Beyond 1984 Punjab: Three Non-Sikh Women Voices

Himadri Banerjee

I

The Punjab of 1984, the Partition of 1947, and the Akali struggle of the 1920s are important milestones of twentieth century Sikh history. It is these developments that contributed to making Sikhs a community known beyond Punjab in India. While these events have very little in common, they are defining moments that have widened the frontiers of Sikhism. In Punjab, these are read as: for the Sikhs, of the Sikhs, and by the Sikhs; in the pan-India context, they generally stand beyond scholarly scrutiny.

In the last few decades, in the course of my interactions with Sikhs of the Indian diaspora, I have found that interest in transnational settlements of Sikhs is far greater than interest in the former. Research on the Indian-Sikh diaspora, in fact, remains largely marginalized in Sikh Studies. Here, I do not propose any alternative mapping; I can only say that there exists alternative ways of viewing the Sikh diaspora in India and these can stimulate appreciation of the diminutive voices of the community—mostly ignored in prevalent Punjab-centric Sikh Studies.

My paper draws attention to this. It examines three creative narratives, analyzes why the creative imagination of litterateurs differ from one another, and hypothesizes if Sikh experiences in dissimilar locations are relevant in outlining the community's past during a specific period. It tries to understand whether the creativity of a litterateur is different from the conclusions of a historian, which are based on critically-assessed sources. A litterateur is free to begin his or her journey from any point; a historian is not generally able to do so because of the methodological restraints of his discipline. This raises the question whether a historian engaged in depicting Sikh past should invariably depend on materials preserved in governmental record rooms or should he also travel along unmapped pathways, beyond archives, in search of alternative sources for research.

Of late, historians have been debating whether record rooms of the colonial government refer adequately to Sikh past. My interactions with Indian Sikhs, i.e. Sikhs residing outside Punjab in India, suggest that governmental agencies took note of them whenever the community posed a threat or challenged the authority of the British in India. Otherwise, Sikhs remained marginalized in official records, and a historian will hardly find adequate material to map the changing mindset of the community in the early twentieth century.

The scenario did not change much in the post-Independence decades. When historians study Sikhs residing outside Punjab, they travel beyond archives. They are aware of how and why alternative sources that provide access to the community's marginalized voice in distant pan-Indian locations are relevant. These sources are likely to introduce them to unknown testimonies that do not figure in official records. Vernacular materials could also come to a historian's aid and introduce him to the community's collective memory—communicated in dissimilar tunes.

II

Sikh experiences of 1984 Punjab are widely documented in Punjabi, Hindi, and English writings and underline the community's sense of alienation and anxiety. The 1984 Sikh Pogrom sent the community into shock and generated a sense of international Sikh identity. It forced many to think of having moved "from one 1947 Partition to another". It witnessed widespread displacement and revived memories of mid-eighteenth century *ghallughras* (holocausts). Some Sikhs preferred to bracket themselves as a 'distinct de-territorialized religio-political community' with an 'imagined homeland of Khalistan'. A handful of Hindi newspapers published from Punjab time and again aggravated the crisis, claiming that they represented the views of Punjabi Hindus. Contemporary Hindi litterateurs, on the other hand, frequently emphasized how brutal Punjab experiences were creating deep communal divide in the province.

My study is deeply indebted to these materials, albeit here I would be focusing on three short novels authored by non-Sikh women writers and published from outside Punjab. Essentially based on firsthand experiences of the tragic events of 1984 beyond Punjab, they are contextualized in two different and important urban locations—Delhi

and Kolkata. All three novels raise the question whether the process of India's encounter with urbanization, development, and modernity has been able to create space for the rights of minority cultures.

III

It was a cliché to argue that non-Sikh Indians generally sided with the contemporary official media's views that Sikhs were a secessionist force. The essay contests this and attempts to elaborate on how there were many dissenting views on the Punjab scenario: opinions that did not concur with what was being widely circulated in official audio-visual and print media. The study will refer to the works of three women authors (one of them a non-resident Indian with deep ties with the middle class cultural milieu of Delhi) of dissimilar linguistic traditions—widely known for their portrayal of the 1984 Sikh tragedy in two important urban locations outside Punjab in India.

