

# A TOPOGRAPHY OF SURVIVAL: 1984 AND THE MAKING OF A STREET IN DELHI

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‘Never forget 1984.’

—Poster in Bhogal Chowk, Delhi, 2017

‘Story telling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it’

—Hannah Arendt, 1962

The idea behind this article goes back to a conversation in a classroom at an architecture and urban planning institute in Delhi. The students, a majority from Delhi, future planners and architects for the city, had not heard of the anti-Sikh pogrom that had affected large parts of Delhi in November 1984. Violence triggered after the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards, had culminated in a genocide against the community<sup>1</sup>, which had made Delhi its home after the partition of British colonial India into the nation-states of India and Pakistan (Zamindar

2007). If one imagines drawing a map of violence in the city, it would probably not leave a single area unmarked. However, somehow, in the public and pedagogic sphere, a mnemonic failure ensues, and the memory of 1984 is slowly not spoken of. This text attempts to trace the contours of one locality in Delhi that was severely affected by the 1984 riots, as well as its interlaced topography of survival with several other post-colonial events in and around the Indian subcontinent.

In post-partition India, Delhi served as a refuge to the Sikh and Hindu families escaping from Pakistan, in one of the biggest migrations of the 20th century. Through its constant association with violence, riots and looting, the city’s relationship with those who sought refuge in it is seemed to be marked by some kind of Stockholm syndrome. Survival meant

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<sup>1</sup> Veena Das in her seminal work, speaks of the collation of events of operation Blue star, Indira Gandhi’s assassination and the eruption of violence against Sikh population in Delhi. Here she discusses how smoothly the events got collated into justifying the violence against Sikhs, not only as revenge against the perpetrators, but also the creation on a specific Sikh character, who needed to be avenged, by the Hindu male (Das, 2007).



Image 1: Banners featuring Bhindranwala, one of the key leaders of the Khalistani movement, emerge here every year during the first week of June. This was the time that the Golden Temple (the most sacred spot for Sikhs in the world) was attacked by the Indian army, killing hundreds of Sikh men, and their leader Bhindranwala. These posters are today organised by young Sikh men, who have only heard the stories of the 1984 pogrom.

living with its pathologies and accepting them too. The contiguous areas of Bhogal and Jangpura, which accommodated the influx of partition refugees, are now also habited with people from many communities affected by war, in northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. This article engages with streets, stories, and the built environment of this locality to mark the evidences of violence, memory, death and survival of its different refugees.



Image 2: Train station in Bhogal-Jangpura, also known as the Lajpat Nagar station. Stories of dead bodies of Sikhs found in trains coming into Delhi were often repeated. My own uncle recalls the first week of November and how people found bodies at the train stations, both here and at Nizamuddin station, across Bhogal-Jangpura.

Urvashi Butalia (2014), in her book *The Other Side of Silence* narrates an incident that occurred on March 13, 1947, in which a group of Sikhs were attacked and killed in Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan). Every year at a gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Bhogal-Jangpura, a prayer meeting is held as a memorial to the widows of the Rawalpindi incident. The set of stories on the Sikh community in this area provides it with continuous narratives of endurance and survival. While conversing with the older Sikh residents in the area, their stories often jumped from one event (namely that experienced during the partition) of violent experience to another (the 1984 Sikh Pogrom), traversing different spaces and timelines.

“What we had seen during the partition, we got to see it again in 1984,” said an old Sikh gentleman from Bhogal.

Each time I asked about the trucks being burnt in Bhogal, people pointed from one street to another, repeating, “Trucks were burnt here, trucks were burnt here.” “There was curfew, we could see the smoke coming from that side,” I was told. It seems that the streets had all become smoke and whispers of what was being burnt there, trucks and even people. “They pulled Sikh men and boys out and burnt them alive” is another repeated story one hears of the violence that marred the city. The Bhogal narratives connote a sense of pride through repeated motifs of self-protection and survival. The young priest at the main gurdwara exclaimed, “They came with burning balls of wool and threatened to throw them into the gurdwara to burn it down, but we were able to hold fort and protect this! Ours was one of the only few gurdwaras that were not burnt during the days of violence.” The priest is 26 years old, born nearly ten years after the 1984 violence, but he narrated the story as if he had been an actual eyewitness. He gave me the contact numbers of many older Sikh men, adding, “You can always read on what happened, but it is different to hear their stories.”



Image 3: The one gurdwara that was saved during the 1984 attacks; two others in this area were also under threat.

