

# MARG

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art & conflict



## Jis tann lāgé soee jāné

GAURI GILL

In 2005, when I heard Nirpreet Kaur relate her 1984 story, she had to have a psychologist present in the room. Even for us mere listeners, it was too much to fully absorb. I did not know what to do with the weight of her words.

Among the tragic events of recent days in India, 1984 has been invoked repeatedly in various contexts—state complicity against minorities; using violence to mobilise majoritarian populations electorally; breakdown of institutions including the police and administration; false equivalences that convert one-sided pogroms into two-sided riots; justice denied. My father often said to us after the 1984 pogrom, “What happened may appear to be only about Sikhs, but if India does not address it, if justice is not served, this precedent will come back to haunt the country again and again. And we will never know whose turn will come next.”

Yet, for a very long time, there was a silence around 1984, even a lack of much-needed solidarity. At the time, there were no 24-hour television channels, cell phones, internet or social

media; what we have are only eyewitness accounts, notes and sparse photographs. Photographers who documented the massacre that November were terrified that their photographs would be made to disappear from photo-labs in New Delhi by the Central Government. Images did disappear. Those that survived may now be used as evidence, or to relive the emotion. At a street exhibition of photographs organised in 2012 by the activist lawyer H.S. Phoolka at Jantar Mantar, many of the visitors wept even as they used their cell phone cameras to re-photograph the images on display. Others spontaneously started to do the *Ardās*, or Sikh prayers. This made some friends uncomfortable. A prominent activist friend said to me that day, “Sikhs should adopt more secular means, many might feel uncomfortable with non-secular ways of protesting.” Yet, members of the sadly almost exclusively Sikh gathering that day were protesting using familiar means, ways that provided comfort. The *Ardās* contains the historical memory of the oppression and suffering of the Sikhs, how they bore it, as well as their aspirations. Someday,





Venkat Singh Shyam

perhaps the 1984 pogrom will find place within it too. In any case, being targeted specifically for their religious identity, they were perhaps justified in using the very same means to express themselves. In the words of Hannah Arendt, “If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man.”

In 2005, after the release of the Justice Nanavati Commission report on November 1984, and later in 2009, to mark the 25th anniversary of the pogrom, I visited Delhi’s resettlement colonies, and took photographs in Trilokpuri, Tilak Vihar and Garhi, as well as at protest rallies in the city. These photographs appeared in prominent Indian print media publications then. Mediated by the mainstream, they formed a kind of artifact, and had a certain relevance embedded in that particular context. I wondered how the images would be read and understood when circulated more intimately. I also wished to use them to trigger a conversation about 1984 with other citizens of Delhi, specifically my community of fellow artists. In early 2013, I asked several friends, those who were present in Delhi that November, or have lived here since or prior, or who see themselves in some essential way as part of this city, to write something for each image. It could be a direct response to the photograph, or a more general

observation related to the event; it could be tangential, poetic, personal, fictional, factual or nonsensically true in the way that were Toba Tek Singh’s seminal words on the partition.

In September 2014, I returned to Tilak Vihar. I met with Darshan Kaur and other widow witnesses, saw children from ‘impacted’ families play and recite at the Guru Harkishan Public School, and went into the Shaheedi (Martyrs) Memorial Museum—where the only visitors were the family members of those in the photographs. In August 2019, I visited the new SGPC memorial at Gurudwara Rakab Ganj. It was hard to locate inside the gurudwara complex, made of concrete and steel, and deserted. The unending lists of victims’ names stared at me.

“Jis tann lāgé soee jāné”, a Punjabi saying goes. Only she whose body is hurt, knows. But it is also for those of us who are not direct victims, to try and articulate, to remember and retell, the history of our shared city—and universe. A world without conversations and fellowship; without the stories, experiential accounts, personal interpretations, diaries, secrets and myriad truths of ordinary individuals; one in which the narrative is entirely subsumed and controlled by the all-powerful State and its willing henchmen, or by a dominant majority, would indeed form 1984 in the Orwellian sense.



