

From Silence to Testimony: Narrating the Gendered Violence of 1984

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*This essay reviews the book *The Kaurs of 1984: The Untold, Unheard Stories of Sikh Women* written by Sanam Sutirath Wazir. The work highlights the silenced experience of the Sikh women who survived the 1984 state-led violence. It presents their voices, resilience, and memories through oral testimonies, offering a gendered perspective on collective violence against Sikhs.*

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History is riddled with instances of state-led violence, often manifested through the active or passive complicity of authorities, facilitating targeted persecution and suppression. The year 1984 was a watershed event in Indian history. Operation Blue Star, followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi, led to a complete breakdown of law and order, with the state itself becoming an instrument of violence. But 1984 should not be seen as a closed chapter in history; its consequences still reverberate today, informing present-day narratives, policies, and lived realities.¹ Scholars, teachers, and human rights activists have begun to probe the event with greater depth, leading to a growing body of literature—comprising books, articles, and legal reports—that continues to shed new light on its complexities and consequences. However, the memories and narratives that have emerged from this body of literature are selective and limited in nature. The attacks on Sardars (the turbaned men), seen as primary bearers of Sikh identity, has been given more attention when compared to the gendered violence that Sikh women endured.² Recent interventions have tried to fill this gap by bringing in gendered notions

¹ Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, "After 1984? Violence, Politics, and Survivor Memories," *Sikh Formations* 11, no.3 (2015): 267–270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1133104>.

² Anshu Saluja, "Gendered Erasures in Memory: Silencing of Cases of Sexual Violence in 1984," *Sikh Formations* 20, no. 3 (2024): 149–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2024.2384843>.

of violence, giving space to missing voices that have been overlooked for a long while.

The book under review authored by Sanam Sutirath Wazir, tries to fill this gap by bringing forth a collection of narratives titled *The Kaurs of 1984*, featuring women who were seemingly random victims of state-led violence.³ The author, who is a human rights activist from Jammu and Kashmir, went door to door to talk to the survivors of the massacre. Drawing from interviews, historical research, legal reports, RTI petitions, and affidavits, he weaves together a narrative that captures the experiences of women who witnessed the brutal killings of their family members, endured deep psychological trauma, took up arms, joined militancy, and fought to survive and secure a future for their children. The book consists of twelve thematically arranged chapters, each containing a story unique to the lived experience of its subject. It gives insights into real-time spaces, with details of campsites, colonies, names of state officials, and citizen-led peace movements. The book progressively shows how women navigated through a society that was dominated by patriarchal values while simultaneously facing the chaos of a lawless state, resulting in the loss of their agency. This dual oppression left them vulnerable to the violence that was unfolding during the riots, shaping their experiences and narratives during this period.

The book begins with a detailed description of Operation Blue Star, centred around the Golden Temple in Amritsar. It paints a picture of the atmosphere within the complex when the army surrounded it and opened fire. While the role of Sikh leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale is highlighted, the book brings to light a crucial yet overlooked aspect—the experience of women and how they perceived these events. Through first-hand narratives, it brings forth the voices of those women who were present inside the complex for various reasons—some searching for their husbands, others accompanying their families to offer the first harvest of the season to community kitchens, some visiting as pilgrims, and others present alongside political outfits, refusing to abandon their loved ones.

³ Sanam Sutirath Wazir, *The Kaurs of 1984: The Untold, Unheard Stories of Sikh Women* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2024).

The accounts evoke a sense of martyrdom, embraced by not only men but women as well, reflected in the active roles that they assumed during this period. They participated in various *morchas*, willingly faced arrests, and contributed to the emergence of groups like the '*Shaheedi Jathas*' (Martyrs' Contingent). Figures such as Bibi Rajinder Kaur exemplify how women, in the face of lost agency, reclaimed power by taking up arms and leading movements. Their experiences within the complex became the foundation for the ways in which they later carved out spaces for themselves, especially in a society that was engulfed in riots and turmoil. The author situates this expression by mentioning the protest song from the movement:

*Indira sadi datri, assi Indira de soye, jeon jeon Indra Wad di, assi
doon sawaye hoye*

[Indira is our axe, we are the grass, as she cuts us down, we
will grow in doubles] (p. 36)

