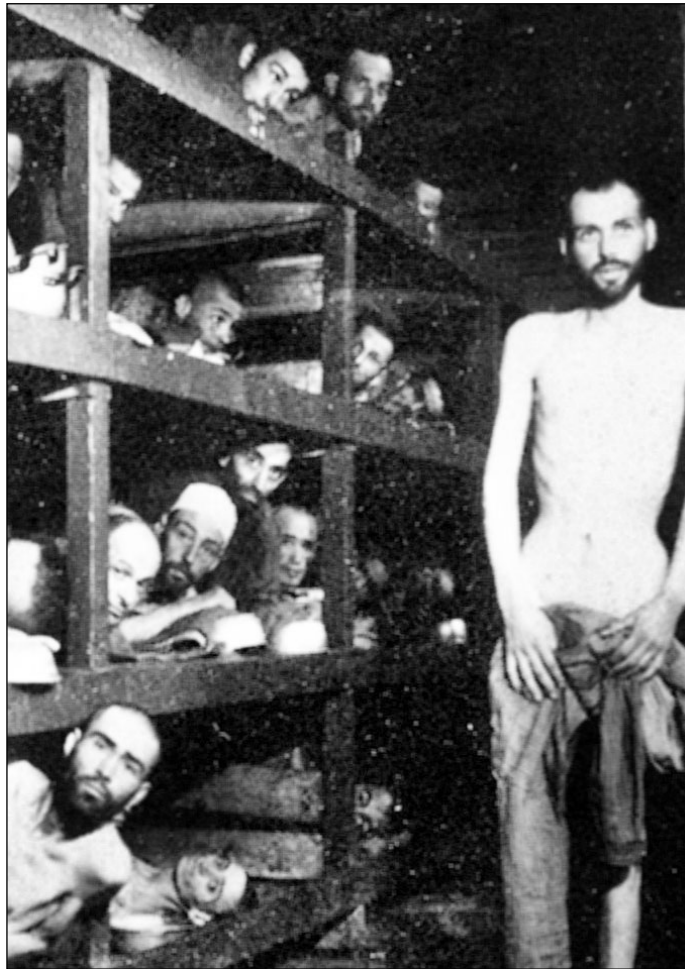
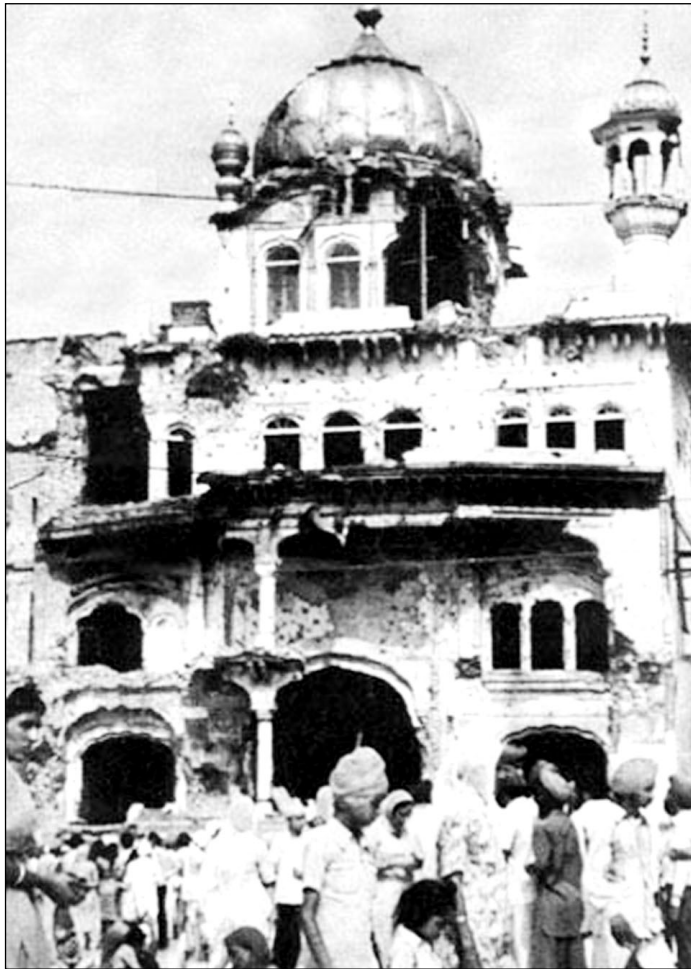


The assassination of memory



Kalam Nishan Singh

Who is left to recall the violent period of the '80s and the '90s? With the top leadership itself denying the legacy of blood and struggle, the collective memories are dying fast. Soon, the few who are hanging on to these memories will also pass into history, into nothingness. And the masses will be left with the corpses of many dead memories. How is life with the corpses? Ask those Indians who buried their hearts at the Wounded Knee

Punjab is currently in the throes of an election campaign, but listen to the debate carefully and the deafening silence of what is not heard will shock any disinterested student of history. Parties competing for the power pie are burying their history alive, mainstream Akali Dal led by Parkash Singh Badal virtually makes no reference to the fifteen odd years of politics in Punjab which left deep scars on the socio-cultural milieu and psyche of Punjab. The fact that the questions raised by that volatile period still beg for answers hardly seems to matter for the Akalis, the forever self-styled representatives of the Panth.

The manifesto of the Badal-led party has a foreword by the president beginning with 'Bahadur Panjabiyo!' and ends with 'Guru Panth Da Das'; in between he recalls the Akalis' role in the freedom struggle and then the emergency before returning to the allegedly bad regime of the Congress. Whatever happened to the fifteen-year-long period during which Badal and his party were very much in the political domain? (By the way, even PM Manmohan Singh ended his election speeches with Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh).