The walls of Bhaggi Kaur's house are covered with her grandchildren's graffiti. The scribbles and doodles form a contrast to the framed pictures of Kaur's husband and son that hang nearby. 53-year-old Bhaggi lost her husband in '84, while her son committed suicide by overdosing on painkillers three years ago.

The other day on the metro to Shadipur, I watched this girl who was standing near the door, facing the corner and listening to her headphones with her eyes tightly shut. She would open her eyes when the song would finish and close them again when the next one would start. There are times when sadnesses need to find each other, unnoticed by one or the other. It doesn't matter that she had no idea this was happening. [There is a monumental silence here. A monumental crime has been committed. A monumental history of violence has been absorbed.] The same day, I decided to take the metro to Dwarka instead of back to Rajiv Chowk. Winter is over. The days are clear with incredibly short shadows at noon. People walk around without their shadows briefly. For a moment this city loses its soul everyday. The metro to Dwarka was no revelation and the sun was setting and casting all kinds of shadows. [This corner of this room of photographs, this photograph of photographs, this frame of absence, these people looking at us, these garlands around a father a son a husband a saint, this uncanny stillness, this fan that doesn't stop, this present moment, these drawings on the wall, this heaviness in these hands, this illegible piece, this printed sheet, this sleeping justice, these markings of a future, this future city, this generation, this contained sadness, this unfathomable grief, this corner of this room in this photograph.] I can't take photographs on moving trains anymore. I would rather not witness the blurs.

Priya Sen

october 2009

Does she usually read this way? Always in the same room?

Is the tiny black object on the trunk (on the steel cabinet) really a bird?

Why exactly am I moved by this image?

There are 48 black-and-white photographs in my new novel, *Helium*, including this one, on an entire page. Yesterday I showed it (without the original caption) to my father. "Padhai ho rahi hai," he said. "A very humble family... She is trying to locate the past." He doesn't know yet that the photograph carries traces of an atrocity. The caption would have disturbed him. Among other things it would have triggered his own memories of November 1984. Layers of cold ash. In 1984 the two cabinets in the room would have failed to hide the victims. The phone, too, would have been equally helpless (because the cops in Delhi were extremely busy facilitating acts of cruelty). She was not born yet.

When I first saw the photograph I felt its silence. Silence filled the whole space. But, soon a detail broke the silence. Her ear. It made me pause, and I heard the hum of painful stories she must have heard over and over. The same ear, I felt, would have preserved the shape of her grandmother's voice.

Postmemory—that messy archive of trauma and its transference. Outside the house, ironically, the same ear must have detected ongoing shamelessness and injustice. Collective amnesia.

Whenever I revisit the photograph, my gaze is also perturbed by the earring. But, is it really an earring? Perhaps what I see is a slow t(ear). And it refuses to fall down. I make a list of all the objects around her bed. They, too, are listening/hearing devices. They will outlast her.

What book is she reading? Hope it is not a prescribed text of 'history'.

"Why should young people know about an event best buried and forgotten"—The Indian Censor Board on awarding an 'A' rating to a film on the 1984 pogrom. But this is not the exact reason why the picture wounds me.

Something within its space—and accumulated time—is broken, and will always remain so. **Jaspreet Singh**



Taranjeet Kaur's grandfather Jeevan Singh was killed on Nov 1, 1984. "A mob of 400–500 people followed my husband and before he could reach a safe house in Pandav Nagar, they knifed him and left him to die on the rail tracks," recounts Taranjeet's grandmother Surjit, crying uncontrollably. It hasn't been easy since. "I have spent my life struggling, but I want my granddaughter to study hard," she says.

october 2009



Sikhs protesting against the Nanavati Commission report.

august 2005

In 2005, Gauri and I travelled extensively through Delhi to talk to the survivors of the 1984 massacres. Gauri's haunting portraits were published in *Tehelka*. This photograph, taken at a protest against the government's failure to act on the G.T. Nanavati Commission report, captures some of the anger at the Congress and the despair of the protestors. But only knowledge of the circumstances that led to the report allows the photograph to be seen for what it is, a reflection of the naivety of these young Sikhs.