Their publications coincided with the increasing visibility of creative women authors and social activists in the political and cultural life of the country. Possessing rich educational background and plenty of exposure to national politics, they embodied the new face of the Indian woman, which questioned their marginalization in post-Independence years.[1] Their creative imaginations were in circulation in different public arenas and focused on the significant role played by a few Sikh women during the crisis. In a distinctive style of communication, they not only talked about urban dislocation and indignity of human values, but also dwelt on how the relationship between Sikhs and non-Sikhs had suffered over the years.

IV

Indira Goswami (1942-2011), a front-ranking writer of the Brahmaputra Valley was the first to respond on the theme. A social activist widely respected for raising a voice against the politics of terror in contemporary Assam, Goswami authored marvellous literary pieces that questioned both violence against animals in the sacred space of Kamakhya in Guwahati and terror unleashed by militant outfits and the Indian State in the name of 'fighting' militancy in Assam.[2]

Goswami was a faculty member at the University of Delhi when widespread violence erupted against Sikhs in the city. She involved

herself in providing relief to the community, something which gave her ample opportunity to closely witness the devastating carnage. But even in the midst of unfortunate experiences, the author encountered 'priceless and divine' glimmers of love, honesty, and tolerance among the victims, prompting her to write *Tej Aru Dhulite Dhusarita Prishta* (*Pages Stained with Blood and Dust*)—a novel that focused on Sikh characters whom she had met either at her university flat or in the streets of Delhi.

The 200-page novel was drafted on the basis of intermittent diary entries between August 1975 and December 1986. Her original plan was to write a historic novel based on the greatness of the imperial Mughals; it is only when the Sikh Pogrom flared up that her plot was disrupted. As her interfaces with a section of local Sikhs were unceremoniously cut short, fresh twists were added to the narrative. The storyline rambled and a sharp rupture was created in an unexpected corner—finally making the novel an album of assorted episodes. This made *Tej Aru Dhulite Dhusarita Prishta* significantly different from her Jnanpith award-winning magnum opus *The Saga of Kamrup* (2000), an epic-like novel that centered around a Vaishnavite family living in a village on the northern banks of the Brahmaputra River in Assam.

V

The novel had a few other distinctive points. Unlike the firsthand report of a journalist or a political commentator, it did not include any statistics elaborating the extent of loss of Sikh life and property. She also broke fresh ground by distancing herself from Hindu nationalist discourse accustomed to depicting Sikhs as part of the larger Hindu community.[3] Instead, she contextualized her creative imagination in contemporary Delhi, a place that never figured in the writings of any other Assamese author of her generation.

In the style of an eyewitness account, Goswami sketched Sikh commoners of different occupational backgrounds and masterly ended them with a note that had no direct relevance to her Delhi Sikh narrative. While this could appear as an abrupt end to the novel, it came only after she had carved out enough space for the tragic outbursts of those Sikhs who had become an integral part of her daily experience. The novel made no secret of her deep anguish and pain at their loss—one for which they were in no way responsible. Her camaraderie with them gave her

portrayal a spontaneity that matched her narration in the first person. It made her stride seamlessly from one episode in Delhi to another reference in Punjab as well as subtly shift from the streets of India's capital to the inner precincts of her university flat.

The novel had an important subtext and provided an interesting backdrop to the present work. As already stated, Goswami's long interface with the history of the Mughals had excited her enough to think of a novel based on their glories and tragedies. This had also kept her moving from one Mughal architectural location to another with a diary, taking necessary notes for the novel. Innumerable such journeys across Delhi introduced her to a cross section of the city's Sikh population, two of whom grew close to her. The Sikh Pogrom came as a rude shock and disrupted her daily life. It turned the pages of her diary into blood-stained Delhi dust as she searched for the missing Sikhs who had ferried her around different parts of the city and intermittently also visited her university flat.

VI

In her search for the causes of the Delhi Sikh Pogrom, Goswami was not reluctant to look at the fast-changing Punjab scenario. She did not hold any brief for Sikh terrorists; at the same time, she was not ignorant as to how tragedy in Punjab had complex ramifications on the lives of Sikhs in Delhi. She was upset with the Government of India's military assault on the Golden Temple and viewed every bullet directed towards the Sikh sacred space 'as an attack upon the community.' The author was convinced that steady deterioration in Punjab's law-and-order situation had not only made the Sikhs of Delhi restless but also reinforced their apprehension that something equally grave would affect their life in the city.

