than twelve members of her family were killed during the pogrom.<sup>18</sup>

Attar Kaur was a resident of Kastura Nagar, from there her family shifted to Trilok Puri, where they stayed for ten years. She stayed with her husband, seven children and mother-in-law. She remembers that last ten years before the carnage were years of prosperity for her family. Her husband had a repair shop, hired cycles and rickshaws and did miscellaneous jobs. They were now in a position where they had hired servants. She emotes that before the pogrom: “We used to cast vote to Indira Gandhi. We always voted for congress. She was the one who brought us from Kastura Nagar to Trilok Puri. Gave us a loan, gave us a house. We made a house, ten years passed, in ten years our business was flourishing.”

Many people have reported voting for Congress and have felt betrayed. This group of people have been apolitical. Uma Chakravarty records the experiences of Nanki Bai and Shanno Kaur in her essay. They had been congress supporters and how Nanki Bai's husband who was actually fasting to mourn Indira Gandhi's death was killed by the mobs. The community felt betrayed as the protectors and providers as recalled by Attar Kaur had turned its back towards them. Uma Chakravarty appropriately suggests that:

...survivors, particularly women and children, perceived the sense of loss, material and emotional in a situation where it appeared that the 'community' of fellow citizens, the neighbours, and their 'protector' - the government - not only abandoned

them but actually betrayed them. (Chakravarty 1994, 2722)

Thirty one years hence Attar Kaur's daughter, who was one month old in 1984, is married and extremely unhappy. One of the interviewees reported that most of the girls of the victim survivors have been extremely unhappy, while we talked to some daughters-in laws (wife of their sons) they said that since their marriage these families had never celebrated diwali, in fact every year when diwali approaches the family enters into a mournful period of grief. Moreover, several boys in the colony were drug addict and led into petty crimes.<sup>19</sup>

Attar Kaur remembers that they were saved as her son's muslim friend hid them in their house. They cut the hair of their child and turned them *mona*.<sup>20</sup> By evening when they come out of their hiding they realised that the Sikhs were being burnt alive. On inquiring where her son's were now and what were they doing she informed that her sons had studied from Akal Academy, Baru Sahib, a Sikh missionary School near Solan in H.P. About 22 children pogrom effected children around these women, were sent to the Academy for education. Having returned from there, they are auto-rickshaw drivers. The sons later on retained their hair and turned Gursikh.<sup>21</sup>

Attar Kaur remembers that her husband was burnt in his shop. His brother-in-law was being burnt in the Gurudwara when he had gone to attend him, somebody informed him that his shop was being burnt. She also remembers how the women were abducted:

What we have seen, the whole day they kept killing our Sardars, and when evening came, they collected our women in the evening, some were falling on their children and they were dressing them in small clothes, and if the child was a son, they killed him, those who fell on their children they tore her clothes, at night they lighted candles (batti) and carried daughters and daughter's in laws with them. <sup>22</sup>

All those women have been in the camps and children have been a witness to plight of their mothers.

They were not saying anything to little children [perhaps infants], then they said they are snakes, they are snake-children, kill them. They said *salayon* you will become our daughter-in-laws and the chests of Hindus, having been cut are being sent. They abused us immensely, who did this, who got it done, Congress, congress knows everything, how they abducted women, how they burnt men alive. What kind of a punishment

is this? We feel so sad?

Attak Kaur retorts that it is their Sardar brothers who helped them re-establish. Although, one cannot overlook the fact that many Hindus had also helped people. Many students and scholars from Universities in Delhi had participated in the relief work and many Hindus had hidden people in their houses as also evident from Harbans Singh's account. Thus, this assertion seems to be a very subjective emotional outflow where perhaps, for Attar Kaur there is a moment of refuting any favour from the people of that community who participated in killings of people would also be amongst the one's offering help. Though, this is momentary and transient because on being asked if they hated the Hindus, she denied and exercised a wish hoping that this incident never repeated itself to anyone at all.