By the time they began their protest in the Delhi summer heat, eight commissions of enquiry had been wound up, and Nanavati's was the ninth. But Nanavati, as a judge of the Supreme Court, was part of a two-judge Supreme Court Bench that commuted the death sentence of the 'butcher of Trilokpuri' Kishori Lal, accused of stabbing several Sikhs to death in 1984.

According to the judgement, "We may notice that the acts attributed to the mob of which the appellant was a member at the relevant time cannot be stated to be a result of any organised systematic activity leading to genocide. Perhaps, we can visualise that to the extent there was unlawful assembly and to the extent that the mob wanted to teach stern lesson to the Sikhs there was some organisation; but in that design that they did not consider that women and children should be annihilated which is a redeeming feature."

Nanavati had made up his mind before the commission was constituted, and the sentiments expressed in the judgement were, to say the least, reprehensible. When the BJP appointed him, they already knew what he would conclude. The political class was shielding its own. The faith of the young Sikhs in the possibility of the Congress or the Indian State coming to its senses made them unwitting actors in the last act of a pre-scripted farce. **Hartosh Bal**

august 2019



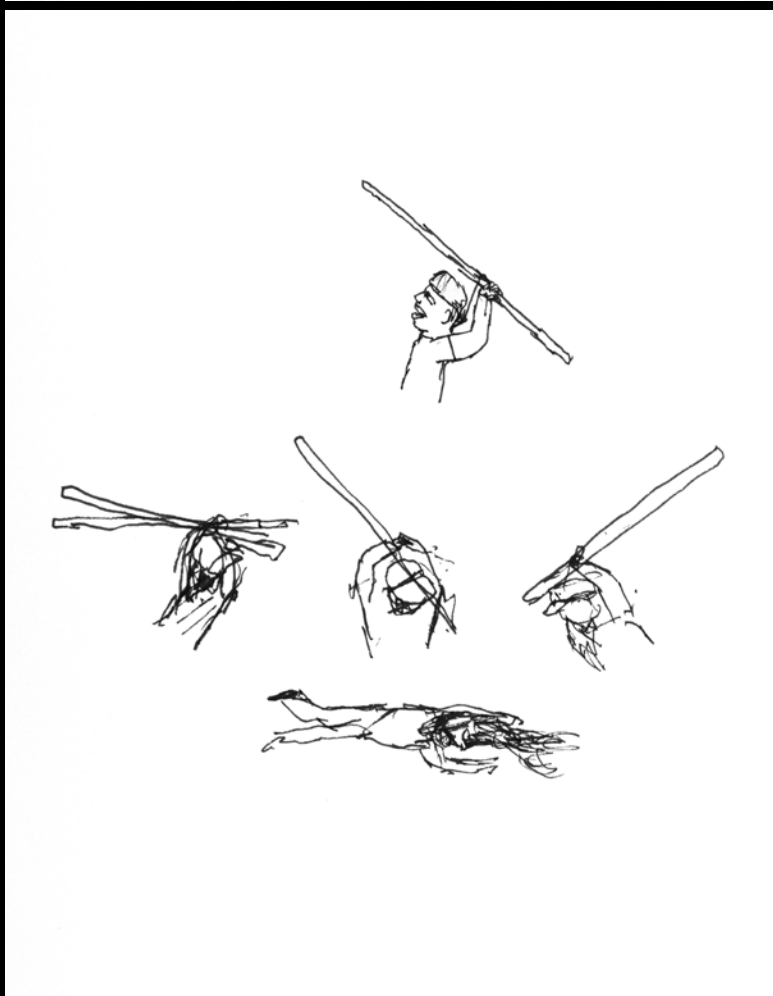
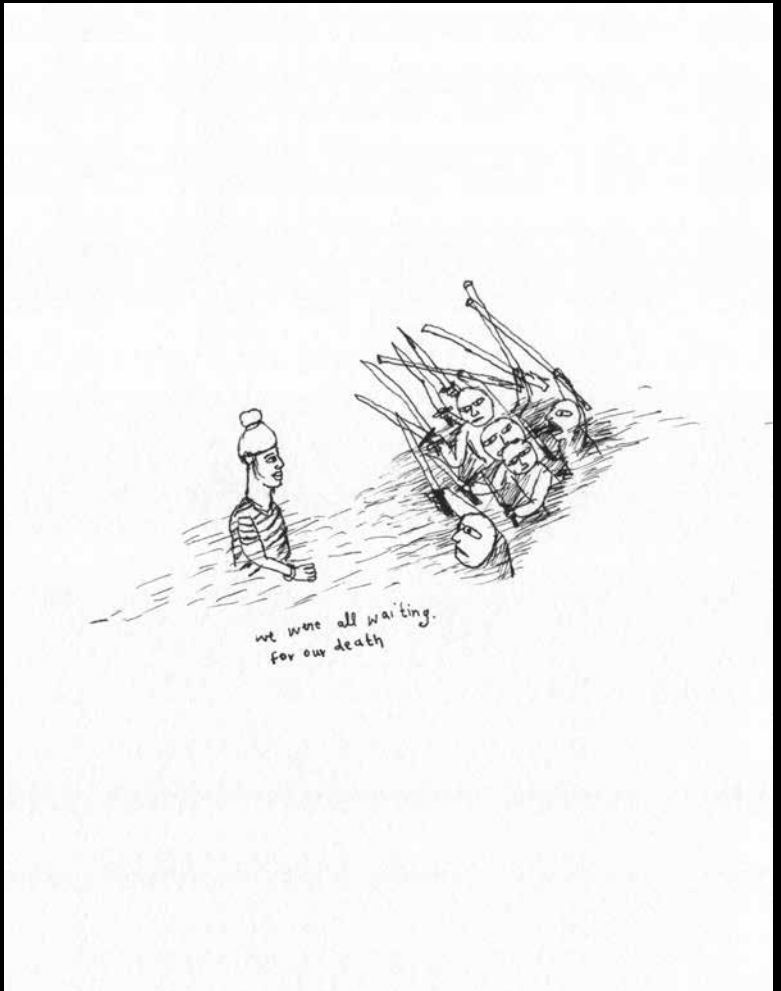
1984 Sikh Genocide Memorial, Gurudwara Rakab Ganj Complex, New Delhi.

