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VICTIMS, HEROES OR MARTYRS?
PARTITION AND THE PROBLEM OF
MEMORIALIZATION IN
CONTEMPORARY SIKH HISTORY

Heroism and martyrdom are central values in contemporary Sikh historiography and primary symbols in their collective memory. Both are replete with the stories of numerous heroes and martyrs who faced death, unflinchingly fighting in defense of the Sikh faith and its believers (constituting the Panth or community) against overwhelming odds. Conversely, it is considered shameful for Sikhs to become mere victims, succumbing to attacks against faith and community without fighting to the death. It is also insisted that true Sikhs do not themselves attack those who are weak or harmless; on the contrary true Sikhs come to the defense of such persons even if they are not of the same faith. However, during the last half century, Sikhs have many times become victims, as well as perpetrators of violence, being unable to act in a way consistent with their central values. The consequence has been an inability to integrate their modern history successfully into a narrative consistent with those values and to find appropriate ways of memorializing what has been done to many Sikhs and what many Sikhs have done to others.

Victims, heroes, martyrs: community responses and attitudes towards traumatic violence

Traumatic violence, and the memory of it, appears to be intrinsic to the formation and development of most larger communities, that is to say, ethnic and religious communities, nationalities, nations, and states. The forms and manifestations of such violence are innumerable, but, in the formation of larger communities, there are only a finite number of possible *attitudes* to violence directed towards the community and its members and outwards towards other communities. When violence is directed against a community, the valorized responses may be either non-violent acceptance or non-resistance; non-violent resistance; or active, violent resistance. Labels attach to the participants involved in each type of response, who usually comprise only a



section of the group, typically only a minority. However, there have been occasions when all or most members of an endangered community act in a uniform way.

Non-resisters may be labelled pacifists, a term that for some will be considered laudatory, for others cowardly. When it is valorized by a community, however, there are two terms that may be applied: victim or martyr. No one, I think, would doubt that the term 'martyr' always has a positive meaning for members of a community, but one does not usually think of the term 'victim' in a positive sense. In the history of modern societies, however, it does have a kind of valorized meaning, identifying members of a community or the community as a whole as hapless innocents. These hapless innocents are valorized as peaceful, law-abiding, often defenseless persons living normal, if not exemplary, lives, who became targets of violence through no fault of their own. The term victim, it would appear, is especially favored by communities that have no continuous history of martyrdom, though the latter term may also be adopted even in the absence of such a history. Thus, it has been part of Christian tradition to use the term martyr in the types of cases described here, for martyrdom has been valorized in Christian history for two millennia. In the case of Jews, however, there is no continuous tradition of martyrdom, where the status of victim has been the preferred designation for the sufferers from Christian intolerance over centuries in the west and, in modern times, of racist nationalisms, especially, of course, Nazism.¹

The term martyr, however, has a much more positive ring than that of victim. So, despite the absence of a well-defined tradition of martyrdom, that term has also been adopted for the Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide in the Holocaust.² However, analytically speaking, it is clearly a misnomer for the hopeless, non-violent acceptance by almost all Jewish victims of a fate over which very few had any reasonable prospect of successful resistance. Nor could more than a handful have resisted successfully or at all without incurring responsibility for the deaths of numerous other Jewish victims through Nazi retaliation. But, most importantly for purposes of definition, the six million did not go to their deaths by bravely proclaiming themselves as Jews, declaring their unflinching adherence to their community or their faith. They were chosen – or, rather, given the heavy freight carried by that term, they were selected – by criteria that had nothing to do with their own self-definition(s). But, it would seem, contrary to the general point just made that the specific types of responders to violence directed against a community usually constitute a minority, virtually all Jews caught in the Holocaust net were non-resisters. However, since they had no reasonable alternatives, there is a kind of pathetic quality to the valorization of the non-violent acceptance by Jews of their fate as a form of bravery or even as an 'act' at all.

Non-violent resistance, however, does constitute wilful acting. First adopted in a major way by Gandhi in South Africa and then in India, it became a preferred mode of resistance in colonial societies to perceived unjust authority, domination and control over entire populations by alien rulers, and then in the United States to similar domination and discrimination by a dominant white population against Blacks. Those who suffered retributive violence, including in some cases violent deaths, have sometimes been described as victims of ruthless, racist colonial regimes or of white racism, but the term martyr has also been used in these cases. Either term would appear to be appropriate in such cases. The term victim

would seem to be appropriate for persons who acted peacefully on behalf of a cause, but were treated violently. The massacre of Sikhs and Hindus assembled in the open, but partially enclosed field at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in 1919 under the orders of a semi-deranged British general is one such case. Another case towards which attention has recently been drawn once again in the United States after fifty years, is the wanton killing by white racists in Mississippi of three non-violent workers against the segregation of, and discrimination against, Blacks in the South. While the term victim is appropriate in both cases because of the imbalance in the violence applied by armed killers to peaceful activists, so would the term martyr also be appropriate, by virtue of the fact that those victimized were standing up for a cause.³ They were not chosen or selected because of their race, creed or ethnicity; they were targeted because they acted, and their actions were greeted by undue force.