The writer sought to enliven the city's Sikh situation through three representative Sikh characters.[4] One of them was Santokh Singh Ajnavi, an ever-accommodating young auto driver, around 25 years of age. His refreshing outlook reminded her of medieval folk hero Ranja's love for his beloved Heer. Balbir Singh, the second, was a middle-aged, poor *kabadiwallah* whose poverty was writ large in his torn rubber slippers, tattered and unclean shirt, and a broken push-van that he drove from the early morning hours every day. While Santokh Singh drove the author to different parts of the city in his auto or waited patiently for hours

outside the university gate until completion of her class in the afternoons, Balbir Singh introduced her to the bazaar gossip of Delhi in the olden days. He would frequently draw her attention to soiled copies of priceless old books that he had purchased as junk from different localities—for their subsequent resale at higher prices. Sometimes, he would visit the author's flat for a cup of tea from Assam. These infrequent but intimate exchanges cemented Balbir's confidence in the author. He found her the most trustworthy person in the city in times of trouble. He also left her his life's savings in two small wooden boxes—lest they be lost during unexpected police raids in his residential site.

The author's relationship with these two Sikhs differed significantly from her relationship with Nanak Singh Bhalla, a quiet elderly man, of around 60 years. Widely respected as Sikhbaba in the bye lanes of old Delhi, Goswami found in him a person with a loving heart, ever ready to support the locality's slum dwellers. The author could sense the old man's restlessness when news of Operation Blue Star spread. Witness to the devastation of Partition in 1947, Bhalla in his old age, was faced with another chapter of Sikh suffering—something that did not figure in the minds of many young Sikhs in Delhi.

VII

Throughout the novel, Goswami made no secret of her friendly relations with Sikhs. As the city suffered large-scale killing of the community, she learnt how they were not only attacked at different intersections of major city roads, but also relentlessly pursued into their domestic space. Their properties were systematically looted and religious places deliberately desecrated, climaxing in the burning of the Sikh sacred text. Womenfolk were not spared either. She summed up her experience thus:[5]

> I see two more turbans on the road at the Shakti Nagar crossing and stains of blood, like dried *paan* juice. The area is marked off by red bricks. ...All Sikh drivers are gone…The cracking and bursting sounds seems to split the sky into two…The police can't be relied on….We can see flames rising from Anand Parvat to Punjabi Basti…Blood for blood. Long live Indira Gandhi… The dance of death is at its height. From Block No. 32 of the Resettlement Colony at Trilokpuri, four truckloads of skull, bones and ashes...have been brought out…The corpses of Sikhs

> fill the mortuary at Tees Hazari….My eyes fill with tears as I stand in front of the gurdwara [Singh Sabha Gurdwara]… [It] has been reduced to ashes.

As the Delhi Sikh situation deteriorated in the first two days of the Pogrom, Goswami went out in search of her two Sikh friends. She could find none of them. She felt the urge to return the two boxes that Balbir Singh had earlier left with her. After frantic searches in various places, the author finally traced his wife in one of the relief camps. Even after the death of her husband and loss of property, Goswami found her deeply committed to basic human honesty. The unnamed lady refused to accept the boxes because 'he [husband] had said [her] nothing about this'. As Goswami pressed the lady so that she might finally agree to take back the boxes, a more devastating experience surfaced.

The author asked the lady if she could talk to Sonu, Balbir Singh's son who often accompanied him in hawking in the by-lanes of Delhi. The lady quietly took off the sheet that covered Sonu lying next to her and Goswami saw that both his eyes were bandaged. "His eyes were pierced with a sword. Take away these boxes. I can't keep them,"[6] the mother said in a matter-of-fact tone, communicating the innate and unsoiled honesty of a common Sikh woman, even after she had been through some of the worst tragedies.

VIII

While Goswami's novel primarily focused on the Delhi Sikh Pogrom, it took note of other details as well. It recorded the centrality of the gurdwara in the life of the community and underlined the significance of the Sikh sacred text. The violation of dignity of a religious place was an important feature of early twentieth century communal riots under colonial rule.[7] Her reference to similar violations of sacred space served to remind how an unfortunate colonial legacy had not been altogether forgotten; only recreated in the capital of independent India for delineating the fragility of the country's secular urban space.

Second, while the novelist engaged in the sufferings of Delhi's Sikh subalterns from various walks of life, she was enigmatically silent on the creamy layer of the Sikh community in the city. Albeit she had many affluent Sikh friends, the author only viewed the situation 'from below'. Third, despite identifying with the sufferings of Sikh commoners, she

could not ignore the unbridled terrorist activity of militants in rural Punjab. Goswami's bitter denunciation of their cold-blooded murder of innocent people underlined her commitment to the message of peace and non-violence, although she did not elaborate on this point in the novel.