I look at this horror, this heartbreak, these shards of memory that broken people carry around with them stitched into their skins, these portraits of fragile lives that continue to be lived long after the hammer has fallen and smashed everything, and I ask myself—why, in our country, do the architects of genocide always return to power with a thumping majority?

*Why?*

What is it about us?

Why are we so ugly? **Arundhati Roy**





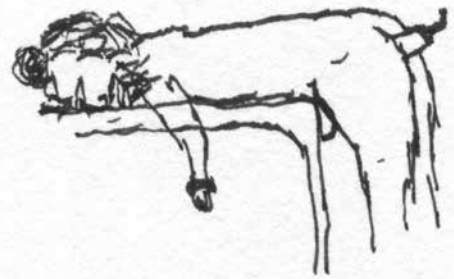
lahu dā dareeyā



even now i fear them.



nails torn.



torture.





Survivors, Garhi, New Delhi.



august 2005

I knew a young man in his twenties in November 1984. He was tall, had a loping gait, and a way of speaking that would alternate between short, staccato bursts of words, and long, perfectly formed sentences. He was studying to be a doctor, in his last years at medical school, and I thought that he was the most intelligent man I knew at the time. I was impressionable, I was sixteen.

When you are sixteen, twenty-five or twenty-seven can look very far away. You have none of the assurance that a young man in his twenties can have. When I look at this picture, I see that assurance in him, as well as its absence in me.

I idolized this man. He was my then girlfriend's elder brother. I remember that he gave me a book by D.D. Kosambi to read, and that he would sometimes take me and his sister with him on his ornithological field trips (he was an avid bird man) in the Jahanpanah forest. He taught us how to be quiet in a forest, and how to speak about things that we felt were too big for sixteen-year-olds. He gave me a universe.