We come now to the third term – namely, active, violent resisters. The often-preferred name used by their admirers for such activists is ‘hero’, by their detractors, ‘terrorists’. But there is overlap here as well between the terms hero and martyr. Most often, the hero is perceived as acting against great odds regardless of the prospects of success, while the martyred resister acts with the certainty of defeat and death. But in their usage within particular communities, the terms are often used interchangeably.

Of course, all such categories are subject to change and transmutation through social action and interpretation. Indeed, they cannot exist independently of such action and interpretation. It then becomes a task for social scientists and social science historians to trace the uses of these terms, their adoption and adaptation by different communities, and the functions they serve for different communities. That, at least, is my intention herein, with the focus on Sikh uses of such terms and their consequences in the political life of the community, with particular attention to the uses of the terms ‘victims’, ‘martyrs’ and ‘heroes’ in relation to the partition massacres in the Punjab. In particular, I want to discuss herein the ways in which such terms, engraved in the institutionalized ‘collective memory’ of Sikhs, as Das has put it, have been valorized in relation to acts of violence perpetrated both against Sikhs by others and by Sikhs against perceived enemies and oppressors.⁴

Genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the partition of the Punjab

I want now to consider some general aspects of genocide and ethnic cleansing that present great obstacles to the peoples concerned in finding appropriate terms of commemoration, lessons for the future, and recovery of group respect, with special reference to the case of the Sikhs, but in a comparative perspective.

I want to discuss several features of genocides and ethnic cleansing in relation to the issues of trauma and memorialization. First, it is generally assumed that peoples who have been subjected to genocide and ethnic cleansing have been made victims. Indeed, the claim to the utmost victimhood is characteristic for all such cases, including many that do not fit the conventional categories of genocide and ethnic cleansing. There is almost a competition for rank among groups that have suffered genocide or genocidal massacres of a part of the group. The central example, without doubt, concerns the uniqueness of the Holocaust, upon which most Jews

insist and which other groups contest. In any case, it certainly constitutes the extreme case against which all others may be compared, without in any way minimizing the sufferings of others.

It is generally accepted that there were many tens of thousands of hapless, innocent victims massacred, especially women and children, and, in the case of women, raped and abducted during the bloody months of violence before and after partition of the Punjab on 15 August 1947. With regard especially to the women, Das has noted that the sufferings they experienced were not predictable or transparent, but arose as a consequence of 'a configuration of accidents',⁵ that is to say, the accident of being in a particular village or a particular line of migrants or upon a train that was chosen for attack at a particular, unpredictable time. In other words, they were not in a position to act meaningfully to protect themselves nor, often, could their menfolk protect them. They lived in the midst of unpredictable chaos.⁶ There is both similarity and difference here with the experience of Holocaust victims, who also never knew what to expect from day to day, minute to minute. But the contingency of existence in the two situations was also different. For Jews in the camps, there was unpredictability from day to day concerning the consequences of any independent action whatsoever, a total absence of rules of behavior to avoid beatings and immediate death, but the certainty of misery every day and of imminent death for all.⁷ Nor was there chaos, but instead the strictest imaginable organization, confinement and control by others of the very existence of each person. Only by accident, not by choice, could anyone survive, whereas during the partition violence, it was death and abduction that were accidental and survival a genuine possibility that sustained the hopes of all migrants expelled from their homes and set on their dreadful journey to a new life in a new land.

Victims or heroes? Problems in community acceptance of a claim to victimhood

But there are three problems for any people who make a claim to victimhood, which affects most of all the self-respect of the adult men of a community. The first is that it may degrade them, especially as in the case of a people like the Sikhs, among whose central values are bravery, fighting to the death against all odds, never submitting, and the like. This is an issue that recurs in the Sikh literature on the partition. While Sikhs as early as 1950 used the new term 'genocide' to condemn what they portrayed as a 'Muslim League attack against Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab',⁸ they sought at the same time to salvage the image of Sikh bravery and fighting determination. Thus, on the one hand, they sought to document the riots, pogroms, and massacres in western Punjab as vicious attacks against a people vastly and hopelessly outnumbered by Muslim gangs acting with the complicity of the police. At the same time, occasional instances are cited even in these cases where, against all odds, Sikhs fought bravely to the death and, in a few cases, repulsed attackers and saved a village or a remnant of a village.

