

Examining Parallels in India's Anti-Sikh Narratives from 1984 to the Farmers' Protest

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Introduction

The Indian government has a complex history of purposefully mischaracterizing and maligning Sikhs as terrorists and extremists. Since the establishment of the Sikh religion in the 15th century, Sikhs have continuously advocated for their religious and political autonomy through calls for the establishment of a distinct Sikh state named 'Khalistan' (Gill 2015). This movement to safeguard and strengthen Sikh identity has been viewed as a direct threat to the state. The Indian state's concern increased as the growing movement for Sikh separatism gained momentum, leading to the infamous Operation Bluestar (1984), a paramilitary siege of the Golden Temple, a site sacred to Sikhs. This militarized response resulted in the death of thousands of people and the destruction of Sikh relics. This targeted attack on the religious and political autonomy of Sikhs was justified as anti-terrorism and sanctioned by the Indian government, angering Sikhs worldwide. Soon after, the Prime Minister of India was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, which led to the organized pogroms of 1984 in which Sikhs were systematically murdered. This paper will not fully delve into the nuanced history of the marginalization of Sikhs in India but will draw temporal parallels of 1984 to the recent farmers' protests in India and across the diaspora with the aim of highlighting the overarching narrative of the vilification of Sikhs by the Indian state.

As a student conducting qualitative research, I am “not separate from the study,” but rather, I am “firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it” (Dwyer & Buckle 61). I am a Sikh woman who was born in Punjab and immigrated to Canada at the age of 6 with my parents. My family was directly impacted by the state-sanctioned violence of 1984 that killed thousands of Sikhs and whose family members continue to seek justice. This intergenerational trauma continues to permeate the lives of Sikhs—in India and the diaspora. The violent events of 1984 are a point in history that illustrates how the memories of the past have transgressed and are embodied in our present, the memorial repository of *lieux de memoire* that inextricably binds Sikhs (Meierhenrich 2009). I have grown up hearing horrific stories of people recounting the trauma of 1984. I have heard countless stories of people witnessing their homes ablaze, people slaughtered, hearing the piercing screams of families being torn apart, smelling burnt flesh, and witnessing the destruction of their communities as they fled in fear. The ontological and epistemological constructions of identity were directly targeted in the 1984 Sikh genocide; by grounding my research in my standpoint, I am consciously working towards genocide prevention by affirming my existence as a Sikh woman (Moses 2013). As a member of the Sikh diaspora, I am in a position of privilege, as I can engage with this topic in an academic setting without any imminent threats of violence or backlash against me, unlike many others in India. Therefore, I believe that writing this paper is putting my way of knowing into doing—a small attempt at amplifying the truths that continue to be silenced.

Othering Sikhs: A Brief Overview

In the 1980s, the growing movement for a Sikh independent homeland resulted in Operation Bluestar, an attack on the Sikh ways of knowing and being. This attack was rationalized through the purposeful manufactured narrative that painted Sikhs as domestic

terrorists (Gill 2015). Operation Bluestar angered Sikhs worldwide as the open attack on their religious and political autonomy was sanctioned and organized by the state. Soon after, the Prime Minister of India was shot dead by two of her Sikh bodyguards—Beant Singh and Satwant Singh (Singh 2017). As news spread of Indira Gandhi's assassination, the organized attacks of violence against Sikhs ensued. Sikhs were systematically murdered and identified through voter cards, ration lists, electoral rolls, school registrations, and other records to ensure that all Sikhs were killed (Singh 2017). The tumultuous relationship between the Indian government and the Sikh people continues to this day.

Narrative of Ethnic Terrorism

Despite the fact that the history of Sikhs and Sikhism contains a deep reservoir of valour and victory, these commemorations have been overshadowed by the larger context of narrative struggle. Since the events of 1984, the Indian state has treated Sikhs as an existential threat, through the perpetuation of an ethnic narrative of terrorism. In India, there have always been clashes between ethnic movements underpinned by narratives of domestic terrorism. As history indicates, Sikhs have organized through their religious frameworks that foreground equity as a means of achieving cultural and political autonomy. Deliberate state reorganization of group identities has created the conditions for intensifying violence across ethno-religious divisions. The results can be seen in the 1984 Sikh genocide as well as in persistent stereotypical characterization of Sikh identities. In the mainstream state discourse, Sikh demands have been positioned as 'anti-nationalist' and 'terroristic,' which has delegitimated their movements, while constructing them as targets of legitimate violence. Cobb (2003) writes that "marginalization is the consequence of delegitimization in narrative" (103).

