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Book Colloquium

Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict: The Wheat Fields Still Whisper

Mallika Kaur

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Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Activism: Challenging Hegemony by Giving “Voice” to the Victims of State Violence in Punjab

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Mallika Kaur’s *Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict: The Wheat Fields Still Whisper* is a strikingly intense book that engages beyond the customary telling of Sikh history and the political turbulence of the 1980s. Instead, it delivers a creative and raw telling of “history” through both traditional historiography and, more importantly, ethnography of the comparatively “voiceless” and marginalized—in this case, the Sikhs of Punjab, Sikh women, and those activists confronting the might of the Indian state. Faith, gender, and activism serve as three common themes which are interwoven through this work, and have relevance to other cases of marginalization and human rights violations throughout the globe as well. Through these themes, the previously “voiceless” are given an opportunity to be seen, speak up, and demand justice.

Mallika Kaur recounts the history of Sikhs in a unique manner using concurrent timelines flowing, on one hand, chronologically from Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s early 19th-century empire toward the present and, on the other hand, from the present into the past. These timelines collide in the momentous year of 1984, which is utilized to encapsulate the nature of faith and activism in confronting the excesses of power and demanding a more just social and political order. The specific events covered in her book are often not relatively well-known, but this adds to the contribution of her research—that is, why read about what is known whereas excavating the “voices” of the marginalized from obscurity is an important contribution of both historiography and ethnography. The book itself focuses on three activists—Baljit Kaur, Inderjit Singh Jaijee, and Justice Ajit Singh Bains—whose lives and human rights research and advocacy act as portals into the violent world of insurgency, counterinsurgency, and human rights abuses of 1980s Punjab.

Through their experiences are revealed the stories and experiences of other previously “voiceless” victims of state oppression, including women and children.

As a young Sikh-American woman, Mallika Kaur’s book provided me an opportunity to “experience” the violent conflict and human rights tragedy of Punjab during the 1980s/1990s. In particular, narratives of the victims of state oppression, who never lost their sense of agency in even the most harrowing of circumstances, provided a human element to the usual event-based telling of history. These narratives, dynamics of oppression and cruelty, and heroic attempts of the protagonists of the book to not allow these events, experiences, and history to be lost to an otherwise hegemonic official narrative of the Indian state allowed me to connect the abstract concepts of “marginalization,” “agency,” and “social justice” to tangible experiences and feeling in my own felt “history” as a Sikh woman. In this respect, while reading Mallika Kaur’s book, I became a part of the historical and human narrative by linking my faith and Sikhi, my gender and experience as a woman, and activism and commitment to social and political justice.

Of particular importance is the trite but important notion that history has always been written by the “victors” as a means to institutionalize a sense of power and control over the voice and memory of marginalized groups and individuals—in other words, becoming hegemonic. Hegemonic powers—in this case, the majoritarian Indian state—attempt to warp history to write themselves into the “story” as the protagonist while demonizing the targeted “other” to justify cruelty and violence. The state-sponsored educational system and official histories are a part of this hegemonic project. Mallika Kaur is able to challenge this official narrative and, in fact, break open the layers of dominance and interpretation by recording the bravery and courageous actions of numerous common people of Punjab, including women. While reading this book, I was often overcome with emotion, as I “lived” the experiences told by the three individuals. Of equal importance was Mallika Kaur’s own innocent childhood memories in Punjab, which helped juxtapose the banality and beauty of everyday life in Punjab with the untold human cruelty that was happening at the time in the police stations, interrogation (read: torture) centers, and wheat fields of Punjab.

In particular, Baljit Kaur’s accounts in the book were especially moving and relevant for me. The role of women in Sikh history, including during the 1980s/1990s, is often lost in narratives and accounts traditionally told by men in books, films, media, and social settings. In this respect, Mallika Kaur’s book helps to erode the traditional “masculinized” versions of Sikh history. For example, Baljit Kaur proves that a gender-based hegemonic narrative is incomplete when she

displays love for faith, family, and community through her actions. As narrated in one section of the book, “When asked if there were any other women protesting, she gently shrugs. ‘I think...no!’... ‘And I told the men, Justice Bains and my brother, Please stay behind, they won’t shoot a lady.’...’Well, at least it was less likely for them to shoot me.” (p. 182). This account of Baljit Kaur’s courage to walk in first and be one of the only few women protesting reflects faith in herself and Sikhi. It also acknowledges the cultural gender norms and stereotypes which, while certainly existing, were often challenged and discarded by Sikh women activists of the time for the higher calling of social justice and human rights. Thus, Baljit Kaur demonstrates the intersection of the three aforementioned themes of faith, gender and activism. Her identity and sense of “self” as a Sikh, woman, and activist becomes interfused in such a meaningful fashion. Sikhi promotes the ideal that women are equal to men, and that all Sikhs should uphold justice and human rights. Yet, Mallika Kaur is careful to give “voice” to the unique gendered experiences of women in the Sikh resistance movement including the challenges of managing their menstrual cycles with dignity, caring for their ailing infant children, and avoiding the possibility of rape while in custody in police stations and interrogation centers. The sisterhood of these incarcerated and often-abused Sikh women is explored in Mallika’s ethnographic accounts, which provide a necessary corrective to the usual narratives of the Khalsa brotherhood of male Sikh militant fighters. The nuanced role of gender is even seen in sections of the book in which female police torturers (who are also often Sikh) privately express anguish at the treatment they are forced to inflict on incarcerated women in the name of fighting “terrorism” on behalf of the Indian state.

Another account that reflects this intersection of the three main themes of the book surrounding social justice and giving “voice” to the voiceless is also seen in Baljit Kaur. As told by Justice Ajit Singh Bains: “In 1989 when, along with Baljit Kaur and local activists, he was detained at a police station in Dehlon for a whole day. Young men were beaten in front of them, as intimidation. The Justice then smiles as he remembers how Baljit Kaur raged against the police officers, despite dark warnings...‘This just had to be done.’” (p. 188). Once again, the commitment to activism is apparent; faith can be seen through teachings of Sikhi and Baljit Kaur’s courage to be vocal at great risk to herself; and to experience this story through the lens of a woman is something rare and new in explaining the Sikh experience during the 1980s/1990s.