Testimonies and court cases are many, so are witnesses, and the stories never stop telling themselves out. An old lady who runs a small grocery store explained that the shops were shut for days and that she had to hide away. *Do we let go of every word to find its way into the page, or do we let the street tell its own tales?* “The Texla TV shop was ransacked, and we don’t know what happened to its owners. When the army came in, some people even left the looted televisions back on the road.” “Some trains pulled up with bodies of Sikhs, we didn’t know who had done it; the city was a fortress onto itself.” “Why do you ask about 1984? Will this bring justice and why do you want the younger generations to know? Let them not know, let them forget.” Perhaps, writing about it does not bring justice and maybe ‘surviving it’ does, I wished to tell the old, slightly agitated Sikh gentleman.

Evoking Agamben’s reading of Primo Levi’s literature on Auschwitz (Agamben and Heller-Roazen 1999) the idea of ‘bearing witness’, moves into the conversations of the streets of Bhogal. Much tougher for the survivors to hold onto their stories, tell and retell them, especially with the very fraught legal processes on in the cases of the 1984 pogrom. Yet, many wish to explain, what they had seen or heard over generations. A motley of words, my own childhood memories of watching the billowing smoke from Bhogal, as I lived not far from here, intermingle with stories I have heard from childhood, voices from All India Radio, declaring curfew in parts of the city, visions, which did not present themselves with coherence, whispers, rumors, sadness, words without bodies, all assemble to initiate a new

archive of this street. Now so banally laid under the rustle of the everyday bazaar, plumbing shops, bakeries and merchants, sellers, people and survivors. The survivor not only bears witness and gives testimony for those who can no longer speak, but in being heard, the survivor is borne witness to by the world.



Image 4: This Afghan bread shop used to be run by a young man from Badakshan. Due to quick turnovers and constant movements between India and Afghanistan, shops in Bhogal keep changing hands. The shop in its last avatar was run by a migrant family from Qandahar and sold Afghan hand produced ice cream, it eventually became a mobile phone shop owned by locals.

The street embedded with stories of violence, looting, even anger and sadness, also suggests another archival quark, something known only in its effects, namely, that of wars and bombings in the region, as well as the refu-

gees that these have created. Refugee populations from Kashmir began to come and settle here after the second Intifada in the late 1990s. Similarly, the Afghan wars led to a large influx of Afghani people to Bhogal and Jangpura. Refugees were given refuge by others of similar disposessions, and today a space emerges that has the endurance and experience of absorbing pluralities. Today, we can hear Pashto, Dari, Kashmiri, and Punjabi that all resonate on the street, especially in the area now called “Kashmiri Park.” This small semi rectangular park, built by the local municipal authorities of Delhi, stands in a non-descript manner in the area. There is nothing particularly special about it, and from season to season, or year to year, it could either look well maintained, park with greenery, or succumb into a dusty field, used intermittently by young boys playing cricket. Interestingly, a staccato of languages, wars witnessed in different regions, violence endured have settled in and around this park, where much of the banal everyday ensues.



Image 5: Kabul Burger Shop. This is a typical old-style property of the early inhabitants of Bhogal, now possibly cohabited by different communities. One can see a tile of a Hindu goddess on the façade.

Hannah Arendt (2018), departing from the Heidegger's "being towards death," explained *natality* and *plurality* as continual aspects of human life. Natality, located much more in her own biographical context, is the ability of human life to begin anew, undertake action to be able to start again, while plurality is an aspect of human existence that she uses in order to explain the ways in which people reveal and express difference or uniqueness and communicate it to the world, so as to then be able to live in it with others.



Image 6: Innumerable property dealers have opened businesses here to cater for the significant influx of people looking for rental properties. These include a majority of refugee populations from Afghanistan. This shop poignantly stood out for its name, a haunting presence of Gandhi in a mercantile world of refugees.

The metonymic chain of signification and intimacies with cities and areas that are now part of another country inhabits this area. Shops with names such as Lyallpur Cloth House, Kadimi Sweet House, and Lahore General Store all provide the street with the archive of a memory. These shops somewhere also unsettle the archive of the partition, which had categorically separated the two countries and its people. One wonders if there is some Delhi

in Lahore still, as there is so much Lahore in Delhi. If not as names, the two continue to co-exist in each other, through tastes, food, music and languages.

Another signage has begun to emerge in Bhogal in the last few years, namely, the Perso-Arabic script. A medical store run by a Sikh shopkeeper seems to have two names, "Guru Nanak" (after the Sikh guru) and "Afghan Medical Store." Its owner explains that he got the signage changed last year, as his main clientele were Urdu and Dari speakers. There is the "Qandhahar Ice-Cream Shop," Badakshan bread makers, Kabul general stores, and many other traces of other lives and memories. The street is both the material evidence and the materiality through which people rebuild and continue their lives. In it, an anatomy, a body and its signification become inseparable aspects of one field of existence and survival.

The topography of survival accounts for itself, through petty disputes, adaptive property dealers and prices, a thriving competitive marketplace, kinship networks, everyday precarity, conviviality and a *vita activa*, the life force that induces this survival.

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