The rise in Sikh nationalism in the 1980s and the mobilization of youth by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a Sikh revolutionary,

were quickly labelled grave concerns to the security of the nation. Operation Bluestar was made possible because of the historically sown seeds of terrorism narratives against Sikhs. The apex of state-sanctioned violence was legitimized by the manipulation of the image of Sikhs as a martial race (Rand). The rise of Bhindranwale and the assassination of Indira Gandhi led to the widespread social production of hate that circulated as rumours. The presence of these unofficial narratives permeated society, making it difficult to differentiate between the rumours and reality (Das). Das writes about how the conditions created in 1984 pitted social groups against each other, bound by feelings of fear and hatred. Das (1998) writes that the narrative surrounding the 1984 violence sparked by Operation Bluestar was manipulated in ways that painted Sikhs as the enemy and the perpetrators of violence, even though the violence was being unleashed upon Sikhs, and so clearing the state of any form of accountability.

The thematic framing of an ethnic terrorist narrative is a “process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner” (Kuypers 2009; Usharani & Priti 154). The Indian state’s grand narrative was one oozing with venomous hatred of Sikhs in which “the Sikh character was compared to that of a snake who turns around and bites the hand that feeds it milk,” in other words, labelling them as traitors against the state (Das 121). The othering of Sikhs had direct consequences. The fear of the ‘other’ concretized maligned views of the Sikh character, which in turn helped to legitimize acts of genocide. This propaganda led to the episodes of genocide in 1984 and this narrative continues to be the reason why survivors have not been able to heal and reclaim the truths from the past. The media played a key role in the 1984 Sikh genocide by toying with narratives of ethnic terrorism. The Constitution of India is founded on principles of secularism, yet constant acts of violence against minority groups

in India demonstrates the ineluctable erosion of secularism (Ganguly 2003).

The Struggle for Narrative Legitimacy

The Indian media's reporting, or lack thereof, is of critical importance in situations of conflict. It is important to note that broadcast and print media censorship was still prevalent in Punjab during the attacks of 1984. Due to strict censorship in Punjab, the government had complete control of the narrative being propagated to the citizens of India. The systematic destruction of democratic institutions such as the media demonstrates how these actions taken by the state worked to stifle any form of accountability or dissent. Media censorship played an integral role in contributing to the narrative in which Sikhs were assigned the role of ethno-terrorists. Due to the severe media restrictions, the Indian government had full control over the creation and distribution of information. If the Indian government had no ulterior motive behind Operation Bluestar, there would have been no reason to impose a media blackout.

Usharani and Priti (2011) describe how negative images of minority groups portrayed by the media are a highly effective way of reinforcing the public's prejudiced perceptions. Ahmed (2010) writes that media broadcasts do not just exist to inform global audiences, but also "ignite the opinion building process" in ways that can "instigate further violence in an existing violent situation" (103-4). Ahmed writes that the media was heavily censored, resulting in selective coverage focused on the assassination: for example, it depicted images of Indira Gandhi's body rather than the eruption of murderers against Sikhs. Ahmed argues that leading national media outlets such as *The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times* painted all Sikhs as extremists and, in so doing, successfully incited hostility between the Hindu majority and the Sikh minority.

Media censorship prohibited communication coming directly from Sikh sources, making the state the only source of information and allowing it to choose what information was given to the public and when. For the majority of citizens, the Indian state had maintained the security of the nation, but the public was not fully privy to the scope of the violence that occurred during Operation Bluestar. Pettigrew (1975) writes that state-manufactured narratives are purposeful in “suppressing the culture of a people ... striking a blow at their spirit and self-confidence” (49). The freedom of speech and the freedom of press should be the fundamental pillars of the world’s largest functioning democracy, yet the Indian government proved to be corrupt through its insidious control of democratic institutions. The unrestricted flow of information is essential to the rights of the citizens and lays the foundation upon which democracy can deepen its roots. To limit access to information is a direct violation of the political rights of the citizens of India. By manipulating the narrative, the Indian government covertly targeted the Sikh community and raises significant concerns about the continued treatment of minority groups in India.

These narrative framings proved to be successful in waging war on the existence of Sikhs and resulted in a political win for Rajiv Gandhi in the elections of 1984, which were held soon after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The construction of a state of ethno-religious tension proved advantageous for Rajiv Gandhi. Anti-Sikhness became mainstream in disgustingly overt ways that “formed the central theme of the election campaign” (Singh 115). Electoral advertisements rooted in the demonization of Sikhs were publicly displayed to gain political momentum:

Vipers crawl out of their holes, predators prowl the streets and seemingly normal citizens take off their masks and shuffle in the shadows, waiting for the hour of the gun. The hour of acid bulbs, iron bars and daggers...Your vote can stop your groceries list turning into an arms inventory. Your

vote can make all the difference. Between order and chaos.
Give Order a Hand. (Manor 51)

Once again, the anti-Sikh theme was represented with the imagery of proliferating snakes in the election campaign. Images of the assassinated Prime Minister being gunned down by two Sikh men were openly displayed. These explosive campaign strategies proved to be effective, as “Rajiv Gandhi achieved a massive landslide in the December 1984 elections, winning 404 out of 533 seats” (Singh 118). It is almost impossible to overstate the polarization that has occurred through the adoption of ethnic terrorist narratives as a means of stifling dissent. In fact, the same anti-Sikh narrative that led to the genocidal acts of 1984 has once again been reignited in India and the impacts are being felt across the Sikh diaspora.