The decision to disown legacy and live in a denial mode is a dangerous luxury.

Some social groups, religious or secular, build their identities on the basis of certain foundational historical events which are systematically recalled and transmitted over generations. Such is the case with the Sikhs, the way the religion came to be founded, the nurturing by the gurus, the compilation of the Adi Granth, the concept of the seat of temporal authority in Akal Takht.

Then came the continuous resistance and skirmishes, battles and wars with the Moghuls, the chain of martyrdoms, the ghal-lugaras.

Similar is the fate of the Jews, rendered homeless for two millennia, for whom history became their defining feature in the absence of a geography which they only sought to reclaim in recent times. For the Jews, the exodus and re-entry into the "Promised Land" are imbued with sacral meaning.

Sikhs also only have a history; they had a geography for some time during the reign of

This is the time for the community to watch out for those denying us our past, for then we will not have a future, but only a catastrophe. Holocausts are not only denied; denials also bring holocausts

Maharaja Ranjit Singh though the regime had many flaws when tested on the Sikh agenda.

Collective remembrance also reinforces the identity of the Shia who annually mourn the martyrdom of Husayn at the battle of Karbala, or that of the Sikhs who are daily reminded of their largely troubled history in the gurdwaras.

The Hindus' annual burning of Ravana's effigy is a study in contrast: although reenacting Ravana's destruction by Rama is more a universal symbol than a unique historical event.

Continuing their narrative, the Jews have not failed to further record and transmit their experiences in exile, nor the Sikhs their struggles and battles right up to modern times. The Sikh militancy climaxing in the storming of the Golden Temple may be subject to contentious interpretations, but the bare facts are not in dispute in contrast to the struggle over recognising the causes and course of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

In the case of the gigantic proportions of the Holocaust of the 20th century, however, in which over six million Jews were subjected to dehumanising abuse and systematically put to death, there has been in Europe a certain

amount of revisionist history-writing which seeks to diminish or deny it, echoed in West Asia for obvious political reasons.

Margaret Chatterjee, in her *Hinterlands and Horizons Excursions in Search of Amity* (Lexington Books 2002), devotes a chapter to the "assassination of memory." Of course she wrote before Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran started the campaign of denying the Holocaust.

But there is more to such denial than political objective, though that is grave enough. The aim of the perpetrators of the Holocaust was virtually one of "assassinating memory." Not only were six million Jews eliminated, but their memories died with them, individual and collective memories of their personal lives, their history, learning, culture, that would have, in the normal course, formed part of the flow of Jewish social and cultural inheritance.

All Jews and Jewish culture were slated for disappearance so that for all the world they might never have been. Such a fate in fact overtook the Tasmanian islanders who were not only completely eliminated by Australian whites, but of whom no physical trace remains in their native land, since their very bones were disinterred and transported overseas to satisfy western "scientific curiosity."

Strangely enough, we know of them through Australian records, as we know of the Jews, gypsies (who originated in India) or other Nazi victims through concentration camp records. Similarly, Native Americans were heavily decimated and remained for long mere curiosities in their reservations: again much of their history is gleaned from the records of their conquerors. Currently a similar fate threatens the Tibetans in Tibet where they are being reduced to an ethnic tourist curiosity in their own country now flooded with Han Chinese. Turkish officialdom continues to deny the Armenian genocide of 1915. Orhan Pamuk, Nobelist, was prosecuted for affirming it and Hrant Dink, Armenian editor, was recently shot dead (not by the government) for his campaign to put it on record. "To have genocide denied is to die twice," reads a locally published advertisement on the Armenian genocide.

Perhaps the most chilling literary account of erasure of memory can be found in Gabriel Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where striking workers of a banana company in a public square (along with 3,000 innocent passengers waiting for a train) are to a man machine-gunned to death, their corpses bundled into compartments of a ghost train and clandestinely debouched into the sea. Press disinformation projects an Orwellian account of the massacre as a peaceful demonstration which quietly dispersed, so historically the event "never took place." The one chance survivor slowly goes mad with his uncorroborated memories.

Who is left to recall the violent period of the '80s and the '90s? One Simranjeet Singh Mann? One Daljit Singh Bittu? Two? Ten? Soon, they too will pass into history, into nothingness. And the masses will be left with the corpses of many dead memories. How is life with the corpses? Indians at the reservations knew.

The horrific power of this act of negationism is achieved through multiple assassinations, of the victims, of their memories and of the memories others might retain of them.

Indian communists and students of the Left movement in India know very well the fate of M.N. Roy. He fell out with the communist leadership, his name was eliminated from all records and his photograph doctored out from the snapshots with Lenin and other communist dignitaries.

The negation was effective within the USSR and amongst its fraternal allies and sympathisers: there was no M.N. Roy in the official history of communism.

Prejudice and untruth can also be propagated and transmitted over generations. Preserved alongside the self-history of the Jews are the Christian myths of the Zionist protocols, the blood myths of the Seder and so on, now appropriated by Judaism's current enemies. We live in a world of mass communications in which "spin" has become a ubiquitous component of information dissemination, not to mention sheer disinformation. Thus it is possible to misinform huge populations living in closed (but also open) societies where freedom of research and information is subordinated to political exigency, and where spin or illusion can be used to arouse and channel public resentment.

It is vital for the sake of preserving our humanity to carry remembrance into the future. For lack of remembering we become passive accomplices in new catastrophes. This is the time for the community to watch out for those denying us our past, for then we will not have a future, but only a catastrophe. Holocausts are not only denied; denials also bring holocausts. Assassins of memories should keep that in mind.