Fourth, instead of highlighting the mission and message of Sikh Gurus, an important feature of early twentieth century Assamese nationalist discourse on Sikhism, Goswami dealt with Sikh commoners—a section that had not figured in any Assamese writing until then. In this sense, she came out of the domain of nationalist rhetoric and located her imagination in the context of post-colonial India. Fifth, the role of rumor in times of great uncertainty and violence like the Sikh Pogrom of 1984 and its impact in widening the scope of the crisis did not miss the attention of the author. She made mention of at least two occurrences when rumors were consciously exploited to legitimize large-scale violence against Sikhs in Delhi.

Finally, the Delhi Pogrom revived the memory of the Partition of 1947. On both occasions, the Sikh community suffered immensely. But Goswami merely hinted at this. It is likely that the author was more committed to the recall of Sikh victimization as part of large-scale human suffering, leaving out related political details. As she protested forcefully against all forms of violence, Goswami's outburst against the Sikh Pogrom of 1984 may be bracketed as one of the 'protest' chapters of her long literary career. It can be presumed that this was dictated partially by her lower Assam Vaishnavite background, which had led to many sufferings at the hands of *Sattra* institutions of the lower Brahmaputra Valley. Her spontaneous response against the Sikh Pogrom would be otherwise difficult to explain.

IX

Suchitra Bhattacharya (1950-2015) was a popular Bengali novelist who created sensation with her engrossing storytelling power and control of language. Focusing on the familiar world of Kolkata's Bengali middle class, Bhattacharya's fiction drew on contemporary social issues, conflicts in family relationships, and changing human values.

Her novel *Parabas* (Not Home) introduced the reader to the inner domain of a middle class Sikh family—one that missed the attention of Bengali litterateurs of post-Independence years.[8] In popular Bengali

perceptions of the period, a Sikh with his turban symbolized a stupid person (*bandhakopi*) or a bus or taxi driver addicted to drinking and accustomed to using unsophisticated language when at the wheel.[9] Bhattacharya did not agree to such stereotyping of Sikhs; nor did she concur to depicting them as terrorists, something that widely dominated non-Sikh popular imagination of the period. She visualized the community beyond these limits.

Bhattacharya found that Sikhs residing in Kolkata—like their counterparts living elsewhere in India—were swayed by the hopes, aspirations, frustrations, and anger prevailing in their ranks in Punjab. They looked forward to home experiences and tried to reproduce them in their new residences, away from Punjab. However, this did not keep them away from the local cultural milieu and politics. On the contrary, she found that these Sikhs swam between two waves of societal experiences. Her portrayal of Kolkata's Sikhs communicated the message of a home away from home and made the novel distinctly different from other Bengali writings that directly or indirectly referred to Sikh presence in the city.

Unlike many of her predecessors, she underlined the need for sharing their moments of anxieties and festivities as well as their search for a community identity distinct from that of the Hindus of the locality. Bhattacharya's creative imagination brought her readers face to face with some of these experiences and provided an interesting glimpse of the everyday life of a Sikh middle class family who were not sufficiently known to Bengalis of the locality.

X

The novel outlined the tragic experiences of a refugee Sikh family, covering a time span of two winter months in early 1990. The cheer that the arrival of an aged Sikh couple from Amritsar brought to the home of their relatives in Kolkata lasted for just a little over twenty-four hours. One of the guests, wrongly targeted as a dreaded Sikh terrorist from Punjab looking for a safe haven and shadowed by a police party from Punjab is killed along with his wife in the residence of the host, while the police in Kolkata are kept in the dark about the move. The Punjab police are jubilant that a dreaded terrorist has been eliminated, although the killing was entirely based on unconfirmed intelligence reports.

The author presented the two killings not only as a violation of the sanctity of family space but also an act of counter-terrorism, perpetrated by the State in the name of fighting militancy. Interestingly enough, no one from the neighbourhood, predominantly inhabited by the Bengali middle class, questioned the legality or morality of the incident. Some among them were known for their secular political views; many even held important university faculty positions.