Farmers’ Protest and the Role of Sikhs

What is the purpose of a voice, if it does not dissent against injustice? This is exactly what Indian farmers have done for the past year. Since 2020, farmers and labourers in India have actively dissented against Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s farm laws, referred to as ‘black farm laws’ (Agrawal 2020). With his stated hope of modernizing the agricultural sector, Modi undemocratically and expeditiously passed ‘The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce Ordinance,’ ‘The Farmers Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance,’ and ‘The Essential Commodities Ordinance’ (Javaid 2021). Farmers say that the three bills give corporations a chance to monopolize the agricultural sector of India. The privatization of the agriculture industry will not allow farmers to make enough to sustain their livelihoods, as the bills do not explicitly guarantee minimum support prices for their crops. Through this reform policy, corporations will have the ability to stockpile food, allowing them to manipulate market prices, leaving farmers at their mercy when selling harvests (Al Jazeera 2020). Farmers argue that this will leave them vulnerable to economic exploitation by

corporations. Despite the government defending these bills, there are significant merits in the arguments being presented by the farmers. The ex-chief economist, Kaushik Basu, tweeted his thoughts about the three bills, labelling them “flawed” and “detrimental to farmers,” but advantageous to the agendas of corporations (Business Today 2020).

As these major bills became a political concern, the same narrative that has historically ‘othered’ Sikhs and promoted communal violence has been ever-present in today’s socio-political landscape. Modi’s conscious circumvention of parliamentary procedures to fulfill his agenda enraged the farmers of India, particularly the Sikh farmers of Punjab, who began marching to New Delhi in November 2020. Ghuman (2012) writes that high proportions of Sikhs “are engaged in agriculture and in allied agricultural activities, either as cultivators and dairy-farmers or as agricultural labourers” (Ghuman 88). Aujla and Mann (2020) write that agriculture is the backbone of Sikhism, as Guru Nanak Devji, the founder of Sikhism, “tilled his own fields.”

Thirty-seven years have passed, yet the ethno-religious divisions in India are hauntingly similar to those of 1984. The rhetoric of Sikh militancy and a narrative of ethnic terrorism once again emerge in this protest, and were made glaringly obvious on January 26, 2021. Again, the media is the critical instrument of the Indian state. The Modi government has used the media as a weapon of mass destruction, attempting to dismantle and criminalize all forms of dissent. The protestors are being met with brutality from the Indian police in the form of tear gas, water cannons, barricades, concertina wires, and trenches dug to stop the transportation of masses (Aga 2021).

January 26 is India’s Republic Day and in 2021, on that day, farmers held a historic tractor march, circling New Delhi. The events of January 26 are complex, riddled with conspiracies and propaganda.

The objective of this section is to draw clear parallels between the events of 1984 and the 2020-2021 farmers' protests, both of which are underpinned by the common narrative of anti-Sikhness. As I've discussed above, disinformation campaigns were central to the events of 1984 and in the propagation of narratives of Sikh extremism. These same tropes have been again reignited, this time to ensure that the public denigrates the Sikh community and their legitimate demands in relation to their opposition to "the black farm laws."

As part of this most recent state response, censorship is once again a familiar tactic, with journalists such as Mandeep Punia and Nodeep Kaur wrongfully detained, charged, and abused for reporting on the farmers' protest (Punia 2021; Tantray 2021). As the farmers were being met with paramilitary violence, internet services around New Delhi were suspended, "followed by a campaign of censorship, media blackouts, large scale Twitter suspensions...and deafening silence from Prime Minister Narendra Modi" (Singh 2021). Cracking down on journalism, stifling dissent, passing laws in an unconstitutional manner, and controlling the media to fit a certain narrative resemble the sociopolitical landscape that led to the 1984 pogrom, with the state once again demonstrating its power to initiate and legitimize forms of repression.