On the other hand, however, where Sikhs were able to truly fight and prevent total destruction even in what they thought was an unequal contest, as in Amritsar city in the months between March and August 1947, they drew upon what they called 'a not inappropriate parallel' – namely, Stalingrad (the greatest siege and defense of a

city in world history in the world's greatest war). They also now placed Amritsar in the frame not of genocide or of a series of riots, but of a 'Muslim League–Sikh War'. Pursuing the parallel further, though not explicitly, they then gloried in the flight of Muslims from the city (as of the German army after its defeat at Stalingrad), which they described as 'a wonderful sight', and proclaimed retrospectively that the time had now come for a 'well-deserved punishment' of the Muslims.⁹

Although, of course, the parallel is grossly misplaced, the Sikhs were not the only ones who used the term 'war' to describe what was happening generally in the Punjab. Governor Jenkins himself called it a 'communal war of succession'.¹⁰ But the point here is that, however inflated, the Stalingrad parallel served a double purpose for Sikh memorialization. It demonstrated once again that, even against the odds, given a chance, 'the dogged tenacity of the Sikh character, which has never taken defeat, even after heavy losses',¹¹ was demonstrated once again in Amritsar. But then what was the genocide against the Sikhs in western Punjab, if not a defeat, a humiliation, and a victimization documented in several hundred pages of the same text? The second purpose of the Stalingrad parallel is to justify the retribution that then followed as Sikhs gathered and displayed their forces to expel the entire Muslim population from East Punjab, like the victorious Russian army in pursuit of the Germans across eastern and central Europe.

But before we turn to that aspect of the Sikh response to partition, we need to consider the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the status of victim by Sikh commemorators. The justification for their participation in the partition violence rests upon their initial status as victims, including men, women and children in massacres perpetrated in the villages and towns of western Punjab by Muslim gangs in March 1947.¹² But the status of victim for the men must be qualified in Sikh commemoration, for it is unacceptable that any Sikh man should, under any circumstances, no matter the odds, accept without resistance a violent attack against themselves, and against their women and children. The constitution of the Sikh Self, as Das has put it, is 'heroic'.¹³ The status of victim can only be accepted by a Sikh with the qualification heroic, a victim who has fought against odds even too great for a Sikh – that is, odds that surpass even the much-touted numbers of 35 to 1 or 135 to 1, against which the great Sikh fighters of times past have been said to have prevailed or ought to be able to prevail even now. To be killed fighting against all odds is to turn the potential Sikh victim into a hero. The rest are consigned either to a memory hole or to the status of cowards – that is to say, non-Sikhs.

But what about Sikh martyrs of partition? In fact, as Fenech has noted, contemporary 'Sikh martyrologists never write about the Sikh victims of Partition as martyrs'.¹⁴ They do not do so, he argues, because they can find 'nothing edifying in such victimization'. Since there remain both contemporary martyrologists and sanctified martyrs in twentieth-century Sikh history, the failure to designate any of the Sikh victims of partition as martyrs testifies to the inability of Sikhs to integrate this disaster in a fully satisfying way into Sikh history and hagiography. Since the disaster was turned into a triumph of survival, resettlement and prosperity in post-Independence India, this failure requires explanation. One part of the explanation has already been given above – namely, that the displaced Sikhs were indeed victims, were victimized, suffered miserably. From out of this wretched situation, acts of bravery and heroism have been proclaimed, but Sikhs cannot

accommodate the humiliations they suffered into their history. But there is also a second reason – namely, that Sikhs were not only victims, they were also victimizers, killers of innocents in actions that can in no way be considered brave or heroic. Not only did they retaliate, but the record indicates that they were the principal aggressors in eastern Punjab.

Victims or perpetrators?

We come now, therefore, to the second problem with the portrayal of a group as victim, also relevant to the Sikhs – namely, that the victimized group may retaliate and victimize their opponents, which is certainly part of what happened in the Punjab and what justifies the term ‘retributive genocide’ for the great killings there in 1947.¹⁵ I have noted above the heroization of the Sikh fighting in Amritsar city, but the record portrays a quite different situation in Amritsar district as a whole, which can stand as representative of Sikh actions in other parts of eastern Punjab as well. In fact, aggressive Sikh ‘retaliation’ was already happening in the rural areas of Amritsar district while the battle for Amritsar city was taking place. While the Sikhs, by their own account, were fighting an unequal combat with the Muslims and while the latter were ‘regularly’ going in trucks ‘about the roads outside the town ... picking off Hindus and Sikhs’,¹⁶ Sikhs were gathering in armed gangs slaughtering Muslims in the Amritsar countryside. In other words, it was Muslims who were being killed by Sikhs in the rural areas of Amritsar district, which comprised one of the main centers of Sikh concentration in the whole of undivided Punjab.¹⁷

