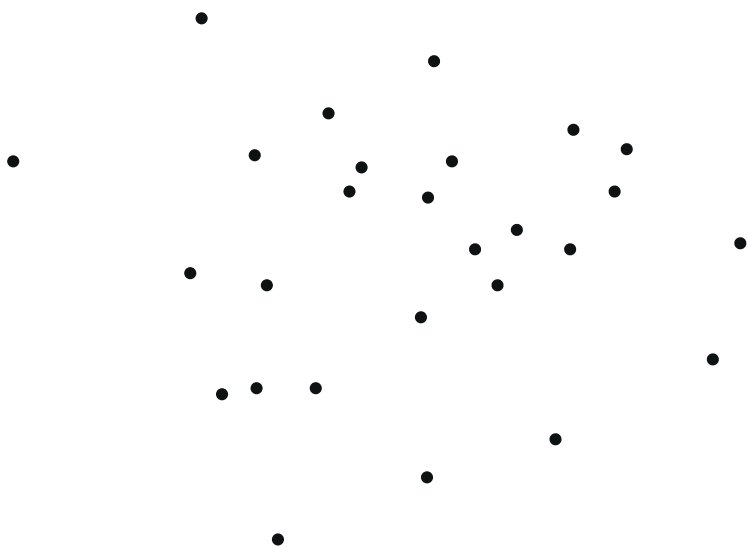
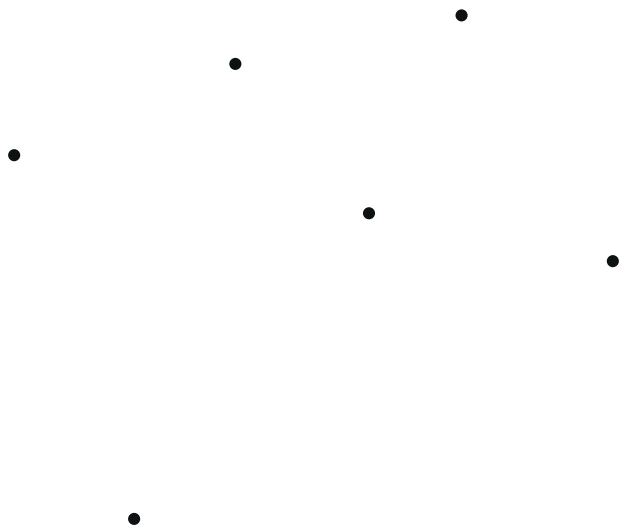


1984



Gauri Gill



gauri gill 1984

Partition capital
 no food, no water
 87 - married 4 children
 works in a factory electrical socket
 goal hasn't written happiness
 in our destinies
 poor people - earning + eating.
 what justice
 1005 11th August Parliament protest
 18th August promises
 no compensation employment, hanging
 They're living happily -
 what good are we?
 we won't get justice
 nobody else will
 precedents
 we will keep fighting
 our children will fight our
 battle
 we'll never forget -
 blame on Congress
 will never get washed
 Rajiv Gandhi had blown us to
 bits, so he was too
 / what goes around, comes around
 → Not my mother,
 everyone else's mother

This is an excerpt from the project 1984 by Gauri Gill. Originally released on
 Kafila.org in April 2013, rereleased in November 2014, November 2017, November
 2019, and June 2020. The original document included texts on the 1984 anti-Sikh
 pogrom in India and their aftermath by a range of contributors paired with
 various artworks. Some of those contributions have been reproduced here,
 alongside the artist's own ongoing bibliography. All photographs and captions
 are by 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 mobilize 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 twenty-four-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 organized 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 rephotograph 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, 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 twenty-fifth 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 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 Bannerjee, Hartosh Bal, Amarjit Chanda, Arpana Caur, Rana Dasgupta, Manmeet Devgun, Anita Dube, Mahmood Farouqui, Iram Ghufra, Ruchir Joshi, Rashmi Kaleka, Ranbir Kaleka, Sonia Khurana, Saleem Kidwai, Pradip Kishen, 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, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh, Gurbinder Singh, Jaspreet Singh, Madan Gopal Singh and Paromita Vohra.

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

Released on Kafil.org in April 2013, rereleased in November 2014, November 2017, November 2019 and June 2020; 22.86 × 17.78 cm; 116 pages, 45 black-and-white photographs; 24 drawings; free to download, print out, staple, and distribute.

To: gauri.gill@gmail.com
Subject: 1984

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.



The walls of Bhaggi Kaur's house covered with her grandchildren's graffiti. The scribbles and doodles stand in contrast to the framed pictures of Kaur's husband and son that hang nearby. 53-year-old Bhaggi lost her husband in 1984, while her son committed suicide by overdosing on painkillers three years ago.



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.

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 forty-eight 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 asks 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.

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 pictures, 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 tire 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 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.



Sikhs protesting against the Nanavati Commission report in New Delhi.

"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 1984. 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, underfed 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 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 2001! Were you at the stadium when Harbhajan fucked the Australians with that hat trick?"



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

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

1984

SHO Sharma - He had started
 Pizzagat - and on his
 friends had become even
 family had saved as
 Nihalvati - give justice
 Barbara Raur
 state is silent, as if
 nothing happened
 guilty have been made
 children haven't ever seen
 given father's love.

widow
 2

Pappi Kaur, 15 years old
 Police sent the mob
 cut people open
 went people alive
 took some gardeners are dancing
 cut their eyes, doctor took the
 eyes out
 "spent 3 days, 3 nights in corpses"
 torches, beautiful women
 get out of here
 nobody was ready to help
 they were all ready to kill
 took us into camps

family saved with
 25 yrs, nobody has come back

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