After every episode she repeated "Bahut jurm hoyeya hai."<sup>23</sup> She asks:

Rajeev Gandhi said when one tree falls the earth shakes, for his mother the earth shook but for those numberless Sikhs who were killed did nothing shake? Everyone knows how Congress killed Sikhs, how women were abducted. Everyone knows. Rahul Gandhi says I am sad for my grandmother, but so many women were abducted; someone's mother was abducted, someone's sister was raped, did no one see what was happening to the Sikhs, nobody was saving us, we were roaming around like beggars, we kept wandering with children for three days, Chille village, here and there, somebody is offering rotis, like pieces [thrown to the dogs] what the thirsty did with us. What congress did to us was it less? *Bahut jurm kiya hamere saath....* There is one actor Salman Khan, who killed a buck, an animal and he is summoned by the court again and again and we say, we go to the court in Geeta Colony and said that he is our killer, he is our killer; no one heard us. Police killed us itself, police said sit inside nothing will happen, government got this done. Even now the circumstances are such, in Tilak Vihar, there are such women who don't have food to cook.

For Attar Kaur herself, life had been miserable and she was very insecure about her children. She would count her children and sleep. She remembers that one night one of her children had gone to a neighbor's house to watch T.V. She created panic having lost him. Till date women of neighborhood joke around

Attar Kaur that she counts her children before sleeping. This is the kind of psychological impact on Attar Kaur's mind post-pogrom. She suggests that it was only the collective community and a shared experience of trauma that led these women cope up. When they were distressed they saw their neighbouring companion equally distressed and thus continued together helping, crying, resettling and battling with the hard circumstances of life. They question why Sikhs were attacked as Sikhs are merciful, kind, benevolent, people who can't see anyone in agony so why was so much pain hurled on them in such a merciless manner.

Similarly, Shakuntala shares her fear and says that they don't speak to anyone about the carnage as they are scared of being killed. Harbans Singh, her husband remembers how his entire family was burnt alive. 16 members of their family were killed. Harbans Singh had cut his hair before the actual destruction began around their house. He remembers how his father pushed him out from the back door towards the room throwing his children to him and a blanket saying, "Harbans Singhe bacche bacha apne."<sup>24</sup> Shakuntala's brother was adamant about not cutting his hair. He was swung by his hair and hit against the wall. He was also strangled by the neck. He kept shouting for help but Harbans Singh expresses his helplessness for not being able to do anything. Harbans Singh narrates his experience of escaping, hiding, running away and thus being able to save himself. There was a man who took them to about 10-12 houses trying to find shelter for them but to no avail as people were scared of providing shelter to Sikhs and putting their life in danger. He remembers how his acquaintance Darshan Singh was tied to a rickshaw and dragged. The rickshaw was loaded with numberless dead bodies. Attar Kaur and other women complained that a truck full of dead bodies was brought in which they were asked to identify their kins but the bodies were burnt and faces tattered as men were hit on their faces and heads being marked for their hair and beard. No one could be identified.

Shakuntala remembers the manner in which her sisters-in-laws were killed:

One of my sister-in-laws (Bharjai), when my Bharjai came out, she asked for water, they said, urinate in her mouth, no need to put water in her mouth, none of her children should be saved, none of their women should be saved, kill everyone...they killed my two Bharjaiyan, one, who came out died and one got burnt inside...and the one who came out she was killed brutally, she was pulled by her legs, one man killed her one leg, other man

pulled the other leg that she was torn apart (begins; crying) we  
have seen all this in front of us with our eyes...(silence and tears)

The house in which Shakuntala and her family stay at present is a two-bedroom house outside which they run a sugarcane juice stall. Shakuntala has refused to take any compensation for her dead as she feels her loss cannot be compensated for. When asked that a monthly compensation of Rs.1000 per month per person who died would account to Rs.16000 per month is provided to the survivors, Shakuntala spat on the floor and said, "Do I eat out of the people whom they killed? Mangal Singh's entire clan has been killed, no one can compensate. They killed our people and now they are compensating?" The condition of this house in which approximately 8 people stay together is deplorable. But Shakuntala's self-respect is beyond the favors of the state. She is very clear about the fact that it was a state-organized pogrom and refuses to accept any compensation from those who themselves had plotted against people like Shakuntala.