The following accounts indicate what was happening simultaneously in Amritsar city and district. Hansen has noted that the rioting in Amritsar (city) in March 1947 that followed the resignation of the Punjab coalition government was begun by Hindus and Sikhs.¹⁸ The July 1947 Fortnightly Report of the Governor of Punjab ‘expressed concern that the Sikh community appeared to be preparing for a potential showdown with the Muslims’, the strength of their *jathas* at that point being estimated at ‘around 19,000’; moreover, Muslims were being killed in ‘the rural areas of Amritsar’ where, according to Jenkins, ‘Sikhs were the prime aggressors’.¹⁹ On 30 July, Jenkins reported to Governor-General Mountbatten that there had ‘been a string of rural outrages’ in Amritsar district in which ‘Muslims have been murdered in various ways’, that ‘the aggressors’ in all cases ‘seem to be the Sikhs’, and that, in his estimation, Sikhs were making ‘certain preparations’, notably including the production of bombs and the collection of firearms.²⁰ Further, they had been responsible for ‘the shooting up of a train at Ganga Railway Station between Amritsar and Beas’.²¹

As the date for the announcement of the Boundary Commission Award drew closer, so did Sikh preparations and attacks against Muslims. A telephone message from Mr. Abbott on 1 August 1947 reported as follows:

... raids on Muslim villages have begun in Amritsar and Lahore district and along the Jullundur Hoshiarpur border, and there have been four attacks on, or attempts to interfere with, trains in the past two or three days. Muslim casualties in Amritsar Rural area alone since night of 30th–31st July are 23 killed, including 3 women and 2 children, and 30 wounded.²²

A week later, the situation had become even more serious, as Jenkins reported to Mountbatten: 'In rural areas of Amritsar, Hoshiarpur and Jullundur we have for some days had both casual attacks and organised raids in most of which Sikhs are aggressors and Moslems the victims'.²³ On 12 August, Jenkins reported again to Mountbatten about 'continued' outrages perpetrated by 'Sikhs in Amritsar District and elsewhere'. He also reported that the Muslim policemen in Amritsar had been disarmed under the 'verbal instructions of Superintendent of Police designate', a Hindu.²⁴

Ian Talbot also accepts that 'the Sikhs were the aggressors in East Punjab'. He notes further that, after the publication of the Boundary Award, attacks were perpetrated on 'the Muslim villagers of Amritsar' and other East Punjab districts as well as upon 'the Muslim refugees packing the trains from Delhi to Lahore. Jathas operating from the Sikh princely States preyed mercilessly on the trains travelling west'.²⁵ That there was a Sikh plan to ethnically cleanse eastern Punjab of its Muslim populations, whose leaders were known, has been increasingly acknowledged. Jenkins was of two minds on the subject. Kushwant Singh, though he did not like the term 'Sikh Conspiracy', identified the main leaders with, of course, Master Tara Singh and Gyani Kartar Singh at the forefront, Giani Harbans Singh as the organizer of the first 'Sikh bands', 'General' Mohan Singh and Colonel N. S. Gill as the principal ex-Indian National Army (INA) leaders operating from Majithia house in Amritsar, and several others.²⁶ Finally, Aiyar has noted that the attacks by Sikhs on Muslims, including the infamous Refugee Specials, amounting to 'wholesale slaughter',²⁷ continued relentlessly into September, petering out only 'by the middle of October'.²⁸ These attacks were marked by 'savage brutality', were 'methodical and systematic' in character, displaying 'a high degree of planning and organisation', and 'were organised often with military precision'.²⁹ The members of the killing squads, that is, the *jathas*, were trained, '(frequently ex-servicemen), armed and skilled in the use of modern lethal weapons'.³⁰ Aiyar notes further that '[a]lthough the Muslim gangs were equally well armed and worked in the same ways as did the Sikh *jathas* – a hard core [of] gangs out on the warpath – in the early stages, they did not achieve the same degree of organisation as the Sikhs'. In other words, in this stage of the mutual killings, it was the Muslims who were at a clear disadvantage.³¹ Moreover, in the rural areas of Amritsar, 'raids' were carried out 'on Muslim majority villages at the rate of three or four each night', in which 'all the inhabitants [presumably the Muslim inhabitants] would be massacred' and the village then set on fire. In other words, the Sikhs did in Amritsar district and other parts of eastern Punjab exactly what Muslims did to Sikhs and Hindus in western Punjab.³² Finally, Aiyar implies that preparations, in the form of collection of 'arms and ammunition' in Punjab villages, had been detected as early as January 1944.³³

It cannot be said, therefore, that Sikhs were only victims during the partition massacres. While it may be true that many Sikhs fought heroically wherever and whenever they could against all odds, it is not true that the odds were always against them. Further, it has to be acknowledged that Sikhs themselves were aggressors in the eastern Punjab, where their leaders deliberately sought to turn the Muslims out, and a great number of local *jathas* were formed throughout the eastern part of the province to carry that task out, not failing to include women and children, for the project was, indubitably, one of 'ethnic cleansing'. Moreover,

contrary to those who wish to portray this violence as a natural development from the history of Muslim–Sikh relations in the Punjab over the past several centuries,³⁴ the purposes were political – namely, to assure the Sikhs a region in the subcontinent where they would form a substantial, compact group, preferably a majority in a territory they could call their homeland, a point to which I will return below.