Continued Vilification of Sikhs

The transparent attempts to paint the protesting farmers as Sikh separatists became clear on January 26, drawing direct parallels to 1984. Some protestors stormed the historic Red Fort and hoisted a Nishan Sahib, a flag that is representative of the values of the Sikh faith, such as "equality of all humans, love and respect of all, [and a] life of service and dedication" (SikhWiki). Although the national flag of India remained hoisted at the top of the Red Fort, the protestors were vehemently condemned for their actions and labelled as 'extremists,' 'khalistanis,' or 'anti-national' (Bal 2021). As was the

case with the attack on the Golden Temple, the contrast between the narratives describing the reality of what happened at the Red Fort on January 26, 2021, and what the media has presented to the citizens of India is worrying.

On January 26, even before the rally occurred, news outlets were publishing stories about militant groups disrupting the parade. An article published by NDTV News, a large media network in India, writes that “rogue elements linked to Khalistani outfits are likely to hijack and disrupt the tractor rally” and separatist groups such as “Sikhs for Justice” will likely cause terror (Sengar & Bhasin 2021). The media refer to the protestors as anarchists threatening the unity of India by disrespecting the flag. On Twitter, several hashtags started trending after images of the Nishan Sahib at the Red Fort began circulating. Twitter became a watershed of hate speech with thousands inciting violence by “using words like ‘genocide,’ ‘1984’ and hashtags like #MissingIndira #shoot” (Sircar 2021). Through the hundreds of thousands of tweets that have been posted demonizing Sikhs at the protest, one tweet perfectly encapsulates the social production of hate against Sikhs in India. In a now deleted tweet, Kangana Ranaut, an influential Bollywood celebrity who has been vocal about her opposition against the farmers’ protest, tweeted this on January 26, 2021:

I feel so elated, I don’t remember being so happy/excited ever, the cancer in the body of this nation we were looking for has been located, identified and now the process of eradication will start, together we will see through this. Not just survive but also thrive. Jai Hind. (TheWire 2021)

This tweet was removed by Twitter, but demonstrates an aggressive call for genocide thinly veiled under the guise of patriotic nationalism, hauntingly similar to attitudes of 1984. Genocidal rhetoric, similar to that behind the violence of 1984, has been ever present throughout this protest and labels Sikhs as ‘anti-national’ and ‘khalistani.’ Sikhs

have always been constructed as the enemy of the state and dehumanized. Despite the fact that Sikhs significantly contribute to the Indian economy as farmers and the citizenry, it is clear that they do not get to define what it means to be 'Indian,' as they are fabricated as threats to the safety and security of the state.

In November 2021, India's parliament formally repealed the three contentious farm bills that sparked a global movement—a fight of the proletariat. This victory belongs to the farmers. It belongs to all those, young and old, who died while exercising their right to peacefully protest, those who were falsely detained, those who were abused, and those who felt the reverberations of 1984 once again. The continued dehumanization of Sikhs and minority groups raises important questions: Who gets to define Indian-ness and do those who oppose the state become displaced bodies in their own state? Once thing is clear, dissent is critical for a healthy democracy and Sikhs will continue to lead the way.

Conclusion

For Sikhs, engaging in dialogue and opposing the action of an oppressive government is nothing new. Although the protest is centered in India and has been labelled as the fight for farmers, this movement has expanded in all places where the diaspora has found footing, a protest evolving into much more than just the agitation against agriculture legislation. As history shows, ethnoreligious divisions have always been consciously created. Consequently, although the protests began from a so-called apolitical standpoint, the movement has evolved into one about identity and combating the disinformation being perpetuated by a crumbling institution of democ(k)cracy. Questions about national identity are at the surface of this movement: "who is Indian and who does the government exist to serve?"

The same anti-Sikh narrative that led to the genocidal acts of 1984 once again reignited in India and, this time, the diaspora mobilized. Whether in the form of car decals saying “no farmers, no food” plastered on the vehicles of members of the Sikh diaspora or in the tireless dedication of protestors holding signs of support at busy Winnipeg intersections in the midst of blistery snowstorms, it is clear that the protest has always been about the unity of people who have continually faced the brunt of state oppression.

The dynamics of vilifying Sikhs and other minority groups in India is complex. Despite the narrative parallels between 1984 and now, a stark difference is present. The international community and the Sikh diaspora are now important stakeholders disputing this state-manufactured ethnic terrorism discourse. In this paper, historical events have been examined for the way in which an image of the ‘enemy’ was constructed and framed in dominant Indian media discourse. The analysis reveals a pattern of dehumanizing language applied to the Sikh community at large, effectively mobilizing an ethnic-terrorism narrative that set the stage for genocide. The ethnic narrative in the context of the Sikh genocide reveals how dehumanizing discourse has political force and can lay the foundation for both the language and actions of eradication. This paper contributes to the scarce work on the topic of the 1984 Sikh genocide and connects it to the contemporary conditions of violence by drawing upon a comparative assessment of the recent farmers’ protest in India and revealing the pervasive narrative of ethnic terrorism.

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