These narratives employ both silence and speech as means of communication. It is not possible to register the silence within the formal writings. In Attar Kaur's and Shakuntala's narrations tears, deep sighs, involuntary utterances, silences and expressions of pathos are regular accompaniments. Attar Kaur's repetitive assertions that "Bahut Jurm hoyeya hai," and "Bahut Jurm huya hai hamare saath," are psychological utterances, prelocutionary acts, depicting the impact of the past in the present. The speaker with such utterances involves the listener in ways often missing in the formal documents. Harbans Singh's repetitive gratitude to God, joining hands and saying "Sachhe Patsha ne bachaya" ("Sachhe Patsha saved us") constitutes a performative speech act. It is also a matter of surprise for Harbans Singh that he could survive such a situation, as expressed in performance and tonality of the voice that add to his live narrations. The interviewee's expressions of anger, abuse, sympathy, sadness and self-pity are added effects that point towards both effect (on the listener) and affect (of both the interviewee and the interviewer). One of the interviewee angrily blurted, "If they can kill so many of our people why can't we kill theirs?"<sup>25</sup> Narration, no matter how dramatic or emotive, authenticates the experience through memory. Thus, towards conclusion, I would like to put forth certain crucial questions: is memory instrumental in validating the experience? Is it therapeutic, or can it lead to an erasure of what is otherwise unendurable or unforgettable? And finally, how can memory be instrumental for representation? Attempts have been made to address these questions by reproducing these experiences of the survivors

through memory. Similar cases are visible in the later carnages the country has experience, particularly in 2002 in Godhra, which was of a similarly disastrous nature and continued for several days. The 1984 carnage in fact became an example for other events that followed it. Thus there is a need to question the role of the state vis-à-vis public responsibility in the light of the present situation of the survivors.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 1984livinghistory.org/ ; 1984 Carnage in Delhi: A Report on the Aftermath PUDR, Delhi: 1992; Reports by several commissions; affidavits filed by the victims [www.carnage84.com](http://www.carnage84.com)

<sup>2</sup> Revoking is an act of withdrawal. The reference here to revoking is to suggest that lessons be learnt from the past event around violence and withdraw from any such reoccurrence in any manner. Remembering could be a powerful tool for this to happen practically.

<sup>3</sup> It is clear that testimonies are produced in the court. In the paper the oral accounts of the victims need to be understood as a kind of testimony irrespective of the fact whether they are produced in the court or not. Further reading into testimony theory may disregard the thin boundaries.

<sup>4</sup> “New” here may not be considered as construction of the new but as discovery of the unknown past or even revelation of the untold/ hidden/ forgotten/erased past.

<sup>5</sup> The year 1984 in India saw tensions rise between the Sikh community and the Government of India, particularly the leaders of the then ruling party, Congress. By then Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala had emerged as a strong religious leader who had entered into politics but soon withdrew support to the leading congress party. All the same, there was a great depository of arms being held in the premises of the Golden Temple, the holy shrine of the Sikhs. Bhindranwala was considered a national threat and the Government of India attacked the Golden Temple in June 1984 in order to arrest him, as he was thought to be hiding there. Heavy ammunition and tanks were moved into the premises of the temple and the Akal Takhat, the political epitome for the Sikh community, was reduced to debris. About 1000 pilgrims and 157 soldiers were killed. These events deeply affected the Sikhs and on 31<sup>st</sup> October two Sikh bodyguards of Indira Gandhi, Satwant Singh and Beant Singh, assassinated the Prime Minister. This was followed by mass reprisals against the Sikh community; about 3000 Sikhs were killed in Delhi alone. ([www.1984livinghistory.org](http://www.1984livinghistory.org))

<sup>6</sup> Reid definition of Operation: “...its [mind] various ways of thinking; and that’s why they are called its ‘operations’ and are expressed by active verbs” (7).