The chapters that follow encapsulate the stories of survivors, presenting graphic and unfiltered accounts of the horrors women endured. Each woman's story in *The Kaurs of 1984* is unique, yet expresses the same themes of loss, survival, and injustice. For Darshan Kaur from Trilokpuri, the horrors of the 1984 carnage rekindled "memories of Partition." She speaks of the enduring struggles of women, trapped within societal constraints that demanded their silence and sacrifice. "We often make ourselves sad to make others happy," she laments,⁴ only to find that, in the end, no one is truly content. Her pain is not just about the men who were killed or the homes that were looted—it is about the continued expectation to forget and move on. "Do you think that's possible?" she asks. "I will only get closure when I close my eyes."⁵ For Kulbir Kaur, the search for justice became a lifelong battle. Illegally detained for 11 months, she refused to let her voice be buried. During this particular time in her life, she wrote over 60 letters directed at political figures, activists, and authorities, relentlessly demanding justice.⁶ The book also chronicles shattered dreams, like that of Satwant from Nangloi. As a 13-year-

⁴ Wazir, *The Kaurs of 1984*, 164.

⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁶ Ibid., 155.

old, she aspired to sing like Lata Mangeshkar, but the events of 1984 crushed her hopes.

The narratives also reflect a “sense of unawareness” that most of these victims experienced; accounts highlight that they only learned of the assassination of the prime minister when mobs arrived at their doors. The text also gives nuanced insights into time and space, with details about the camps that victims took refuge in, the rehabilitation process, and significant moments surrounding the gurdwaras. It covers the growing militancy in the Punjab region and elaborately captures the role played by different players in it. A sense of history emerges, keeping the experiences of the women at its core.

Wazir’s approach to history is deeply rooted in oral testimonies, a method that has been instrumental in documenting experiences often erased from official records. Travelling across North India, he met survivors and listened to their narratives of loss, resilience, and survival. Shahid Amin, in his account of the Champaran Satyagraha, highlights the significance of these inquiries, arguing that their value lies not merely in being the “voice of conscience” but in the inquiry itself—an act that became a “bold experiment in truth and ahimsa.”⁷ This process has produced a vast archive of testimonies, preserving the voices of the oppressed and serving as a historical record of their struggles.

Similarly, Wazir’s work acts as an archive for the survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, ensuring that their experiences are documented rather than forgotten. These chapters, rich in survivor accounts, underscore how oral history serves as an act of reclaiming agency, offering a space for women to articulate their trauma in their own words. By weaving these narratives into the larger discourse of state violence and gendered oppression, Wazir’s work highlights how oral history does more than just record the past—it challenges historical silences, resists erasure, and ensures that the voices of those marginalised by mainstream historiography are finally heard.

While *The Kaurs of 1984* makes an invaluable contribution by foregrounding the voices of Sikh women in the 1984 anti-Sikh violence, it is not without its

⁷ Shahid Amin, “The Small Voice in History,” in *Thumb Printed: Champaran Indigo Peasants Speak to Gandhi. vol. 1.*, ed. by Shahid Amin, Tridip Suhrud, and Megha Todi (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2022), 13–37.

limitations. The Sikh community is not homogeneous; it is divided by caste and class, and also by religious sects.⁸ Wazir's work does not take cognisance of these identities. Although the descriptions give a fair insight into the socio-economic position of women, they do not explicitly engage with these nuanced identities. While the book highlights the gendered dimension of state violence, it does not fully explore how caste intersects with gender to shape the experiences of Sikh women.

Additionally, the book operates within a specific Sikh historiographical framework, often aligning itself with the dominant narratives of Sikh victimhood and resistance, which rightfully serve as the background of the events that led to this violent episode. While this is crucial in countering state-sanctioned erasure, it creates tension with broader Punjabi historiography, which situates 1984 within a longer history of communal violence, migration, and state repression in the region. By not fully engaging with this broader framework, *The Kaurs of 1984* risks reinforcing a singular narrative that, while powerful, does not completely account for the diversity of experiences within Punjab and its diasporic communities.

Nonetheless, Sanam Sutirath Wazir's work offers insight into the voices of the victims of state-mandated violence, producing an archive that narrates the event from a 'bottom-up' perspective. His work is a welcome addition to the 1984 discourse, presenting the voices of women and strong archival material that has the potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of the event. Apart from Wazir's work, archival contributions such as Uma Chakravarty's "*1984 Living History*" and Gunisha Kaur "*Lost in History: 1984 Reconstructed*" have expanded the discourse. The recent conviction of Congress MP Sajjan Kumar, whose role in instigating violence was also highlighted in these narratives, reaffirms the strength of archived and recorded testimonies in pursuit of justice.

⁸ Harish K. Puri and Paramjit S. Judge, eds., *Social and Political Movements: Readings on Punjab* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2000).

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