In November 1984, this young man, his sister, and his widowed mother came to live for a few days in our house in Old Rajendra Nagar after Indira Gandhi was killed. They were Sikh, and I did not want to lose the girl I thought I loved then, or her brother, to a mob. On the way home from school, I had seen a mob of men catch hold of a Sikh man, yank off his turban, throw a rubber tyre around his waist and then set it on fire. A policeman watched them do this. From that day on, I have never trusted any person wearing a uniform.

I, who had barely started to take a razor to my chin, shaved the young man's full beard, so that he could 'pass' as someone who would not be taken as being Sikh on the street. He had taught me many things, I taught him how to shave. There was a mess of black hair on the white tiles of our bathroom's floor. His face changed. It became smaller. Much smaller. And I saw him change. I saw the brightness in his eyes dim as he saw his new, naked face in the mirror.

Something changed that day. I grew up. He lost something that he never found again. It took a few years, but eventually, he was no longer the man I knew before that November shave. He dropped out of medical school, became a recluse, stopped reading, stopped the bird walks, stopped talking to me or to his sister, became hostile and suspicious about everything.

A few years ago, I read a small item in a newspaper about a man whose body was found, months after he had died. He had been living alone, in a locked-up house, and had apparently stopped eating. A friend called me in the middle of the night, in another country, to tell me what I suspected. It was the man who showed me anatomy charts, read Thomas Hardy and taped bird calls.

In my mind, he is the last casualty of 1984. And I have never forgiven this city for it. **Shuddhabrata Sengupta**



Darshan Kaur at her home.

october 2014

Darshan Kaur gave testimony against H.K.L Bhagat, whom she saw arrive in Trilokpuri in a “cream-coloured car” and who told the gathered crowd that when a big tree falls, the earth shakes and not a single child of a sardar should survive.

She was later brought 25 lakh rupees, which was put on the table in her home as an offer for her to take back her statement. She refused, “Bring back one of the twelve family members that I lost and I will consider your offer.”

“The government has not asked any questions. 5000 Sikhs were killed... why? They filled trucks with dead men and dumped them on the hills. One political party killed, the other patted them on the back.” Her life changed. “I had to work and could not look after my children. Two of my three sons are unemployed today. I was given work in Guru Tegh Bahadur Hospital in Dilshad Gardens; I would leave at 5 am, get there at 8 am. Sometimes I had night duties. After some years they gave me work in the local dispensary, now I work there from 8–2 pm...”

“...I have seen nothing of life. I have only cried. All the widows here have heart problems. But still, you may have noticed that none of us is a beggar. I trekked 35 km to work everyday but I have not begged.”

october 2009

Grandfather lies on his right side, eyes closed. Sleepless.  
 In another second he will open his eyes, and look at the camera.  
 He will offer us water, and ask us about the weather outside.  
 He will ask us if we had trouble finding the house, and we will say—not at all.  
 He will show us an album of pictures of his sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters—now no more.  
 He will tell us about an evening contained by police FIRs, case files, and newspaper reports.  
 He will talk about the time he last slept. **Iram Ghufan**



Houses in Tilak Vihar are stacked together in a manner that induces a pressing claustrophobia. Doors are often left open, letting passers-by like us peer inside Widows Colony’s small rooms, where the paint is peeling and walls are thin.



Tilak Vihar in West Delhi acquired an unenviable title after the '84 survivors were given tenements here: Widows Colony. When not packed in unventilated rooms, children here spend the day playing in a brown park outside. Malkit Singh (left), though, is allowed to stay in—"It is important for future generations to know"—when his grandmother Bhaggi Kaur recounts the horrors: of how she found her husband's body in a canal, of how her brother's head was put in a TV carton and a knife put through it.

october 2009

### Children of Widows Colony

Barthes said that we give captions to photographs "to sublimate, patheticise or rationalise the image". Does this image of two curious kids playing with a new kind of toy demand a caption? Is there any thing in it to be rationalised?