Victimization and memorialization

Let us return now to the issue of overcoming the humiliation of a community that must somehow integrate into its memory the degradation associated with acceptance of the status of victims. There are two ways out. One, relished by the Sikhs and used by Christians as well, though in entirely different ways, is the transformation of the victims into martyrs and heroes. For Christians, martyrdom, I believe, is meant to convey the ultimate in identification with the sufferings of Christ and, consequently, submission to God's will. Some of this martyrdom has even been self-inflicted through self-abuse by inscribing on the body of the martyr the stigmata of Christ. I am not aware of any such practice among Sikhs, but there has almost been a similar savoring of the tortures that Sikhs have undergone in past times, most vividly portrayed – in my recollection – in the museum in the Golden Temple complex, which was filled with paintings depicting the cutting in two, the burying alive, and various other punishments meted out to Sikhs during the Mughal period and at other times as well. It occurs to me also as I write that there is something of considerable symbolic significance in the fact that the Indian army destroyed that museum during the onslaught of 1984, thereby even wiping out, by design or accident, one of the sites of the Sikh claim to martyrdom while at the same time creating new martyrs in Sikh history.³⁵

To bring in a third example from the secular American experience, where there is no sanctity attached to victimhood³⁶ or martyrdom, American leaders have not been willing to designate the victims of September 11 as such. The word is jarring for Americans. Perhaps it is also for Sikhs. So, the victims of the 9/11 attack on the twin towers who, in plain English were certainly so, have been transformed into heroes – that is to say, heroes in a battle that was not a battle in a war they or noone else never imagined in their wildest nightmares. But this pathetic transformation of these victims into heroes is not to console the survivors of the victims, but to create a resolve in the American public to act as heroes in the great new war against terrorism. The emblem of hero, and perhaps even martyr, does certainly belong to those few who fought back on the one plane that did not reach its target, in a real fight that was certain to bring only death, but would save many others, including probably the ultimate symbol of America, the White House.

In all three cases, we encounter a problem with the discourse of victimhood, which, in turn, comes directly to the question of the means and purposes of memorialization of such a status for a whole community. The issue here is that of 'never again'. But then, there are different ways of imagining and enacting the 'never again'. Jews have used two devices. One is the proliferation of Holocaust museums around the world, of which the Washington, DC one is the central object. This method is designed to instill horror, sympathy, and even guilt amongst those who visit such sites. In the United States, no resolution has yet

been reached on the proper memorialization of the victims of the 9/11 attack. Nor, as far as I know, have any museums or memorial sites been proposed to commemorate the partition massacres of the Sikhs, though such sites are being proposed to commemorate the deaths of the Sikh insurrectionists killed during the decade of the 1980s–90s.

The second method of dealing with the humiliation and degradation caused by the victimization suffered by a community, however, is quite the opposite of memorialization – namely, it involves building one's strength, arms, and symbols of power and determination in such a way as to defiantly proclaim, or otherwise indicate clearly, that any group that dares try again will itself be obliterated. This method may also include the demand for a political territory of one's own to ensure all these conditions. Jews have achieved this position, with much blood and horrors.³⁷ The United States has resolved to obliterate the real and imagined sources of the humiliation imposed upon the American people by the 9/11 attack, imposing in reaction – in the words of George W. Bush in its immediate aftermath – 'World War III' (later changed to 'the global war on terrorism') on the rest of the world. In the case of the Sikhs, some of their leaders have from time to time pursued the goal of achieving a place in which Sikhs will be the dominant people, manifested first in the very regrouping of the community that was actively and purposefully sought during partition, up to the achievement of the Punjabi Suba³⁸ in 1966, and, in the most recent phase, the incoherent and self-defeating effort to achieve the dream of a sovereign Sikh state, a Khalistan. In none of these cases, it must be stressed, have the overreactions been accepted by the entire population of the affected community. Rather, in each case, exaggerated fears have been manipulated by political leaders with grandiose aims that stifle dissent through the 'never again' resolve or through direct attacks on the patriotism of dissenters or even on their rightful status as members of the community. In all cases, the 'never again' reactions have led to exaggerated estimations of the dangers to the community in an utterly changed context: in the Israeli case, to the oppression of the entire Palestinian population under its control in the occupied territories; in the American case, to the conquest of a country that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attack; and in the Sikh case, to the exaggeration of the threat posed to the community and its integrity by the Hindu majority community and the Indian state.³⁹

Concluding remarks on genocides, ethnic cleansing and 'never again'

I want to return now to the point mentioned earlier concerning the political aspect of genocide and ethnic cleansing. A central feature of both genocide and ethnic cleansing is its association with nationalism as a form of politicized ethnicity, the hallmark of our age – that is, of the last couple of hundred years. This type of nationalism contains a dynamic that can lead, and often has led, to what I would call a politics without limits, by which I mean a politics that assumes the necessity for the supremacy of one group in a territory, the subordination of others within that territory, and the legitimization of all forms of violence to achieve the goals. One sees here Weber's dictum defining the state as a monopoly of the use of legitimate violence

as a self-fulfilling prophecy – namely, the development of nationalism as a striving for complete control of the means of violence and the right to use violence as and when deemed necessary by one ethnonational group against another.