In “Chapter 6: Holy of the Holy,” multiple accounts of abuse, torture, and trauma are given by Mallika Kaur (or actually Baljit Kaur): “‘I brought the camera...hoping

to capture the victims' voices directly" (p. 168). The details of these stories are riveting, emotionally charged, and saddening. The numerous accounts of horrific abuse given by those in power and endured by those seemingly "voiceless" show the intersection of the three main themes of the book. Throughout the book, Mallika Kaur is able to tie every account and story together in a meaningful and rich fashion, and unleash this powerfully-distinct telling of Sikh history during this period through previously "lost stories," including of Sikh political activists and human rights workers. Baljit and Mallika Kaur's bravery in capturing these previously untold stories disallows for ignorance to be a legitimate defense mechanism for inaction (or, at minimum, acknowledgement), and disproves the widespread hegemonic narrative so carefully promoted by the hegemonic Indian state.

Mallika Kaur's work is an important step in uncovering the hidden truth and purposely perpetuated misinformation surrounding the Punjab conflict, particularly the events leading up to and after 1984. Her work becomes an important contribution in ensuring and working towards a more socially just world by giving those who were traditionally marginalized, forgotten, and forced down a "voice." These activists always had agency but, without this work, their experiences and contributions may have been lost behind the concrete walls of police stations, the killing fields of obscure Punjabi villages, and an official state-sponsored historical narrative. By providing "voice" to the previously voiceless, especially in dealing with state-sanctioned power and privilege over marginalized communities, this book is essential to uncovering ethical responsibility for the harm caused to the Sikh community, including Sikh women, in the name of national security. "Ignorance" is often a defense mechanism for the inability (or actually unwillingness) to uphold human rights, prevent identity-based stigmatization, and engage in cruelty towards others. By writing this historically-based ethnography (and filling it with heartfelt, raw and passionate testimonials), Mallika Kaur bridges the gap between collective ignorance, commonly known as "systemic" and "conscious ignorance," and truly not knowing about a specific community perspective or historical event. This bridge is necessary to limit the excuse for ignorance and hold all parties accountable for their inhumane actions—both separatist militants and state-sponsored terrorists alike. This book is reflective of social justice and human rights, while providing an account of history that challenges the distorted narrative of the state hegemon—or, in the words of deceased human right activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, "shines a ray of light in the vast darkness of oppression."

Reading this book has opened my eyes to the courage and faith of many ordinary Sikhs (including marginalized Sikh women), and made me question my knowledge of not only the history and themes of the Punjab conflict, but world events as told through official state-constructed paradigms and histories. Yet, the book's lessons apply not only to the case of Sikhs in India, but also other cases of marginalized communities in the world including in so-called "advanced democracies" such as the historical status of Blacks in the United States as highlighted by the current Black Lives Matter movement or the indigenous peoples of Australia and Canada. Mallika Kaur gives power to marginalized and a "voice" to the previously quieted through an examination of three interrelated themes of faith, gender, and activism. This book breaks open the well-known and enforced hegemonic narrative, and proves that it is only the beginning to uncovering other hidden truths and ensuring a more socially just and human rights-based society. This endeavor has no territorial or geographical boundaries—to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "A threat to justice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere." This is also the message offered by the founder of Sikhi, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, and one which can only be brought closer to fruition through "voice" and agency—two concepts so eloquently explored in this well-researched and beautifully-written book by Mallika Kaur. This book opens up new avenues for comparative academic research of other case studies of faith, gender and activism globally, and the human consequences of unjust and enforced patterns of hierarchy. Whether this opportunity and, in fact, responsibility is taken up is dependent on the emerging generation of young scholars and activists (both Sikh and non-Sikh alike) committed to the ideals of social/political justice and dignity of all human beings.

The Punjab Conflict Retold: Extraordinary Suffering and Everyday Resistance

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Mallika Kaur's poignant and skillfully crafted book, *Faith, Gender and Activism in the Punjab Conflict* tells the story of the deadliest decade of the Punjab conflict—1984-1995—refracted through the lens of the human rights movement that emerged at the time. The book weaves together the experiences of its protagonists, three tenacious human rights defenders—Ajit Singh Bains, Baljit Kaur and Inderjit Singh Jaijee—while also pulling out other stories of everyday resistance from under a thick blanket of obscurity and oblivion. The book defies the narrow confines of any

one genre, as Kaur makes the conscious decision to write more than an “ordinary biography” (xi). Kaur borrows from and contributes to feminist methodology in combining history, memory and archival research, and her own personal and political story, but through an atypical arrangement of chronologies. One timeline descends from 1995 (the year supposedly marking the end of the Punjab conflict) while another one moves forward from 1839 (the year of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s death, setting the stage for the eventual annexation by British colonizers in 1849), both culminating in the landmark, life-changing events of 1984, the year that marked “an end and a beginning” (p. 286). In a writing style, at once engaging, evocative and convivial, Kaur describes this convergence of backward-looking and forward-moving time as “a loving relative, [whose] embrace [of the reader] is pesky and inconvenient at times, but unavoidable” (p. 11). Kaur embeds the stories of her protagonists in these “undulating [temporal] layers” (ibid). This unconventional, complex and messy, sometimes even chaotic chronology stands out to me not only for its newness and creativity, but also because it gets to the heart of the Sikh experience and the heart of the book—the non-linearity and repetition of trauma, its “belatedness...its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (Caruth 1995, p. 9).