The matter-of-fact caption in *Outlook* (October 2009) reads like a poem by Brecht:

Tilak Vihar in West Delhi acquired an unenviable title after the '84 survivors were given tenements here: Widows Colony. When not packed in unventilated rooms, children here spend the day playing in a brown park outside. Malkit Singh (left), though, is allowed to stay in—"It is important for future generations to know"—when his grandmother Bhaggi Kaur recounts the horrors: of how she found her husband's body in a canal, of how her brother's head was put in a TV carton and a knife put through it.

The 88-word caption has five emotional triggers: 1984. Horrors. Survivors. Widows. Children. If I had not known the disturbing context of the picture, I would have rather enjoyed looking at the two faces of the brothers as a single one with a visible third eye looking at you.

Let the children play. They are survivors. They'll know. **Amarjit Chandan**

1947. My father was twelve. A not-so-young boy in loose pants, he searched through

a mountain of letters with no specific address, for one from his father, still to cross over a border jaggedly new. It must have been there, but he never found it.

Later. I am the genie in Aladdin's lamp. I search through Anarkali, Darya Ganj, Central Vista Mess, Jodhpur, Sikanderabad, Jama Masjid, Sarita Vihar for single lanes he has lost.

Then I will carefully build this perfect city and fly back with it balanced in the centre of my palm.

Then I will say, release me from the lamp. I have a memory I do not have.

But I already know my wish cannot be granted.

Memory is only a tangled skein

I could sit down to untangle. But forgetting

is a palimpsest

where leftover scraps of skin cling to one another.

Like my face inside my father's eyes

And his eyes inside my face. **Paromita Vohra**



Surjit Singh, 34, says, "I remember it clearly. As Indira Gandhi's body burned on TV, my father was being burned after he had been put on fire by an angry mob. My father used to give his old clothes to needy people in the colony. One of his killers was wearing something that he once used to wear." For the longest time, Surjit says that he would feel petrified when he heard a loud noise in the distance. As his daughter Mahima Singh, four, now plays in his lap, Surjit adds, "I run a small taxi company and have limited means, but I am going to make sure that her childhood is happier than mine."

october 2009



Sikhs protesting against the Nanavati Commission report in New Delhi.



### Lessons

Jangpura–Lajpat Nagar, 1998

“How we beat those motherfuckers, I tell you. After they killed Nndraakandhi. Each and every sisterfucking Sardar we could find. Now they are walking around so proudly, but we taught them a lesson in ’84. We went into the shops, we went into their houses, we found them where they were hiding, we rooted them out from cellars, from cupboards, from the attics where they hide their business ledgers and we turned them into chutney. Sisterfuckers.” He is a thin, short, under-fed man in his late fifties, a sweaty, ratty little animal of a white-haired man, and it’s a wonder he can pedal the cycle-riksha with me sitting in it. But the memory seems to give him energy. As he takes me from Jangpura Extension to Lajpat Nagar Market he points to the auto repair shops, the little dhabas, the families walking in the lanes. “You know, you how they have beards and this hair?” While pumping ahead, he turns around to me, grinning. He mimics a beard on to himself and he tugs it, jerking his head upwards, nearly hitting an oncoming scooter. “They were very useful in those two-three days, the beards and the hair! We grabbed them by the beard, by the hair, and we let them have it!” By the time we reach the market, he is extremely happy in the new camaraderie he has formed with no help from me. I don’t look like any kind of Sardar but I feel like grabbing him and telling him that I’m a cut-Surd and that I’m now going to kill him. What I do is pay him his seven rupees and walk away.

