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Making the Disappeared Appear: Ensaaf's Archive of Loss and Remains*

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Abstract

Ensaaf, a transnational non-profit organization, is in the process of creating an expansive digital archive of “disappeared” Sikhs in Punjab, India. This essay offers a reflection on Ensaaf's latest digital project: sharing the stories of the disappeared every day on their social media pages—Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Through such daily sharing, Ensaaf is performing a mediated ritual of remembrance. By employing the aliveness and dynamism of social media sites Ensaaf's team is actively and creatively engaging with loss and what remains.

Keywords: Ensaaf, disappeared, liminal death, social media, rituals of remembrance



Figure 1

Figure 2

On April 14, 1990, Punjab Police officials unlawfully killed Kuldeep Singh (17) and Pal Singh (18-19) in the fields near village Failoke in Amritsar district. Security officials did not return their bodies to their families.

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Figure 3

On March 1, 1993, Punjab Police officials unlawfully killed Balwinder Singh in Faridkot district, he was 32 years old. Earlier, the Punjab Police officials from Jaitu police station had abducted Balwinder Singh from the bus stand in Barnala city in Sangrur district.

Introduction

Ensaaf (justice) is a transnational, non-profit organization “working to end impunity and achieve justice for crimes against humanity in India, with a special focus on Punjab, by documenting abuses, bringing perpetrators to justice, and organizing survivors.”¹ Sukhman Dhama and Jaskaran Kaur, both lawyers, founded the organization in 2004. Based on work Ensaaf activists and researchers are doing on the ground in Punjab² they claim to have created the largest-ever archive of disappearances and unlawful killings created in India.³ The team at Ensaaf is also digitizing this archive and their website contains an “interactive data visualization site, mapping and profiling 5,200+ extrajudicial executions.” In March 2019 Ensaaf started a project of expanding the reach and visibility of their digital archive through daily posts on their social media pages—Facebook, Twitter and Instagram—consisting of photographs and brief descriptions of disappeared (mostly) men and

¹ <https://ensaaf.org/>

² Some methods through which Ensaaf researchers and activists collect data include interviews with families of the “disappeared” and extrajudicial killings, interviews with human rights defenders and journalists and research on key legal cases (Protecting the Killers 2007, 9).

³ Ensaaf is not the only organization working on documenting and litigation. The Punjab Documentation and Advocacy Project formed in 2008 to do the work of documentation, advocacy and awareness, and strategic litigation. More information can be found at <https://punjabdisappeared.org>.

(some) women.⁴ Every day, they share “the profile of a person who was disappeared or unlawfully killed by Indian security forces on the anniversary of the incident”.⁵ Figures 1 and 2 and accompanying captions are the latest photographs and profiles on their social media pages (at the time of writing) while Figure 3 with its corresponding caption is the very first victim profile that Ensaaf’s team shared on March 1, 2019.

In the following I reflect on this daily project of making the disappeared appear in and through social media. What meanings are implicit in Ensaaf’s work of remembering disappearances on a daily basis? What kind of space and temporality do social media platforms provide to facilitate this project? I argue that Ensaaf’s team is transforming otherwise mundane and ordinary social media platforms to create sacred spaces where “haunting...an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known...”(Gordon 2008, p. xvi). Ensaaf is constructing and performing daily rituals of remembrance, facilitating community members to express feelings of loss and outrage. The dynamism of social media sites intersects with the daily ritual of sharing remains of the disappeared to keep disappearances alive in the collective consciousness of the Sikh community. This is because the disappeared never actually died, but inhabit a place between life and death, or what might be called liminal death.

Crime and Impunity

On their website, Ensaaf defines “enforced disappearance” as deliberate and willful arrest, detention, or abduction of an individual caused by officials working for the government, followed by the “refus[al] to acknowledge the deprivation of the individual’s liberty or disclose [their] fate or whereabouts...An enforced disappearance is a continuing crime until the disappearance is resolved.”⁶ Anthropologist Ather Zia’s observations about disappearances in Kashmir apply to the Punjab case as well. She writes that the term “disappearance” operates as a verb and means “‘made to disappear’ rather than simply disappear or go missing” (2019, p. 4). The phrase “enforced disappearances” first emerged in the 1960s in the Latin American context, including Haiti, Guatemala, Chile and Argentina, among others. It was around this time that disappearance became known as a “tool of

⁴ At the time of writing, Ensaaf’s website contained details of 5,145 enforced disappearances/extrajudicial killings of men and 117 cases of women.

⁵ Why We Started Sharing Victim Profiles One Year Ago. Available at: <https://mailchi.mp/42eac771da24/why-we-started-sharing-victim-profiles-one-year-ago?fbclid=IwAR1LOLwTuhZIGuW7vHjagH7DxTKGSdSu4sYzP9SHfNngp7biPfvXKXvqtSAQ> [Accessed April 14 2020].

⁶ <https://ensaaf.org/faq/#impunity>

repression...[and later] became code for arrest, deportation, and torture in secret prisons and dumping of dead bodies” (ibid. 4-5). In Punjab the disappeared are known as the *lapata*,⁷ though the term is not employed in Ensaaf’s digital archive.