Individuals and groups do not fully experience traumatic events. Instead they can only be experienced *after* the event, and even then, remain elusive, evading “coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility” (Andrews 2010, p. 155), and shaping the durability, repetition and spillover of trauma (Caruth 1996). “The very act of rendering [traumatic experiences] into narrative form lends them a coherence which they do not have” (Andrews 2010, p. 148). And yet, “even if language is insufficient for the task, it is, if not all we have, then at least one of the most effective tools we have for communicating that which must not be forgotten” (ibid, p. 158). Through the various human rights initiatives that her protagonists were engaged in, Kaur pieces together stories of the disappeared, abducted, tortured, the hastily cremated, the dead, and the survivors. In doing so, she joins her protagonists in the social struggle and “trauma process” (Alexander, 2004) to recognize and remember trauma and give it a cultural face, and to formulate a language for extreme suffering, no matter how fragmented and inadequate.

An important motivation guiding Kaur to write the book is to wrest the story of the Punjab conflict from the clutches of the dichotomous politicized narratives and focus on noncombatants. The first narrative comes from the Indian state that deliberately constructs the Punjab conflict as a product of “religious extremism,” engendering fear of all Sikhs as “terrorists,” justifying and valorizing its own role

in disciplining and controlling not simply Sikh militants but curbing a “disruptive community,” and portraying their counterinsurgency operations as putting an end to the “Punjab problem.” The second narrative emanates from within the community to account for the rise of a resistance movement in the face of loss of Sikh power and pride, starting off as peaceful and necessitating a violent, militant turn after the Indian state’s attack on the Darbar Sahib and other gurdwaras and the indiscriminate targeting of all Sikhs. Her book is an intervention to complicate these simplistic binaries that drown the feelings of loss and suffering felt by community members-at-large and neglect the quiet but resolute, everyday citizen-activism accompanying the violence. Kaur pays attention to the little details; she writes of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances and how they manage difficult life situations but also do the work of resistance.

Kaur foregrounds the stories of Bains, Jaijee and Baljit Kaur, who used their own relative privilege and safety in serving the community and doing laborious grassroots work. The story of Kaur’s protagonists is immersed in the story of the community, but the story of the community is also being shaped by the protagonists. Jaijee’s father for instance was an Akali, the political arm of the Sikh reform movement, the Singh Sabha, that among other things advocated the abolition of the caste system. When Jaijee’s father insisted on caste mixing in their home kitchen, his actions were met with criticism. Such details help understand the evolution of her protagonists. This was the milieu in which Jaijee grew up, internalizing these convictions and beliefs, reflected perhaps most starkly in his decision to move towards rather than away from trouble at home (much like Kaur’s own parents). He left a lucrative career in a multinational corporation and moved back to Punjab two months before the Army attack in June 1984, just as the situation in Punjab was getting more turbulent and tense. Justice Bains’ uncle, Harjap Singh, was one of the founding members of the Ghadar Party in the US and Bains’ himself came to be known as the “People’s Judge,” after he chaired the Bains Committee in 1985 to “review the cases of convicts, persons facing trial and all persons under investigation in connection with the political agitation from 1981 to September 1985” (p. 248). Kaur brings attention to the persistence of her protagonists against all odds, including Bains’ own abduction (chapter 5). Baljit Kaur, who had been working as a part-time Air France employee and full-time homemaker, became invested in human rights work with time and started using her family camcorder to document people’s stories, going to “condemned villages and homes during the curfewed years” (p. 9). Baljit Kaur’s story helps Kaur contest the narrative of women as “vulnerable and victimized” and instead portray them active participants during the years of the conflict as “organizers, protestors, videographers,

champions of rights” (p. 14). Though her protagonists’ story unfolds and is present in all chapters of the book, Kaur also devotes space to other citizen activists who were often beleaguered parents of the unlawfully killed and callously disposed—people like Chaman Lal (a Punjabi Hindu) who kept fighting until his last breath to contest the narrative of his son’s apparent “encounter,” and record his son’s murder as a civilian killing (chapter 4); Principal Tarlochan Singh Sandhu whose son Kulwinder Singh, “Kid,” was killed in a staged encounter and who tried his best to prevent a secret cremation, and having failed to do so, was left to play an inhumane and grotesque guessing game of picking one of two urns containing his son’s ashes (chapter 7); and Kuldip Kaur who had send her son from Delhi to a school in Karnataka to save him from the persecution all turbaned Sikh men were facing in 1984, only to die a gruesome death in 1988 in what was supposed to be a place of refuge, and who was denied even semantic justice in remembering her son as “shaheed” or martyr (chapter 8).

Kaur’s commitment to unearthing women’s narratives comes through most explicitly through Baljit Kaur’s life and work, but also extends beyond her story. As Kaur observes, female Sikh identity has been rendered subordinate to male identity, and women’s voices are often missing or go unheard (p. 104). The omissions and elisions that Kaur is identifying then are not just those imposed from *without*, but also the ones that exist *within* the community. In chapter two, Kaur traces the story of human rights defender, Jaswant Singh Khalra and his wife Paramjit Kaur Khalra. When Jaswant publicized his discovery of an estimated 25,000 “unidentified” mass cremations, indicating that the dead had been abducted and killed, he came under scrutiny along with his family. This case of secret cremations along with other cases for justice he was pursuing made him a target for state backlash and eventually he was himself “disappeared.” Kaur writes of Paramjit’s dogged pursuit for justice. Even though not everyone accused in the Khalra case was convicted (most notably K.P.S. Gill), Paramjit’s relentless fight brought attention to the incomplete work of Jaswant and partial justice in his own disappearance case. Most of all, Paramjit’s story is a testament to Kaur’s objective of highlighting the role of quiet female crusaders who keep challenging the culture of impunity. In chapter three, Kaur tells the story of Mrs. Kulbir Kaur Dhami, her involvement in the militant movement and the torture she experienced and witnessed in the 11-month long secret custody, along with her husband and their five-year old son. Kaur even manages to bring up the taboo topic of menstruation, a detail left out of accounts of most conflicts. By telling Kulbir’s story, Kaur brings attention to the agentic role that women played during the conflict. For instance, instead of being a mute victim of the violence, Kulbir reached out to the Akal Takht

and the National Human Rights Commission. This is not to say that silence is tantamount to passivity and repression, as Kaur rightly points out that silence can also be a form of resistance (p. 67). Kulbir's case also highlights the solidarity that women forged during the years of torture and imprisonment. Kaur entitles chapter three, "Monu's Mummy," an acknowledgment and recognition of this sisterhood. Kulbir and "Monu's Mummy," a fellow female jail inmate, had made a pact that if one of them survived jail, the other would take care of the deceased woman's child. When Kulbir was released from jail, she went looking for Monu and upon finding him safe with relatives felt relieved but continued to be haunted by the thought of other children like him left to suffer. This led to her decision to open an orphanage. Even the act of renting a place for an orphanage for marked people like the Dhamis required courage on the part of ordinary Sikhs. Thus, Kaur talks about gendered violence through Kulbir's story, but by also including little details such as the landlord's grit in renting to Kulbir, she shines a light on everyday people who went about doing the work of resistance silently.