The author pointed out that this unexpected aggression against members of a minority community was perpetrated at a time when the community was already passing through a period of crisis following Operation Blue Star and the Sikh Pogrom of 1984. Bengali gentlemen, including editors of local dailies, took for granted that police action against the aged Sikh couple was correct. The tragedy was given wide media coverage, with customary journalistic flair. No one from the city's Bengali middle class neighbourhood, however, came forward to ask the Sikh family what had actually happened in their domestic space. Everybody tried to keep away, maintaining safe distance and avoiding face-to-face meetings with family members—lest they be bracketed with terrorist activities in Punjab. Each member of the Sikh family passed through undeclared silence and a period of social suffocation. They had to face gruelling official investigations at the Lal Bazaar police headquarters—until the governmental agencies were 'satisfied' with their safe conduct in the city. This resulted in fissures in local Sikh society. Almost ostracized by other members of the community, the family were on the verge of selling their thriving business at a throwaway price and leaving Kolkata. The head of the family began to feel that the city was no longer their home. It was as good as *parabas* (residing in an alien land). Much like those living in diasporas, they too thought of returning to their native place—although they were not sure of its location.

They discovered that India's Punjab could never be their home, because they had never permanently resided there. After their predecessors' migration from Lahore in 1947, they had stayed in Punjab only briefly, nearly fifty years ago. As members of a displaced Sikh minority community, they had to leave their ancestral village in western Punjab at the time of Partition. Earlier, they had travelled there in a canal colony in the late nineteenth century, from their densely-populated ancestral home in eastern Punjab. Subsequently, they had to move to Delhi to begin life's second innings. In 1984, they witnessed the Sikh

Pogrom, an event that compelled them to leave Delhi and journey to Kolkata. Their experience in the city was no better; once again they became refugees in search of a new home.

XI

The story centred around a middle class Sikh family comprising four members. The family resided in Bhawanipur, a southern Kolkata locality known for its cosmopolitan culture. A refugee Sikh who could trace his family home to the district of Lahore, Rajinder Singh is a 60-year-old Jat Sikh who ran a flourishing car decoration business near his place of residence in Ballygunge *Phari* (police outpost). Just like other Sikh migrants of the region, kinship ties had facilitated his emigration to Kolkata. Rajinder's 20-year-old son Kuldip, studying in a local college, was presented as one well-acquainted with the local culture by virtue of close interactions with neighbourhood residents. A second generation Sikh in the city, Kuldip is fluent in Bengali, enjoys local dishes, participates in Bengali festivals, knows a few Tagore songs, and loves the sixteen-year-old daughter of a Bengali university professor.

In Bhattacharya's novel, Kuldip represented a 'New Adult' born out of Punjab[10], always ready to modify the strict discipline of Sikh *rahit* (code of social conduct). His mother, Komal, was approaching fifty and maintained household discipline with her silent and strong personality. While she was engaged in cooking Punjabi dishes like *kali dal*, *makki di roti*, *sarson da sag* and warm *phulkas* fried in *ghee*, her quiet mother-in-law Bimla, above eighty years of age, could often be found reciting different sections of the *japji*, *reharas,* and *kirtan sohila*, as prescribed in the *rahit.* Married to Gurbachan, a Jat Sikh agriculturist from Punjab, Rajinder's sister Rohini lived in a village in Amritsar district while his only daughter, also married to a Jat Sikh with a flourishing petrol pump business, lived in Kharagpur, an urban centre away from Kolkata.

Both marriages were accomplished according to horizontal Sikh caste rules prevalent not only in Punjab but also replicated in Sikh locations outside Punjab. The novel had frequent allusions to the significance of *gurvani* in the everyday life of the family. Visits to different Kolkata gurdwaras were a regular feature of their daily life and Rajinder routinely participated in *karseva* (religious service in cleaning gurdwaras). Kuldip, on the other hand, preferred to join once every year. The generation gap between Rajinder and Kuldip was made evident not

only in how they wore the five Ks, but also in how they used words and languages. While Kuldip felt free in speaking Bengali, Rajinder preferred to stick to Hindi. Unlike Rajinder, Kuldip remained almost unconcerned with developments in Punjab, feeling more at home in Kolkata with friends of his age in college and in the neighbourhood. This also made his family apprehensive of a possible tie-up with a Bengali girl, beyond the widely acknowledged Sikh marriage code of conduct. Being a 'Twice Migrant', Rajinder remained more concerned with his business and family, devoting nearly all energy and labour there. On the other hand, Kuldip had little interest in the business of his father, preferring to read novels like his Bengali middle class college friends.