<sup>7</sup> These are only 20 affidavits out of the over 4000 that exist. Only these 20 were available to

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the Researcher during an April 2015 survey. Though one understands that this is a very insignificant number with regard to the total number, the focus of the paper is on narrative and even this small segment of material is of great importance. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that while studying oral histories of trauma even a single account can be of great significance. There is also a need to carry out a systematic study of the affidavits registered as it reveals truth not just about the event alone but about the economic status of the victims and how very little justice was done to them. These affidavits were collected from archives at Gurudwara Rakab Ganj, New Delhi in April 2015. The selection pattern has been random for the initial part of the study as this material was received only after great struggle and difficulty.

<sup>8</sup> The limitation of this paper is that a comparison between the affidavits filed in 1984 and those of 2000 has not been carried out. New and important facts may emerge from such a comparative study.

<sup>9</sup> Kirpal Kaur (aged 76 years) for her husband; Sukhwinder Kaur (aged 36 years) for her husband; Manjit Singh (aged 38 years) for his brother; Shanti (aged 50 years) for her husband.

<sup>10</sup> Shanti (aged 50 years) for her husband, but not for her father-in-law.

<sup>11</sup> Text here means recording. Developing an intimate relationship is not on personal terms but it is purely in the context of discourse and language. I must also mention that for taking these interviews we contacted a resident of the colony who happened to be acquainted to us as the residents are still suspicious of outsiders and are reluctant to talk about their experiences. Shakuntala and her husband, Harbans Singh, clearly mention that they are scared to open their mouths, fearing that if they speak they may be killed.

<sup>12</sup> Affidavit No. 1579, dated 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the accounts are detailed, but bear a thumb impression instead of a signature. Thus they couldn't have been written by the deponent; probably these accounts were dictated.

<sup>14</sup> Affidavits available in records stored at Gurudwara Rakab Ganj, Delhi

<sup>15</sup> "Sardar is asking for water. Throw him in the water."

<sup>16</sup> Piar Kaur lived in Bokaro, though this affidavit was filed in 2000 in New Delhi for the Nanavati Commission.

<sup>17</sup> These interviews were recorded in April 2015, 31 years after the actual event took place. One of the objectives of the study has been to understand what has come of the survivor generations, how have they been able to live all these years. The study proposes that to move further from the events of 1984 is not to detach from them but to understand how



subsequent generations are affected by them. Three decades would roughly mean three generations: the victims, the children who witnessed the event and the ones born to families of the victims after the event took place.

<sup>18</sup> Details of people killed in Attar Kaur's family: "Earlier we used to stay in Kastura Nagar. From there we came to Trilok Puri. We stayed in Trilok Puri for ten years and then after ten years there was carnage and then my husband passed away and my brother-in-law (Nandoi) was burnt in the Gurudwara, three sons of my brother-in-law (jeth) were killed, my husband was killed, my three chacha's were killed, Chacha's sons-in-law (jawai) were killed, his sons were killed, a lot of people in our family were killed, Mama sausur and his sons were killed. Situation and time (Halat) was really bad to us."

<sup>19</sup> This information was provided by one of the interviewee's daughter-in-law who refused to reveal her identity.

<sup>20</sup> *Mona* is a term used for those Sikhs who cut their hair.

<sup>21</sup> *Gursikh* is a term for that Sikh who keeps hair and doesn't trim or cut his beard.

<sup>22</sup> Unpublished interview with Attar Kaur. The original interview is in Punjabi and has been translated by the researcher.

<sup>23</sup> "Bahut jurm hoyeya hai": "Extreme atrocities have been inflicted."

<sup>24</sup> "Harbans Singhe bacche bacha apne": "Harbans Singh, save your children."

<sup>25</sup> Identity of the interviewee has been concealed.

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