Kaur's book is an insightful, meticulously researched and emotional account of the Punjab conflict. The book lacks a theoretical scaffolding, but that was perhaps never Kaur's intention. Instead the book documents the history of the community, events and experiences of the conflict; highlights gendered violence; seeks to find a language to articulate the trauma, pain and suffering of ordinary citizens; and both depicts and does the work of memory, resistance and activism. The book is written for laypeople and scholarly audiences alike, and while it will be of special interest to the Sikh community and South Asian audiences, anyone interested in issues of human rights and everyday resistance, gender, memory and trauma will appreciate the wide-ranging scope and depth of this book.

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The Potency of Sikh Memory: Time Travel and Memory Construction in the Wake of Disappearance

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What words can one string together in an attempt to discuss the most inhumane atrocities that extend beyond several lifetimes? Mallika Kaur has unraveled more than a few and has arranged them seamlessly across nearly 300 pages of text. *Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict: The Wheat Fields Still Whisper* is a moving work that disrupts norms around temporality, geography, narrative structure, and the archive. The contention surrounding narratives on anti-Sikh violence in Punjab, and India more broadly, has more often focused on which details are included, who is painted as victim versus perpetrator, and who should be seeking justice from whom. Mallika Kaur addresses many of these contentions in her embrace of the "people's narrative," asking "what might shift in our collective understanding and action if we spent nearly as much time fascinated by everyday people" as we are by these contentions and the eroticisms of violence. I will not attempt to lay out the intricacies and details of this narrative here, as Kaur has done so eloquently and painstakingly in her text. Instead, I engage with Kaur's narrative choices and demonstrate that, perhaps more significant than what the story includes in its telling, is how the author chooses to tell it.

Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot and U.S. historian Hayden White both address the significance of the production of history and narrative discourse in their work (*Silencing the Past* [1995] and *The content of the form* [2009] respectively). While Sikhs are known to repeat the sentiment "history is written by the victors" as representative of how the community's continuous losses have written them out of history, Trouillot's work argues that the silences in history occur at four separate points: "fact creation (the making of sources), fact assembly (the making of archives), fact retrieval (the making of narratives), and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)" (1995, p. 26). This pairs well with White's work on the nuances between historical fact and historical narrative. White argues that, in building a historical narrative, one is writing history from a vantage point of legality, legibility, and consciousness that interprets documented fact with the intention of providing a "coherence, integrity,

fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (2009, p. 24). Understanding these two great risks in writing historical narrative—both the potential of furthering silences through the making of narratives and history and the imposition of fullness and closure onto a history that continues to unfurl into the future—how can one engage with any text on a multi-generation genocide with ease? In Mallika Kaur’s approach, the answer comes through choices in narrative construction—that of the temporal framework.

The book follows several human rights activists who use their relative social and cultural capital within the labyrinth of Indian state politics to wrangle justice for the continued unsettlement and demonization of Sikhs that began from the moment Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s empire lost control over the Punjab region in 1839 and reached a culmination in 1995 with the disappearance of the foremost human rights activist of the 20th century, Jaswant Singh Khalra. Kaur asks the readers to accept the conveyor belt timeline—moving forward and backward in tandem—as the pesky embrace of a

relative, and also names it as a necessary act of solidarity from the reader. The conveyor belt jerks to a halt in the final chapter in 1984, a year that witnessed multiple government-led operations to kill masses of Sikhs, and also the birth of the author herself. This recognition of the author’s arrival into this timeline is far from self-interested; in fact, it is a demonstration of Kaur’s own reckoning and embrace of how Sikhs, and those vested in seeking justice from oppressive states anywhere, can enter into a space of mourning and acknowledging the trauma that has been unfurling long before their presence was dreamed up.

Kaur’s choice in temporal framework is further significant for it does not separate the current oppression of Sikhs by Hindutva India from the ways in which the British Raj took advantage of Sikh identity and sovereignty for their own rule. In

	<i>Contemporary Timeline</i>	<i>Historical Timeline</i>
Chapter 2	1995	1839 - 1917
Chapter 3	1994	1918 - 1935
Chapter 4	1993	1936 - 1947
Chapter 5	1992	1948 - 1959
Chapter 6	1991 - 1990	1960 - 1967
Chapter 7	1989	1968 - 1974
Chapter 8	1988 - 1987	1975 - 1981
Chapter 9	1986 - 1985	1982 - 1983
Chapter 10	1984	



Photo 1.3 The concurrent timelines running through the book’s chapters

fact, these transverse timelines allow us to bear witness to the continued malalignment and misuse of Sikh sovereignty within multiple nation-states who all claimed to be invested in Sikhs' "right to live" until it manifested as fearless resistance. The use of parallel narratives, rather than a normative linear temporality, give much clearer insight into how past traumas do not dissolve with time nor do the structures that caused them. In fact, as Kaur shares with us through community narrative, it was the hypervisibility of Sikhs in British imperial forces that led to the community's general trust of the military which allowed the Indian government to enact martial law in Punjab without a large amount of suspicion; Sikhs saw the military as their own and never would anticipate those same tanks and guns desecrating the Darbar Sahib complex. Kaur's temporal framework reminds us that when injustice's arc has been long-standing, the justice and reparations we seek must stretch at least as far.