XII

In the manner of an insider, Bhattacharya drew on how the nucleus of a Sikh family functioned within its domestic space. Finding it internally cohesive, she preferred to maintain its distinct family hierarchy. While the male voice dominated dealings with the external world, domestic space was more or less controlled by a woman. The author also took sufficient care to point out the distinctiveness of every member of the Sikh family. There were numerous masterly touches that pointed to the family's collective entity as well.

The novelist was not hesitant to suggest how Rajinder's wife Komal silently held the reins of her family in times of extreme distress. She rose to the occasion, washed almost every drop of blood from the floor of her flat, performed regular domestic chores, responded to numerous queries of the media, and looked after her aging mother-in-law with due care and affection. Bhattacharya made us aware of the special role of the woman within her domestic space—one where she was sufficiently quick and courageous to undertake work otherwise demarcated as 'exclusively male'.

There were enough indications that pointed to the distinctiveness of the term *Punjabiyat*. It was underlined in dignity of labour (*kirat kamai*), hard work, and enthusiasm to migrate to distant lands in search of livelihood. The reader could also learn about Sikh salutations, Punjabi proverbs, caste rules, relational addresses, rites of passage, food habits, external markers of identity—all of which were masterly contextualized in the text of the novel. If this had not been done, it would have been

difficult to appreciate their specific relevance. Bhattacharya simply conveyed them in common Bengali parlance.

Another distinctive aspect of the novel was its reference to the manifold problems that a minority community had to face. Its difficulties were generally intensified at times of crisis—when the community was subjected to unsympathetic media glare. Bhattacharya may have been hypercritical, but she reminded us of how words like 'a Sikh' and 'a terrorist' were often interchangeable in popular Bengali terminology in the 1980s and 1990s. It occurred even in a city like Kolkata, widely known as 'liberal' and 'secular' location in distant parts of the country. Despite the presence of a vibrant middle class, firmly committed to secularism, a small section did not hesitate to react unsympathetically—an interesting index of the sudden spurt of unusual behaviour towards a local minority group. The novelist pointed out how difficult it was on the part of the former to appreciate the significance of the message of religion in the life of a common Sikh. For a Sikh, religion is as good as an integral part of his life, which a member of the dominant community perhaps did not require. It could be that Bhattacharya sounded a warning bell, indicating why members of the majority community in India's plural mosaic had to be more tolerant and accommodating in the context of the country's cultural backdrop.

XIII

Shonali Bose's *Amu* (2004) added another significant dimension to the portrayal of Sikh agony of 1984 Delhi. Written in English, the book received wide attention as an acclaimed cinematic projection in a few countries of the West. Bitter memories of the destruction in Trilokpuri (here Triloknagar), loot and plunder of the Sikh community's property by local hoodlums, burning alive hundreds of innocent Sikhs, and raping their womenfolk in front of male family members with the active connivance of security forces dominated its background. For all of these unfortunate developments, Bose blamed the Indian State. It was accused of 'abdicating its power of defending religious minorities' owing to an oppressive mechanism controlled by the country's dominant religious community.

> [It] was not a Hindu-Sikh riot. It was a highly organized massacre… It was the system that was responsible…. It's more

> about the State than any particular party…. [It] had such a credibility crisis….that its only way to maintain the status quo was to organize attacks on people. So it created huge insecurity that rendered people helpless, and then it stepped in as the protector—the one force that was needed…. 1984 was a watershed because it was the first time that the State acted so blatantly.[11]

These issues were not unknown to journalists, politicians, and bureaucrats who were an integral part of the power apparatus of the Delhi Sikh Pogrom (1984).[12] Instead of locating the origin of the crisis in law and order or restricting it to a debate on religious divide, Bose carried her narrative to a larger audience. She scrutinized the role of the State and pointed out how the system had refused protection to its people and the State had, in fact, turned on them. During those days she had been teaching in a Delhi college and was active in mobilizing public opinion and relief operations for local Sikh victims. Later on, although she went out of India and settled in the United States, she never lost track of Sikh Pogrom victims. She continued to visit the Indian capital, which kept her aware of subsequent developments in Indian politics. This also stimulated her to pen down her unfortunate Delhi memories.