The beginning of disappearances in Punjab has a complex trajectory that lies outside the purview of this paper. Most immediately, the disappearances can be traced back to the early 1980s. In October 1983, Punjab was declared a “disturbed area” and President’s Rule was imposed. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers took refuge in the Golden Temple the same year. While Sikh political leaders were part of the tussle between the national government and Punjab, the community as a whole faced the brunt of suffering. In June 1984, following political tension and under the pretext of “apprehending a handful of militants,” the Indian army, under government leadership, invaded the “theo-political center” of Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Punjab. Thousands of pilgrims were killed. Following closely on the heels of this attack, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, on October 31, 1984. The assassination precipitated the organized, government-backed massacre of Sikhs in India’s capital city, New Delhi, and other parts of North India. The initial wave of killing lasted from the evening of October 31 through November 4, with more than 3,000 Sikhs murdered, yet the events of 1984 initiated at least a *decade* of state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture in Punjab.

While acknowledging the human rights abuses that Sikh militants inflicted, Ensaaf is making visible and public the lawlessness and anarchy unleashed by the Indian state, the very institution that is supposed to formulate and implement laws, and uphold the rights of its citizens. In their report entitled “*Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India*,” Ensaaf’s team writes of the “tens of thousands of people” who died in the period stretching from early 1980s through the mid-1990s. They acknowledge that “Sikh militants were responsible for serious human rights abuses including the massacre of civilians, attacks upon Hindu minorities in the state, indiscriminate bomb attacks in crowded places, and the assassination of a number of political leaders” (2007, pp. 1-2). Yet while the Indian state and mass media focused on and demonized this insurgency movement, the official story conveniently invisibilizes abuses by the government in its counterinsurgency operations. These counterinsurgency measures included:

arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial execution, and enforced disappearance of thousands of Sikhs. Police abducted [mostly] young Sikh men on suspicion that they were involved in the militancy...yet later denied having them in custody. Most of the victims of such enforced disappearances are believed to have been

⁷ <https://lapata-exhibition.com/>

killed. To hide the evidence of their crimes, security forces secretly disposed of the bodies, usually by cremating them...(ibid, p. 2)

Instead of being held accountable for their abuses, under special counterinsurgency laws, the Punjab police was offered several rewards and incentives to capture and kill militants. This in turn led to an increase in

“disappearances” and extrajudicial executions of civilians and militants alike. In 1994, Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights described the government’s operations as “the most extreme example of a policy in which the end appeared to justify any and all means, including torture and murder.” (ibid, p. 2)

Ensaaf has curated a well-designed and accessible archive of these enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions.⁸ The latest innovation in making the archive more visible is to maintain pages on major social media and networking sites: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The project of sharing the profile of a disappeared or unlawfully killed person every day is performing the work of bringing injustices into (primarily) Sikh consciousness regularly, frequently and continuously. What follows is a description and analysis of this mediated daily remembrance.

Mediated Appearance of the Disappeared

Those who are disappeared die a strangely horrific and uncertain death. For family members and friends, disappeared individuals haunt them and assume an absent presence. They are not there, but because they died what might be called liminal or in between death, their traces are always present. Liminal death contains within it the idea of being simultaneously alive and dead, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, past and present (Gordon 2008, 24). In doing the work of archiving and documenting these disappearances, Ensaaf is “tracing these traces” (Goméz-Barris and Gray 2010, p. 5). They are consciously creating digital spaces for “specters or ghosts” to appear (Gordon 2008, p. xvi). These are not spaces for supernatural encounters, but encounters with pasts that refuse to take the shape of pasts because of violence that was inflicted on a minority community and never acknowledged as such by the perpetrators, in this case the Indian state.

Ensaaf is making the disappeared appear and acknowledging trauma and loss suffered by their family members and friends, but by sharing details of individuals everyday, the organization is also forming rituals of remembrance. “As a source of

⁸ <https://data.ensaaf.org>

cohesion and memory, rituals...provide a means by which group identity is formed and sustained among individuals with a common history and shared culture” (Jacobs 2016, p. 42). In expressing emotional connection with the past, rituals provide participants with outlets for “repressed feeling-states, creating conditions under which the cathartic release of emotions is made possible” (ibid). In performing the everyday ritual of remembrance via digital technology transcending boundaries of space and time, Ensaaf is forging a transnational imagined community of Sikhs, experiencing and expressing feelings of loss, but also outrage and anger at the Indian state. This is demonstrated in repeated invocations of *Waheguru ji* and comments on their Facebook page. The following are examples of emotional reactions that this mediated ritual of remembrance evokes:

- “Every day every day more and more We are the voice of the departed (sic)!!
- “India is a rogue state where there is no value of innocent life...”
- “The blood of innocent people’s (sic) who are killed by Indian state in different states will haunt them always...”