Kaur regularly embraces that these narratives of anti-Sikh violence and oppression will be messy, nuanced, and unfinished, but does so through a critical process of stating the power dynamics in narrative and memory making. One of the repeated arcs throughout the book is the criticisms received by the selected protagonists Baljit Kaur, Justice Ajit Singh Bains, and Inderjit Singh Jaijee in their work as the "Movement Against State Repression"—specifically that they were not doing enough to counter the violence being done by Sikh militants and grassroots freedom fighters themselves. The reply never varied: we are fighting state repression; we do not condone any killings, but these are not done by the state. They would further emphasize that, until it was clear Indian courts could deliver true justice, there was no point in attempting to navigate the oppressive system for these murders either. The message is clear; power matters and acknowledging who holds the power is as critical to seeking justice as any other attempts at narrative reconstruction.

At one point Kulbir Kaur, one of Mallika Kaur's interlocutors, voices her own frustration at the oversimplified tellings of contemporary Sikh narrative: "People writing histories today, they make me so mad! They are writing as if there was just one face to the people involved. Or they are writing about things they don't know. And one-sided is not good for the next generation either; people were real, human," says Kulbir, adjusting the hem of her kurta" (p. 74). Mallika Kaur certainly does not tell a one-sided tale, nor does she shy away from the apparent contradictions of communal violence. As indicated by the title of the text, Kaur critically examines when women were present, how, and why; she dives deep into the complexities of self-identified Sikhs being the actors of violence against Sikh victims; she engages with the ways in which Sikh women who were part of the Punjab Police found ways

to resist while bearing witness to atrocities of gender-based violence. Many of these women had received the position after becoming widowed, a generally treasured perk of Indian government positions. But as these policewomen wept to the jailed women about the atrocities they were being forced to witness, one wonders what sanctity could be found for a Sikh even with the relative privilege of a steady paycheck and security of being a police officer. Another tale recounts a Sikh police officer crying after killing a Sikh woman, Surinder Kaur, in custody: “*We told her to do paath, and as she prayed, I shot her*” (p. 87). In weaving together the narratives of unspeakable violence, Mallika Kaur is able to masterfully hold space for individual accountability and the reality that there has not only been one type of victim nor victimization in this struggle. As Kaur demonstrates, to fail to recognize that reality only serves the original divide and conquer strategies laid out by the British Raj and capitalized upon by the post-1947 Indian government.

One of the most potent strategies of Kaur’s historical narrative is the role played by memory. Memory is a key component in developing historical narratives, particularly those marred by extreme violence. Memory studies has blossomed into a multi-disciplinary field after its genesis with scholarship on Holocaust memory and entire methods, like oral history and archival studies, depend on the recounting and documentation of memory. On the other hand, memory is also a contentious data set given its potential for variation and the impact that trauma (lived or intergenerational) can have on memory. This makes the value and space that Kaur gives memory and oral history even more notable; Kaur often opens chapters or sections sharing intimate stories from fireside chats with elders in Chural, a pind that frequents the book’s narrative, or excerpts of conversations she picked up on as a young girl in Chandigarh. Kaur’s unique way of sharing her own memory as she uncovers that of survivors of the anti-Sikh violence is demonstrative that historical narrative is beyond just words or memory—it is a feeling and a spirit that carries forth a people. Kaur reminds us of “the potency of Sikh memory,” with Sardar Udham Singh carrying out justice for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre over 20 years later as he traveled to London and killed the chief executioner O’Dwyer, or the counter-memory efforts carried out by parents whose son was murdered in anti-Sikh violence when the newspaper refused to print the word “shaheed” or “riot.” What is most powerful about how Kaur evokes memory is when she indicates what is no longer remembered. Chapter 7 closes with all three of our protagonists, starting with Baljit Kaur, thinking back on one of many cases of a young Sikh man, barely entered into adulthood, who was disappeared by police:

Asked if Kid was indeed active with a militant outfit...Baljit Kaur pauses thoughtfully and states, “He wasn’t. I don’t think so. His father was politically outspoken and that was all.”

“I am quite sure he was,” remembers Jaijee, when asked the same.

“The point is that the law prohibits eliminating people after kidnapping and hiding and torturing them,” says Justice Bains, who at 93 does not remember the case details as much as surrounding the station with his fearless comrades.

For a community whose collective memory has been erased diligently by its oppressors, from the burning of the Sikh Research Library to the disappearance of entire lineages of Sikh families, this passage is indescribably powerful. Kaur reminds us—readers, community members, history creators, and memory makers—that beyond the legitimacy given to memory or the speed with which legal systems respond is the power of collective action. These are the narratives that will travel across time and memory until they give birth to justice.

Journeying through Mallika Kaur’s Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict

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Mallika Kaur’s *Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict: The Wheat Fields Still Whisper* sheds light on the legacies of human rights activism, alongside the everyday lives of those who continue to be haunted by the period of insurgency and counterinsurgency in 1980s and 1990s Punjab and its diaspora. Kaur’s innovative and creative approach pays attention to the voices of those who have been absent from the narrative of the conflict — “the murdered, the tortured, the imprisoned, the dispossessed, the resisting, the expelled, and the returned,” (p. ix)¹ — offering a multifaceted method for understanding how widespread and pervasive the violence seeped into Sikh lives. The book is a journey: one that spans multiple temporal modalities, and offers an array of characters, in particular women and unarmed human rights defenders, who share their experiences and stories in nuanced ways. Kaur’s approach as a researcher is reflexive and instructive, allowing her interlocutors to tell the story in the way that best moves them, rather

¹ Page references are to Kaur’s book, unless otherwise noted.

than imposing her own lens onto their stories. Journeying through *Faith Gender and Activism* requires the reader to push against normative “official” histories or sensational violence of the conflict, and recalibrates a sense of how Sikh women and men lived through, experienced, and resisted violence in their homeland.