A second feature is what I would call universal barbarity. All genocides and ethnic cleansings involve, of necessity as it were, barbarities, atrocities and many gratuitous forms of violence and transgression. All genocides in principle involve killing of men, women and children, the old and infirm, without exception. Ethnic cleansing does not necessarily imply the same. In that case, from a ‘rational’ perspective, a certain amount of gratuitous killing and other forms of violence are necessary to make sure that people understand that they must move out. But, in both cases, much of the barbarity is gratuitous. But the point here with regard to trauma and memory is that the atrocities committed against one’s group are, once again, degrading to the self-respect of the group and its members.

Again, however, when the genocide or ethnic cleansing is retributive in nature, the barbarities and atrocities are committed on both sides. In that case, again as with the Sikhs, it is necessary to the group’s self-respect to blame the other side, to deny one’s own barbarities, and, when they cannot be denied, to justify them in terms of the passionate, even understandable reaction of the allegedly original victim group to the atrocities of the other group. The aim in this case is to insist upon and preserve the nobility of the group in contrast with the brutality of the other. In some cases, as with militant Hindu groups, the violence and the associated atrocities committed, as in Gujarat 2002 and in many other situations in post-Independence India, are virtually justified as the retaliation of the lambs, who have shed their sheep’s clothing and become wolves after their patience has been exhausted by repeated acts of violence by Muslims. This type of argument has even been used by Sikhs in relation to their partition attacks on Muslims in East Punjab.

A further feature of genocides and, in some ways, its most horrible, but least discussed, is universal complicity. That is to say, everyone in some way or another – excluding children who have not reached the age of reason – becomes complicit or guilty in one way or another, including those most victimized. How can one live through a genocide without committing a shameful act, without feeling guilty over one’s own survival, without sacrificing another to preserve oneself? Even if one can survive without committing an act degrading to the sense of self, how can one avoid a sense of guilt that one has survived when others have died? I believe that it is for such reasons, not because of the traumatic memories, that most survivors are unwilling to talk about their experiences and how they managed to survive at all.⁴⁰ This is characteristic of Holocaust survivors and appears also in the stories elicited from Sikh and Hindu survivors of partition. The most poignant and most discussed are the cases, which appear to be sufficiently numerous, of Sikh men who killed, usually by beheading, their wives and children to avoid their dishonoring by the Muslim killers in West Punjab.⁴¹ And what of the women who survived rape, abduction, forced marriage? Of course, their shame is very great.

Another feature, particularly of retributive genocide, but also of ethnic cleansing and of other forms of collective violence, including riots, pogroms and massacres, is the situating of the event within a larger chain of events. This situating is really a part of the revenge and retaliation theme. It is also part of the broader process of blame displacement that I will take up in a moment. The logic of the chain is simple,

obvious and fundamentally mendacious. It is the justification of perpetrators. It states that the violence for which we are blamed unjustly has to be seen in relation to a series of violent attacks against us, which ultimately required us to retaliate, and then only in the utmost extremity of danger to ourselves, failing which we would have been massacred as other members of our group and other groups were previously massacred. In the Sikh case, the major preceding events were the massacres of Sikhs and Hindus that occurred in March 1947 in the North West Frontier Province and in the Rawalpindi division of West Punjab. But the Sikh justification for their ultimate onslaught against the Muslims of West Punjab goes even further back, to August 1946, the Direct Action day of the Muslim League, which resulted in the Great Calcutta killings, followed then in sequence by the killings of Hindus in Noakhali and Tipperah in October 1946, then on to the numerous pogroms and massacres of Hindus and Sikhs in the North West Provinces and western Punjab. Omitted from the sequence, or lightly passed over or otherwise justified, are the intermediate massacres of Muslims by Hindus in places like Bihar and Garmukhteswar (November 1946). It should also be noted that, in the Sikh case, the chain of events is not confined to attacks upon Sikhs, but includes not only situations where both Sikhs and Hindus were killed by Muslims, but those in which the violence was either directed by Muslims mostly against Hindus or was primarily mutual Hindu–Muslim violence, as in Calcutta in August 1946. The purpose of demonstrating the existence of a chain of violence against one’s group or groups is to provide evidence of a well-thought-out, methodical, organized plan designed to achieve an objective, in this case Pakistan. That the Muslim League did use such violence from time to time and from place to place for this purpose is clear enough, but it is not clear, indeed it is certainly false, that there was a master plan into which each of these events in the chain fit neatly. Further, collective violence was mutual in north India in 1946–47, where there were many riots, pogroms and massacres in which mostly Muslims were killed.