The novel came to be written due to a few other factors as well. Uninterrupted bloodbath in Punjab, Operation Bluestar, and the Delhi Sikh carnage had tarnished the image of the Government of India, particularly in Western countries that had a significant Sikh population. They held the Government of India responsible for flagrant violation of human rights. There were occasions when ministers and important officials faced unruly crowds and public criticism. This led to numerous diplomatic interventions by New Delhi to restore its 'clean' image in the outside world.[13]

XIV

It is likely that Bose received a great deal of moral and material support from a section of overseas Indians/Sikhs for conveying their message of suffering to the Western audience. There were also a few parliamentarians in the UK whose constituencies included a significant number of people belonging to the Sikh diaspora. They had enough political reason to take up the vexed Sikh situation in India on the floor

of Parliament. The author's non-resident Indian (NRI) link possibly brought her close to them. It not only facilitated a wide media exposure but also increased her credibility as a filmmaker. The shooting of the movie gave her an opportunity to remember those brutal Delhi days. While understanding the political agenda behind making *Amu* and writing its print version in quick succession, one can deduce why and how Bose was successful in contextualizing her creative imagination in the wider NRI network. It reinforced the aspirations of a section of contemporary Indians reaching out to the wider Indian diaspora movie market.

The author's scattered autobiographical notes, as well as scrutiny of the text of the novel, point to how she travelled intermittently between India and the United States—a favorite itinerary of rich Indians since the last quarter of a century. Despite being brief and specific in her presentation, the author was aware of the significance of her transnational message. She could contest the racist American countenance in the US and the mad craze for 'McDonaldization' of Delhi among the snobs of the city's upper class creamy layer.

Bose gathered some of the main threads of *Amu* from firsthand experiences. These were again reinforced by the oral testimony of an old lady, which was recorded by Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar in their volume *Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation*. As a *prabashi* (residing outside), Bose consciously added visible markers of Bengali cultural symbols to distinguish her Bengali identity in India's capital. She was successful in finely balancing her Bengali emotions and NRI ties, which differ significantly from those of Bengalis residing in Bengal. All these constituted interesting aspects of the novel and also introduced her readers to *prabashi* Bengali lifestyle, food habits, craze for *Rabindra Sangeet* in cultural functions, protective attitude towards children, and dialogue with the wider world beyond India.

XV

The story of the novel was communicated in the first person by Keya, whose adopted daughter Kajori (Kaju) is the central figure. Kaju, a vivacious young Indian-American returns to the land of her birth to discover her roots during her semester break. Her 'voyage of self-discovery' brings her face to face with some widely circulated Sikh-killing fields in Delhi. Finally, the bitter truth—that she was one of the

hundreds of young Sikh survivors who lost everything during the Delhi carnage—is communicated to her. Keya had nurtured Kaju as her daughter and gone through necessary adoption formalities before leaving for the USA—never once disclosing to Kaju her unique Sikh identity.

The author brought Kaju's parentage out in the open when she journeys to India and meets a cross section of Delhites. While listening to *gurvanis* in Bangla Sahib Gurdwara, travelling to the distant countryside, visiting numerous *jhuggies* (slums), meeting the real Indian soul, and finally encountering women who had witnessed the tragedy of 1984, Kaju realized that her parents, who would have died in 1984, had named their daughter Amu. It stimulated her to throw a volley of questions at her foster mother and the role she had played during those unfortunate days. Initially Bose remained defensive and tried to convince the daughter that they had all been fighting the cause of Sikh victims and risking their lives for their betterment and rehabilitation. But as Amu grew more critical, her mother is convinced that something more positive had been expected from members of the majority community of the country at the time of the crisis.

Amu's big screen success in the West raised important questions about the novel's literary style and predictable handling of the themes. Bose was critical of the failure of the Indian government in protecting religious minorities, many of whom had in 1947 suffered eviction from their ancestral homes. Her condemnation of a section of Congress leaders directly involved in the Sikh killings was also commendable. But towards the end of the novel, much of her artistic skill and control over language appeared lost.

XVI

These three novels highlighted varied trajectories of the 1984 Sikh experiences. These were widely read and translated, underlining their popularity and emphasizing the significance of religious place and importance of sacred text in the community life of Sikhs. Compared to what had been taking place elsewhere in India, Sikhs of Kolkata led comparatively peaceful lives during the Punjab tragedy, Operation Bluestar and Delhi Sikh Pogrom days. In this sense, Bhattacharya's novel suggested an exaggerated profile of what had actually taken place in Kolkata. There were around twenty deaths in West Bengal compared to

nearly three thousand killings in Delhi. But it is also a fact that Kolkata Sikhs were subjected to silent political segregation and social humiliation. This generated a new sense of politicization among local Sikhs, an aspect that Bhattacharya's novel missed.