The structure of the book works against the grain of linearity and teleology. Rather than moving through a straightforward temporality, Kaur works to disrupt traditional notions of progress, which frame conflict as if it has culminated in success, peace, or justice, and as if the violence has terminated. Working in a back and forth, iterative motion, the book takes us between multiple timelines: a contemporary and a historical. Kaur explains that these timelines will travel forward to embrace the reader. Yet, “[...] like a loving relative, this embrace is pesky and inconvenient at times, but unavoidable” (p. 11). The practice of reading in these multiple modalities of time is challenging and disorienting, as it disrupts conventional practices of knowledge. However, this is precisely the point: conflict is not easily consumed or understood; it is messy, haphazard, and chaotic. The ten chapters oscillate between the following timelines: chapter two focuses on 1995 (the so-called end of the violence) and 1839-1917; chapter three moves across 1994 and 1918-1935; chapter four 1993 and 1936-1947; chapter five, 1992 and 1948-1959; chapter six focuses on 1991-1990 and 1960-1967; chapter seven between 1989 and 1968-1974; chapter eight between 1988-1987 and 1975-1981; chapter nine between 1986-1985 and 1982-1983; and chapter ten focuses on 1984. While most accounts begin with 1984, this book closes with that year, decentering the time and space of the conflict to be more extended and expansive.

As Kaur writes, “The immediate effect on the Sikh psyche was unmistakable: the year 1984 was an end and a beginning” (p. 255). What does it mean to begin where a conflict ends and end where a conflict begins? These timelines help position the reader against a progress-driven narrative of time to instead imagine how the violence lingers into the present. Much like the afterlives of the memories of Kaur’s interlocutors who endured the violence of this period, the reader is asked to think about how the violence is ongoing and lingers into the present. As Inderpal Grewal and I argue in an essay on remembering, forgetting, and refusing the violence of the 1980s, memories of conflict unfold in relation to the slow and structural violence that has manifested through years of living with the after-effects of insurgency and counterinsurgency (Grewal and Sabherwal, 2019, p. 346). Like Kaur, Grewal and I found that many women showed themselves to be historians, witnesses, and active participants in sharing and debating what had happened during the insurgency (Grewal and Sabherwal, 2019, p. 355). The women of our

research, and the women in Kaur's book, show that nearly thirty years later, while Punjab is believed to be at peace and was overcome by the power of the state that put down the insurgency, these narratives of "success," and "peace" do not explain the afterlives of violence, the changes that altered social, political and economic lives, or the complex relations of gender and power that comprise the present as it is informed by the past. Kaur's work reveals that 1984 is not static, or frozen in time, but it is significant in the making of timelines, flashpoints, and memories for Punjabis across generations.

Kaur's work is an important intervention in the fields of Sikh Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and for scholars and activists who work on religious and ethnic violence. The book is textured and layered, written through an explicitly feminist lens, circling around the lives of three protagonists, who found themselves at the center of the conflict: Justice Ajit Singh Bains, once known as the "communist judge," later affectionately called the "people's judge;" Baljit Kaur, who used a video camera to record significant evidence of the conflict; and Inderjit Singh Jaijee, who returned to Punjab to document abuses even as others were fleeing. Though these three interlocutors narrate, supplement, and provide lawyer-activist lenses to the different stories Kaur highlights, it is the women—Paramjit Kaur Khalra, Kulbir Kaur Dhani, Rachpal Bains, and Kuldip Kaur, among others—who fill in the lacunae of the innerworkings of the conflict. These women work as support systems and care networks for everyone around them. The symphony of women's voices illuminated throughout the book indexes the unwritten stories of those who were often forgotten heroes throughout the conflict. Sharing the stories of women within the context of a conflict that has been told predominantly through the lens of masculinity and men's stories has a profound impact in reshaping the epistemologies of conflict in Punjab.

Undoubtedly, these women's stories are difficult to read. The violence they speak of—police brutality, torture, projects of impunity, physical and sexual violence—are unthinkable acts that have forever left residues for the community. Acts of violence were not met passively, however, and were resisted. Kaur shows how Sikhs lived their lives and defended their families and communities amidst states of emergency and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) (p. 86). For instance, Paramjit Kaur Khalra, Jaswant Singh Khalra's wife, worked tirelessly to get justice for her husband who was disappeared and then murdered. As Justice Bains said, "Without her grit, even such an obvious case could not have survived in the courts" (p. 30). It is Paramjit's dedication to fighting for justice that Jaswant's killing has not faded into the background, as just another of the many

cases that were easily dismissed by the Indian government. In one of Kaur's interviews with Paramjit, she powerfully says, "[...] Meanwhile I meet women survivors of violence, like old mothers of boys who were killed, doing menial work to earn daily rotis. But it is in the land of Guru-Shaheeds. A miracle could still happen. Till then, we keep living our lives the best we can" (p. 52). Paramjit's commitment and resilience in the face of violence speaks to the larger argument of the book—how women pushed against logics of the state as fighters of their faith, family, and community. In addition, Kulbir Kaur Dhami, a Sikh woman who was kept in a secret torture camp with her husband and their young son, explains in an interview, "I've seen a lot. My habit is to speak from what I've seen" (p. 63). In describing her life, Kulbir articulates herself as a historian and knowledge-keeper, someone who has lived through, documented, archived, and is now sharing her lived experiences. Her experience of police violence is just one of the many atrocities committed by the police against Sikh families, but as Kulbir tells her own story, it becomes clear that she is not only a victim of this situation, but that she is attempting to bring justice and reconciliation to her family and to others impacted by the violence.