It was also important to the Sikh argument that there was a master plan to demonstrate that the Muslims sought to create purely Muslim provinces in both eastern and western Pakistan and that they deliberately set out to expel the Hindus from both West Punjab and East Bengal. Although there was some considerable migration of Hindus from East Bengal, it never achieved the proportions of West Punjab nor the level of violence that occurred there. Moreover, despite the movement of Hindus in the early post-partition period and during the Bangladesh crisis, there remained 13.5 million Hindus in Bangladesh in the year 2000. In fact, the situation in the two major provinces was entirely different in 1947, and that difference was the presence of the Sikhs in the Punjab: their community divided, without major political importance in either of the two new states, but determined to fight, and ultimately determined to turn the Muslims out of East Punjab.⁴² They succeeded in their objective, but they have not been able to memorialize their success as a glorious battle for freedom and self-determination. Instead, they have chosen the trope of victimization and heroic bravery against all odds, but they have not been able to use the more favored trope of martyrdom.⁴³

This leads me to my last point concerning the general features of the various forms of collective violence – namely, that the effort to produce heroes, to conjure up images of valor and bravery, falls before the horror, barbarity, images of evil, justifications of

all sorts, and ultimately blame displacement. These forms of violence all lack legitimacy, however much their perpetrators believe in and even enjoy what they are doing. Even the Nazis had to create, embellish and magnify an imagined threat from Jews while at the same time dehumanizing them in order to justify their extermination. The horrors of the death camps could not be presented for public display, but had to be hidden. Stories, movies, plays, other cultural artifacts could not be created to demonstrate what a glorious achievement was the extermination of Jews and other peoples. Indeed, there is no way even that such cultural artifacts can be used to portray the plight of the peoples against whom such atrocities have been committed. None of the acclaimed films on the Holocaust come even close to portraying the realities.

So what is left then to memorialize? Mostly the victimhood of the people who suffered and died and the vow 'never again'. But the vow of the victims is too often turned into a design to become invulnerable by methods akin to those of their former tormentors, by creating homogenous nation states in which all but the former victims will be subordinated. And it is this seemingly unending drive for national homogeneity that has been the spur for most of the genocides that have occurred in the past century.

Notes

- 1 I forbear here from mentioning the place of martyrdom in Islamic history, for its current manifestations are at once so apparent and so ill-understood that it would be foolish to make any summary statements about it.
- 2 It has also been used by both Jews and Muslims to refer to those killed in the violent struggles on the Temple Mount/*al-haram al-sharif* during the violence in, respectively, 1929 and 1990; see Friedland and Hecht (1996), 116, 140–46 and *passim*.
- 3 Fenech has defined a common use of the term martyr, concisely as 'righteous struggle and victory through death'. Also apt is his paraphrase of Augustine's statement: 'martyrdom depends not upon the fact or the manner of one's death, but rather on the cause for which the martyr died' (Fenech 2001, 30).
- 4 Das (1995), 10. The references throughout this article (as well as in Das) are, of course, to Khalsa Sikhs. Other groups and individuals who consider themselves Sikhs, many of whom suffered equally in the partition migrations, would not necessarily have the same attitudes towards, and problems with, memorialization that Khalsa Sikhs do.
- 5 Das (1995), 20.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 7 This is noted in many sources, but see especially Langer (1991).
- 8 *Muslim League Attack Against Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab, 1947*, published in 1950 by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, but completed in January 1949, as indicated on p. 210.
- 9 *Muslim League Attack* (1950), 140.
- 10 Mansergh (1983), document #337, 4 August 1947 (Jenkins to Mountbatten; Enclosure [Memorandum]), para. (3).
- 11 *Muslim League Attack* (1950), 140.
- 12 As well as by those Sikh men who slaughtered their own women and children to 'save' them from death, abduction, and rape at the hands of the Muslim gangs.
- 13 Das (1995), 136.