Goswami, on the other hand, appeared preoccupied with her personal relationship with Santokh Singh *kabadiwallah* over cups of tea. The silence of Sikhbaba for almost three decades, in a busy urban space like Delhi, seemed equally questionable. Goswami's mastery lay in her frequent journeys across the city of Delhi. Bhattacharya was happy to concentrate on a smaller territorial space—elaborating her imagination around various conflicting experiences of a nuclear family and its unfortunate encounter with the police. While the former travelled with the poorer section of Delhi Sikhs, the latter was comfortable interacting with higher income group Sikhs in Kolkata.

Another distinctive characteristic of all three works is their criticism of the role of a section of law enforcing authorities, namely, the local police apparatus. In both Delhi and Kolkata, they were seen to be reluctant in protecting the minority population in times of distress. Neither Goswami nor Bhattacharya held the Indian State directly responsible for the contemporary Sikh malady. It was left to Bose to take up the stick against the Indian nation State. Her bitter criticism of its abdication of authority created a distinct space in literary tradition for *Amu*.

It also goes to Bose's credit that she could carry her message overseas and draw the attention of a wider media network to the Sikh victims of 1984. She argued that while Sikhs responsible for killing the Prime Minister were silently executed by the Indian State machinery, those responsible for killing thousands of innocent Sikhs in Delhi continued to stand beyond justice even after three decades. The strong hands of the State could not punish them because they were protected by a powerful section of the political lobby.

Finally, one needs to review these sources as important material for contemporary Sikh Studies. Instead of branding them common works of literary imagination,[14] these need to be remembered as narratives drafted by three important non-Sikh women authors on different occasions. Contemporary Sikh suffering kindled their emotions and prompted them to write in their own distinctive styles. There could be significant variations in their forms of narrative and thematic presentations, but the

gravity of the Sikh situation of 1984 did inspire them all to portray Sikh suffering in India, beyond Punjab.

Postscript: After the essay was printed, I read another book in Bengali on the massacre of Sikhs of the same period by a non-Sikh woman author (Debasree Chakraborty (*1984: Sardar Gaddar Hey?* Kolkata: Banglar Mukh Prakashan, 2020). The book portrayed the sufferings of the Sikhs, and the study drew materials from different categories of sources. I hope to include Chakraborty's book at the revising of the essay for its inclusion in a volume.

Notes

[1] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2006, p. 2.

[2] Mamoni Raisom Goswami, 'Jatra,' in idem, *Mamoni Raisom Goswamir Swanirbachita Galpa*, New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1998, pp.19-33

[3] Himadri Banerjee, *The Other Sikhs*: vol. I, *A View from Eastern India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2003, pp. 10-50.

[4] Goswami described them as 'a part of my family'. *Pages Stained with Blood*, Katha Books, New Delhi 2001, p.123.

[5] Goswami, *Pages Stained with Blood*, pp. 131-46.

[6] There is almost a similar reference in Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Sesh Saptak* (1933), which he wrote at an advanced age, after a long dialogue with the Sikhs of Lahore.

[7] Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991.

[8] Suchitra Bhattacharya, *Parabas*, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1994.

[9] Niharrajan Gupta, *Kiriti Omnibus,* vol. i, Kolkata: Mitra O Ghose, 1353 BS, 18-19; Satyajit Ray, *Badshai Angti,* Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1377 BS, 87; Sirshennu Mukhopadhyay, *Sunnyer Udyan,* Kolkata: Sahityam, 1392 BS, 16; Bani Bosu, *Meyeli Addar Halchal,* Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1998, 115; Tarapada Roy, *Sarbanash,* Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001, 14-16.

[10] For definition of the term, see Arthur W. Helweg, *The Sikhs in England*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979.

[11] Shonali Bose, *Amu*: *A Novel*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 99, 105-07.

[12] I draw attention to the essays of Vichitra Sharma and Joseph Maliakan included in Amrik Singh ed., *Punjab in Indian Politics: Issues and Trends*, Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1985, pp. 219-50.

[13] I had occasion to witness some such explosive situations during the university seminars of Toronto and Barkley in 1987.

[14] Apart from *The Statesman*, other important transnational newspapers like *The Times* and *The Telegraph* gave wide coverage to the Indian Sikh scenario.