While Kaur's book is a pivotal feminist project, there are a few points that could have been more carefully considered. For instance, while caste is an important part of the project and Kaur discusses the plight of Dalits across Punjab, it is not immediately clear how Kaur is disrupting dominant Jat Sikh history. Though she discusses the ways in which K.P.S. Gill made the conflict out to be one that pitted Jats against non-Jats, there is little additional discussion of how Dalit Sikhs (including Mazhabi Sikhs and Ravidassias) experienced the conflict. Many of Kaur's interlocutors represent a Jat-centered viewpoint. Second, Kaur's discussion of diaspora is significant as she points out the overlapping connections between diasporic Sikhs and those in India (p. 131, 218). However, at times the back and forth between the diaspora and the homeland occurs so seamlessly that it absolves difference between the two communities. Specificities of place could have been teased out more. For instance, the NRI politics of Bhindranwale are very different across different geographies such as the U.K., Canada, and India. More attention to these differences may have produced a sharper sense of how the conflict was being constructed transnationally. Finally, though there is some discussion of Kashmir in the early chapters of the book, there is a way in which claiming Punjab as a laboratory for conflict misses other ongoing conflicts, and further exceptionalizes Punjab. One way to draw out these historical connections could have been to discuss in greater detail K.P.S. Gill and the production of a global security "expertise." Gill used his knowledge from Assam and the Northeast to shape his

work in Punjab. Rather than siloing Punjab's conflict, it would have been helpful to see the continuities in Gill's controversial work as a "supercop."

Though there were points that could have been extended in more detail, *Faith, Gender, and Activism in the Punjab Conflict* cannot be expected to elaborate on every aspect of insurgency and counterinsurgency in the region. Her work remains one of the few to reflect on the conflict both through a gendered lens, and with specific attention to human rights activists in Punjab. The journeys encountered throughout her book—stories about human rights violations, gendered violence, justice, and resiliency—are paramount to understanding the everyday implications of the conflict in India. Her important work paves the way for future research on Punjab, religion, gender, and violence, and urgently adds to scholarly conversations on religion and "communal violence."

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Book Author's Reflective Response to Review Commentaries

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*"The very act of rendering [traumatic experiences] into narrative form lends them a coherence which they do not have."*¹

The above excerpted quote and related reflection in Professor Shruti Devgan's book review reminded me of the visceral question I was consumed with while writing this book: how do you provide readers a viable yet honest journey through a tortured history—while also endeavoring to avoid torturing the memory of survivors?

Contesting any monochromatic telling, I wrote this book to provide a radically new approach to telling conflict stories. This approach, and the larger underlying questions it provokes, make the book relatable to anyone interested in civic action, human rights advocacy, citizen movements, peace, and inclusive democracy. It has been heartening to witness an often-eclipsed recent history find such diverse readership.

For their close and careful reading, I would like to sincerely thank reviewers Navkiran Kaur Chima, Shruti Devgan, Harleen Kaur, and Sasha Sabherwal. They critically and enthusiastically engaged with the layers of stories, and shared insightful reflections and suggestions.

The non-linearity of the book, which all four reviewers appreciated as a choice and ethic, asks a little more from the reader than a usual chronological telling. But through the required time-travel, it is my ardent hope all readers, just as these reviewers, are drawn deeper to various historical pockets of recent Sikh history. The book's two braided timelines help the reader traverse a brief telling of Sikh history from 1839 to 1984, in order to better understand the focus of the book, which is the contemporary conflict history from 1984 to 1995. That's a vast time period, but as Harleen Kaur noted in her review: "injustice's arc has been long-standing."

¹ Andrews, Molly (2010) "Beyond Narrative: The Shape of Traumatic Testimony," in eds. M. Hyvärinen et. al., *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 147-166, 148.

While triangulating historical details was important, the book's narration was precisely attempting to evoke the kind of emotions described by Navkiran Kaur Chima: "juxtapose[ing] the banality and beauty of everyday life in Punjab with the untold human cruelty [that] was happening at the time in the police stations, interrogation (read: torture) centers, and wheat fields of Punjab." To be certain, not all Punjabis or even all Sikhs were impacted equally. Yet, even in the most privileged and self-consumed Sikh homes, an undeniable messaging by the State was internalized: Sikhs were considered suspect unless they clearly displayed their fidelity to the status quo; certain political views would cost you your life; resisting such muzzling would be seen as treacherous, dangerous, seditious, regardless of constitutional guarantees under India's own laws. The ways in which Sikhs' minoritization was perfected does indeed have parallels as well as ramifications for other communities, "including in so-called advanced democracies," as Chima noted.

The book contributes to the under-studied question of transitional justice in electoral democracies. In discussing a conflict context that has seen no regime change (unlike say, Argentina or Chile, Punjab was an electoral democracy pre- and post-conflict), the book engages with questions of collective trauma; reparations; and transformative approaches toward a just peace. With the benefit of hindsight; with the State's declared victory against Punjab militancy; with years of aftermath evident, I propose Punjab provides lessons for dialogue on difference, for handling dissent, for building local leadership, for piercing impunity despite staggering odds.

The book's fight against fatalism involves re-focusing us on the possibility of change on the ground, where it matters most to victim-survivors of the conflict. In *The Pinochet Effect*,² Naomi Roht-Arriaza writes about Chilean judges who became "norm entrepreneurs," (p.215) applying international human rights law to their local context. As I note in footnote 82, Chapter 2, Roht-Arriaza measures external pressure and activity by the internal impact it creates: international attention (like the sensational arrest of Chilean dictator Pinochet) and some transnational trials are beneficial precisely when they prompt shifts in attitude in the home countries—such as emboldening judges. I will take this opportunity to remind readers to peruse the footnotes, where I placed several important

² Roht-Arriaza, Naomi (2005) *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

summaries, anecdotes, foundational underpinnings not for their lesser importance but in order to not interrupt the narrative flow.

The choice for the narrative included employing as vehicles of storytelling the life stories of the three extraordinary people on the cover of the book, people who found themselves at the center of Punjab's hazardous human rights movement: Ajit Singh Bains, Inderjit Singh Jaijee, Baljit Kaur. But this is not a collective biography. Each chapter contains many other stories, most in fact of people and families relatively very disadvantaged when compared to the three protagonists. Most of these stories remain unfinished and illustrate how, despite the State's wishful diktats, as Sasha Sabharwal beautifully notes "narratives of 'success,' and 'peace' do not explain the afterlives of violence." Punjab was declared "post-conflict" without truth, justice, reparation, reconciliation.