While Ensaaf’s story includes “the experiences, the perceptions, the feelings” (Butalia 1998, 98) of victims’ families, survivors and other engaged members of the community, the Indian state’s narrative forcibly excludes and leaves out these subjectivities. Moreover, even though the attack on the Golden Temple and the November pogroms are beginning to be commemorated (Chopra 2010, Grewal and Sabherwal 2019), “[m]emories about the various other violent actions of the state across the region *after* 1984 are much more dispersed and have gathered fewer collective memorializations” (Grewal and Sabherwal 2019, 345; emphasis added). The official Indian state story dismisses an entire period of tensions in Punjab, especially from the early 1980s to mid 1990s as a time of “militancy,” “terrorism” and “religious extremism” (Kaur 2019, 8). The dominant understanding about the Punjab conflict is that the Indian state successfully suppressed insurgency and K.P.S. Gill, former Director General of Police in Punjab, is credited for this so-called accomplishment (Grewal and Sabherwal 2019, 344). What these dominant narratives of successful counterinsurgency leave out is the “afterlives of violence” and the durable transformation in social, political and economic life (ibid). Ensaaf’s work of memory is bringing back these afterlives of violence into the Sikh community’s consciousness. Where the Indian state continues to deny and justify its crimes, Ensaaf is doing the work of memory to “develop a collective response to acknowledge those who were victims of gross human rights violations.”⁹

⁹ Why We Started Sharing Victim Profiles One Year Ago. Available at: <https://mailchi.mp/42eac771da24/why-we-started-sharing-victim-profiles-one-year->

Given the 5,000+ cases of disappearances that Ensaaf has documented so far, they will be able to continue the ritual of daily remembrance of the disappeared on social media for more than a decade. In a note explaining the meaning of the daily ritual of sharing stories of the disappeared, Ensaaf's Program Director Bachittar Singh writes: "It is an honor to share the memory of the victim with the wider community...In many cases, the image and the memory are the only remnants of the victim that the family still possesses, that weren't destroyed by the security forces."¹⁰ On the one hand, social media is a space replete with disingenuous, partial and incomplete information that circulates quickly and easily. But at the same time, social media also contains within it the potential for the "written about," namely marginalized communities, to become "authors" of their own stories, and compose an account that fills the gaps in the dominant story. By constructing an online archive on various social media sites and sharing visual remains of the disappeared, Ensaaf's team is claiming the veracity of disappearance and casting the disappeared as dignified and honorable protagonists in life stories cut short ruthlessly by an oppressive state.

By making remains of the disappeared appear, Ensaaf is also creatively engaging with loss. In their edited volume, *Loss*, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian remind us that implicit in the question "what is lost?" is the question of "what remains?" (2003, 2) So we can only fathom loss by making sense of what remains. The "attention to remains [also] generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary" (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 2; emphasis added). Performing the daily ritual of sharing individual profiles contains within it aliveness and generative potential. The medium in which Ensaaf enacts this ritual leaves its imprint on the meaning of the performance itself. Social media is driven by the posts that people *create, share, retweet*; refreshing the *news feed* every few seconds yields a new story. The project of posting remains of the disappeared daily borrows from and contributes to this aliveness, albeit (in what seems counterintuitive) through loss. The "continuous engagement with loss and its remains ...generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future (ibid, p. 4). The daily ritual of remembrance performed in the dynamic and constantly evolving space of social media sites is keeping loss and disappearance alive everyday. In doing so, Ensaaf is imparting value and meaning to what was otherwise dismissed as a meaningless life by the

[ago?fbclid=IwAR1LOLwTuhZIGuW7vHjagH7DxTKGSdSu4sYzP9SHfNgp7biPfvXKXvqtSAQ](https://mailchi.mp/42eac771da24/why-we-started-sharing-victim-profiles-one-year-ago?fbclid=IwAR1LOLwTuhZIGuW7vHjagH7DxTKGSdSu4sYzP9SHfNgp7biPfvXKXvqtSAQ)

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¹⁰ Why We Started Sharing Victim Profiles One Year Ago. Available at:

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Indian state. Moreover, as Ensaaf clarifies on their website, these abuses are not yet part of the “past” but rather a “disappearance is an ongoing violation of the disappeared victim’s right to life until the disappearance is resolved.”¹¹ Sociologist Avery Gordon, writing about enforced disappearances in Argentina, states that “[d]eath exists in the past tense, disappearance in the present” (2008, 113). On the ground in Punjab, Ensaaf’s activists and lawyers are dealing with the presence of disappearance by reorganizing survivors, their families and the general public, and engaging in strategic litigation to help bring perpetrators to justice.

Conclusion

Through sharing the profile of a disappeared person every day on its social media pages, or what remains of the disappeared, Ensaaf is performing a mediated ritual of remembrance. By participating in this ritual of engaging with remains of the disappeared, members of the community, especially victims’ families and survivors are grappling with an unfinished past. The disappeared suffered a liminal death, suspended between life and death. Ensaaf is doing the work of memory to make visible the durable violence of the Indian state and grieve for lives deemed “ungrievable” (Butler 2006, p. 36). Ensaaf is able to employ the aliveness and dynamism of social media sites to engage actively and creatively with loss and what remains. Ultimately, Ensaaf’s project of keeping the disappearances alive is to start transforming the present tense of disappearance and liminal death into a death that happened in the past.

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