

CHAPTER 1

ANTI-SIKH RIOTS (1984): THE ERASURE OF GENOCIDE THROUGH STATE-SANCTIONED AMNESIA

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ABSTRACT

The 1984 anti-Sikh massacre, which erupted with the assassination of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, marks one of the most brutal periods of communal violence in post-independence India. Even though thousands of Sikhs lost their lives, homes, and the entire community was shattered both mentally and physically - the events have largely been framed as “riots” rather than recognising it as the strategic genocide that survivors, activist and later even scholars have argued they were. This research paper examines the politics of memory, the mechanism of amnesia/forgetting, and the responsibility of “remembrance” for the sake of history and future. Drawing on various legal testimonies, witnesses given by the survivors, commissions set for the inquiry and various texts - including *When a Tree Shook Delhi* by H.S. Phoolka and Mitta, *I Accuse* by Jarnail Singh, *Fighting for Faith and Nation* by Cynthia Mahmood, and *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, edited by Anuradha Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan - this study explores the various ways in which the memory of the violence and massacre has been strategically erased from public narratives. The various ways of such provoked amnesia include normalising the violence, delayed and denied justice, terminological reframing, omission from educational books and silence from the media, tactical isolation of the community and others. The paper analyses how such forgetting or cultural amnesia are not mere coincidences, but deliberate tools of power that serves to neglect the narratives of the victims and provide safe haven to the perpetrators from any liability. By following the trajectory of how the 1984 massacre has been remembered/forgotten, contested/silenced, the paper examines how fighting the ‘amnesia’ is a responsibility to build a truly secular and

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