Yet, as I say in the Preface "the events in Punjab ha[ve] since been used as a blueprint to respond to dissent and rebellion in other parts of India" (p. vi). To Sabharwal's point regarding exceptionalism, I do not suggest in the book that Punjab is *the* only blueprint used by the Indian state since. Still, I do believe in the importance of studying Punjab independently. Giving it its own attention, is not simply a matter of respect or representation or independent identity, it is also a matter of historical integrity: Punjab's own story is so large, yet so untold, it needs not one new dedicated book, but many more—that I especially hope will emerge on areas that I could not begin to fully explore in my project. This book's undulating layers attempt to highlight just how many diverse stories flowed through Punjab's rivers, first when they flowed in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's empire, outside of British control; later as they were tamed by the British; and then when they were bloodily and artificially separated between two new nation-states. The stories are so numerous, divergent, complex, and as Sabharwal notes, many more need to be told. She is correct that teasing out caste dynamics was not a specific project of this book. As Devgan's review notes, the book early on signals the entrenched caste dynamics in Punjab: "When Jaijee's father insisted on caste mixing in their home kitchen, his actions were met with criticism." And at the subaltern level my understanding is that there were many non-Jatts, including Dalits, among the militants as well accused militant supporters (for example the Dalit Sikh prisoner in Chapter 3 who would bow to the mango tree that witnessed inhumane torture, p. 81). And as I note in Chapter 7, solidarities across castes were extremely threatening to ruling powers, as exemplified by the deadly State resistance to the Minority and Dalit Front organization. Still, the granular stories in the book do not evaluate the differentiated experiences and aftermaths of the conflict by caste, especially for non-dominant

castes. As I note also in Chapter 3, there are several worthwhile and immediately politically relevant investigations pending on the relationships between castes, deras, the conflict, and post-conflict.

Similarly, Sabherwal is correct in noting that this is not a book about the Sikh diaspora. I paused at her observation that “at times the back and forth between the diaspora and the homeland occurs so seamlessly that it absolves difference between the two communities.” I reflected on how the interlocutors—as well as myself—who made those back and forth journeys have come to remember them in an amalgamated manner. The book does not take room to tease out those “specifics of space.” And of course any future project focused on the diaspora should also properly problematize the binary: home and diaspora. There are so many communities within these distant but proximate groups.

Harleen Kaur’s review notes the book’s brief—even if vivid—exploration of a subgroup within the umbrella community of “women” during the conflict. Kaur notes the book “engages with the ways in which Sikh women who were part of the Punjab Police found ways to resist while bearing witness to atrocities of gender-based violence.” The book, focused on human rights defenders and those they were defending, does not for the most part contain stories from the viewpoint of State actors or perpetrators. Yet, I consistently found that my interlocutors had held tightly to stories where agents of the State displayed resistance to top-brass orders and retained their humanity. Perhaps this is why Justice Bains continues to believe that if only the government had allowed a truth and reconciliation process, Punjab’s present would look very different (the State in fact scuttled the one such process, the People’s Commission, led by civil society, as examined in chapter 2).

I must clarify however the point in Harleen Kaur’s review that the protagonists emphasized that “until it was clear Indian courts could deliver true justice, there was no point in attempting to navigate the oppressive system for these murders either.” Legal case details during the conflict years are available to varying extents, which is instructive: till the mid-90s legal remedies were *de facto* suspended in Punjab. Case descriptions in the book thus also draw from non-legal sources. However, as far as possible and as soon as possible, the protagonists pursued legal remedies. They tirelessly believed in engaging systems, no matter how seemingly intractable, towards establishing a rule of law. They never had the luxury to give up on the systems that are meant to protect the people; because that is the only recourse for folks living on-the-ground, despite the deficiencies of those systems. The oldest enforced disappearance case of Kuljit Singh Dhatt, a sarpanch, killed in

police custody in 1989 (as described in Chapter 2), is still in the system: appeals in his case are still ongoing.

Finally, I wish to add that the feminist lens appreciated by each of the four reviewers is not limited to excavating women's stories. Sabherwal notes that the book includes a "symphony of women's voices," a recognition of the diversity within. Further, a feminist lens attempts to bring out a symphony of nuances in all stories. "The Sikhs" or "the militants" in most available accounts are generally presented as abstract, homogeneous groups. Or in more serious works, there is an acknowledgement of the non-homogeneity. But longer and layered stories can show what academic papers tell.

Sikh men's voices, beyond stereotypes, too need increased space in our telling, reading, and understanding of Punjab's recent history. Plenty of Sikh men, even those who were directly persecuted by the State, committed to human rights activism and remained unaffiliated with combatants. To take just one example: the many roles taken by the father who himself was "left to play an inhumane and grotesque guessing game of picking one of two urns containing his son's ashes" as noted by Devgan in her review. For one, this father, Tarlochan Singh ji, later became a fearless conduit for smuggling letters from the woman committed to staying alive in a secret torture center (Ch. 3). His own heartbreak is documented in his will, which bequeathed his small property as well as his murdered son's languishing legal case to a nephew.

Allowing men emotional stories that get to the why of the why is central to a feminist method. Thus, Justice Bains began speaking about his beloved great-grand aunt Mai Jeevi. Asking about his boyhood connections to Mai Jeevi—the foods she cooked, the animals she tended, the advice she gave this rebellious child, the repercussions she faced as a woman who could have no biological children of her own—then shed light on his family's various sung and unsung heroes through the generations, including many single and widowed mothers who exemplified for their children, *chardi kalaa* (the Sikh belief in the ever-ascending ability of the human spirit) in praxis.

A "feminist curiosity" (as coined by the intrepid Dr. Cynthia Enloe) allows for details and granularity. I was so pleased to see Devgan's critical eye catch and comment on some of the details that provided nuance to the stories. Due to space considerations while publishing, many other specifics did not make it to the final form. But collecting those particulars was essential to the feminist process that

involved complicating before simplifying, asking before assuming, listening before leading with more questions.

I welcome the analysis in Devgan's review: "anyone interested in issues of human rights and everyday resistance, gender, memory and trauma will appreciate the wide-ranging scope and depth of this book."