Law Gardens, 2003

“You don’t understand. They needed to be taught a lesson, these cunt-son mias. There was no choice, it had to be done. You know we have a whole area here at one edge of Ahmedabad where no one goes? Where police even couldn’t go earlier? We call it mini-Pakistan. Well, a few of them got sent to the Pakistan below ground, but not enough. What happened was just like a few small firecrackers. If we’d been serious, it would have been much worse. We should have sent more of them to their watan, which is under here.” The fat man, who couldn’t even kill a mouse, stamps his fancy chappal on the thick lawn. I look at the man’s paunch pushing out the long, embroidered silk kurta. I notice his churidar-type pajama has a little tear in the seam near the ankle. A few feet away, there are people dancing marriage ras-garba and fingering the young newlyweds. “Ei, Nitinya! Now do that Salman Khan dance mimicry na? In front of your mother-in-law? Do, na?” The man next to me puts his hand on my shoulder for balance, slips off his chappal and raises his churidar leg to examine the tear. “Arre, re, re. Will have to send that to the tailor. My good tailor was a mia but he’s run away after last year.” There’s no point my telling this man that I’m a Muslim or anything like that. He’s a relative by marriage and he knows exactly who I am. He puts his leg down and slaps my back. “But the hell with these cunt-son Pakistanis you love so much. Tell me! We haven’t met since way before that Eden Gardens test in ’01! Were you at the stadium when Harbhajan fucked the Australians with that hatrick?” **Ruchir Joshi**



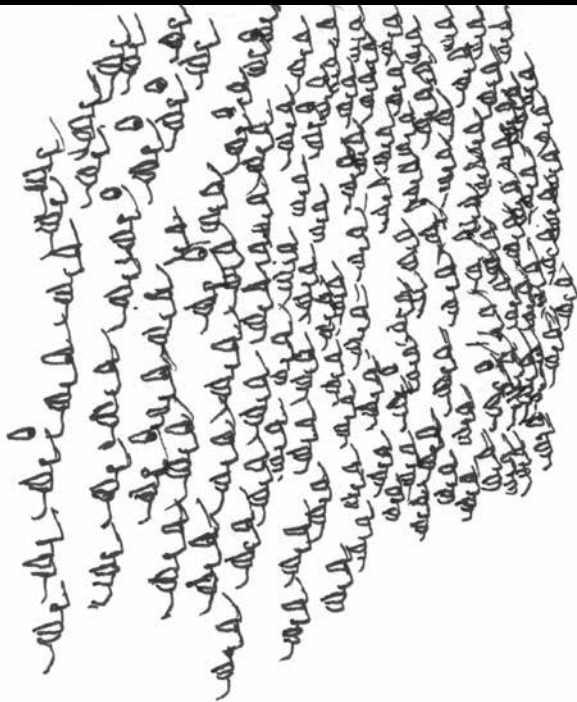
how to become  
invisible?

I'm questioned  
all the time!

but, don't you think  
khalistan  
movement  
was  
anti-national.



the ninteos.....  
Sajpat nagar gym.



they were  
known to  
us.



uss samay di ardās



Sikhs protesting against the Nanavati Commission report in New Delhi.

The photographs from 2005 first appeared in *Tehelka* (with Hartosh Bal); and from 2009 in *Outlook* (with Shreevatsa Nevatia). The corresponding captions are roughly as they were inscribed in the published reports.

Text responses are by Amitabha Bagchi, Jeebesh Bagchi, Meenal Baghel, Sarnath Banerjee, Hartosh Bal, Amarjit Chandan, Arpana Caur, Rana Dasgupta, Manmeet Devgun, Anita Dube, Mahmood Farooqui, Iram Ghufuran, Ruchir Joshi, Rashmi Kaleka, Ranbir Kaleka, Sonia Khurana, Saleem Kidwai, Pradip Krishen, Subasri Krishnan, Lawrence Liang, Zarina Muhammed, Veer Munshi, Vivek Narayanan, Monica Narula, Teena Kaur Pasricha, Ajmer Rode, Arundhati Roy, Anusha Rizvi, Nilanjana Roy, Inder Salim, Hemant Sareen, Priya Sen, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh, Gurvinder Singh, Jaspreet Singh, Madan Gopal Singh, Paromita Vohra.

Suite of drawings by Gagan Singh. Endpiece drawings by Venkat Singh Shyam.

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Subject: 1984