- 14 Fenech (2001), 31. Nor, he goes on, do they do so for ‘those killed during the anti-Sikh pogroms of November 1984’. Indeed, K. P. S. Gill, himself a Sikh, the police chief responsible for bringing the Punjab insurrectionary movement to an end in 1992–93, in a personal interview, condemned the victims of these pogroms as non-Sikhs because, he claims, they did not fight back. However, Master Tara Singh felt assured of ‘the blessings’ of Sikh martyrs past on June 1946 when he warned that, if things turned out badly for the Sikhs in the Independence–Partition negotiations, ‘the Khalsa will rise again’ and ‘Sikh History [*sic*] will repeat itself’ (Tara Singh 1946, vi). He was here clearly proclaiming that, in such an event, there would be new Sikh martyrs. Also, the memory of the victimization of the Sikhs during the partition is reportedly kept alive in ‘an annual martyrdom day in a gurudwara in Delhi . . . where the survivors recite stories of the killings’ (Banerjee 1998, 2,520). So, what we seem to have here is the denotation of the community as a whole as martyred without the identification of particular martyrs.
- 15 See Brass (2003).
- 16 *Muslim League Attack* (1950), 160.
- 17 The others being Ludhiana, Ferozepur, and Jullunder districts; ‘Introduction’ in Kirpal Singh (1991), second page xi; Tinker (1977), 698.
- 18 Hansen (2002), 186.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 20 Mansergh (1983), #292, 30 July 1947 (Jenkins to Mountbatten).
- 21 *Ibid.*, enclosure to #292, 30 July 1947 (Jenkins to Mountbatten).
- 22 *Ibid.*, #306, 1 August 1947.
- 23 *Ibid.*, #382, 8 August 1947 (Jenkins to Mountbatten).
- 24 *Ibid.*, #437, 12 August 1947 (Jenkins to Mountbatten).
- 25 Talbot (1988), 234; Talbot, however, argues that these attacks flowed ‘from pent-up feeling for revenge’, rather than a deliberately planned assault, even though he notes that the attacks stopped when ‘Tara Singh issued a statement appealing for their operations to cease’. In fact, I have it from the horse’s mouth, in an unforgettable interview with him in Amritsar in February, 1967, to wit: ‘We took the decision to turn the Muslims out’. In other words, it was a cold-blooded political decision. Whether or not ‘revenge’ was a decisive emotional consideration seems unimportant in relation to the calculated political goal, though it may help to account for the savage brutality of the killings.
- 26 Khushwant Singh (1966), 273fn; on the roles of Mohan Singh and Naranjan Singh Gill, see also Aiyar (1995), 29–30.
- 27 Aiyar (1995), 21.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 28fn.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 29–30.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 34 On which, see especially McLeod (1999), 155–66.
- 35 Both of these points have also recently been noted by Fenech (2002), 856, text and fn: ‘The destruction of the Central Sikh Library on the precincts of the Golden Temple during Operation Bluestar in 1984 lends itself to . . . claims’ that the

- government 'was attempting to eradicate the Panth's glorious heritage of sacrifice and martyrdom, to deny the Panth its very separate existence'.
- 36 This needs to be qualified. A glance at any daily newspaper would seem to suggest that Americans in general relish the status of victims: victims of sexual harassment, of workplace discrimination, of medical malpractice, and on and on. However, in sharp contrast, Americans cannot as a people accept the status of victims. To use the rather uncouth, but very common American expression, Americans 'kick ass'.
- 37 Not to mention the battery of nuclear weapons that have been kept in reserve to proclaim a definitive assurance that never again will Jews be victimized without taking their enemies with them.
- 38 The achievement of a constituent state within the Indian Union in which Punjabi, the preferred language of the Sikhs, is the dominant language, spoken nowadays mostly by Sikhs.
- 39 The result, which space prevents me from including in this article, was the sequence of disastrous events in the Punjab, centering around the vitriolic speeches of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and the violence that developed initially between his followers and members of a heterodox sect, but that ultimately enveloped most of Punjab in a virtual civil war and a fragmented insurrectionary movement not finally defeated until 1992–93.
- 40 But see Langer (1991) for the testimonies of those willing to speak.
- 41 In addition to the famous case cited by Butalia (1988), 193–98, on which see also the review by Banerjee (1998), 2,518, numerous such instances are acknowledged in *Muslim League Attack* (1950), for example at pp. 84, 173 and 189.
- 42 To argue counterfactually, it is worth considering what would have happened in the Punjab had the Sikhs not been involved. Is it not likely that the two governments of India and Pakistan, holding each other's communities hostage, would have stopped the violence and prevented the mass migrations that ultimately occurred? In other words, would there not have been riots, pogroms, massacres, movements of people from one side to the other, but ultimately contained, as in West Bengal, rather than expanded into total transfer of population and genocide?
- 43 Purnima Dhavan has noted in a personal communication that a further reason for the inability or unwillingness of Sikhs to use the term martyr (*shahid*) for those killed in the 1947 massacres may be that those responsible for the Sikh rising of 1947 were also responsible for accepting the Partition decision in the first place. The acceptance of Partition by both the Indian National Congress leaders and the Sikh leaders, particularly Tara Singh, continues to be considered by many, if not most Sikhs as a betrayal of their community not only by the Congress, but by Master Tara Singh and the other Sikh leaders of the time. It also may be relevant here to note that Master Tara Singh's political career in post-Independence India ended in his disgrace when he gave up a proclaimed fast-unto-death in October, 1961 without having achieved his goal of a Punjabi Suba (a Punjab state in which Sikhs would be a majority) or indeed any significant concession at all

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